

# Madman Butterfly: a Life in Holidays

## Issue 3: Savings Spent

*"I wanna fight your father!"*

—Rubberbandits

Lena was feeling seasick. The house wouldn't stop breathing, the rooms expanding and contracting with each in and out of fresh air, and the once gentle waves of the floor had gotten choppy. It didn't help that she had become acutely aware of the fact that her tongue was always tasting her mouth, and had forgotten how to swallow liquids to help cover it up. Or maybe she had too much water? The cluster of empty bottles that were a million miles away, just out of her reach, pointed to the latter. She stepped out of her body and stood up. There was a very long staircase in the middle of the living room, which broke it up quite nicely, although it would make it hard to find a good place for the TV. She walked up the stairs for about an hour until she reached a door leading to a new house. It was nice. Lots of rooms. It could use a little color; all the surfaces, furniture, and fixtures were different shades of white. The biggest ding against it, though, was that all the windows looked out on the same sight: a grass lawn that extended out until the bright white light of the sun hid it from sight, with an orange tree right at the edge of visibility. Even on the second floor, the ground was the same distance from the window. She wasn't a realtor, but she felt that might take some appeal off the verticality. The lack of doors to the outside was also probably a fire hazard, and the staircase wasn't very wheelchair friendly. Too steep. But it was attached to a normal house, so that was value added for both properties.

She was sitting on the couch on the second floor in what was either a strangely narrow living room or overfurnished hallway, depending on how you looked at it. Probably the second, being right next to the stairs and leading to a half dozen rooms. Maybe it was a waiting room, but it seemed like an inconvenient place to have a home business, so high up. An unusually skeletal woman was standing on the wall, which was really the worst place to do it. You could lean back and look up at the ceiling. Or look forward to seeing if they were on the ground. But you had to bend your neck in an uncomfortable way to look people on the wall in the eyes. Not that she had any. Or a nose. Did that make it easier or harder to deal with a cold? Lena thought it rude to ask. The woman was a little pale, and her outfit was a bit monotone, all black, but it really popped against the interior. Lena realized the dress had an open midriff; there just wasn't anything there. Bold.

"Black is quite slimming on you." Lena complimented the woman.

"Thank you, child," the woman said.

"Is this your place?"

“It’s not for living in.”

“Ooo, spooky.”

The woman extended a hand, “We could leave.”

“And who is the you in we, lady?” Lena said, eyes narrowing as her stranger danger alarm was tripped.

“Eternity.”

“Mmm. That feels like a trap. Being dead is a kind of forever. I don’t think I want to do that right now, not with somebody I don’t for sure.”

“Then why are you still here?”

“It’s hard to stand up sometimes.”

The woman furrowed her brow.

“Why have a fruit tree if you can’t go outside?” Lena asked, feeling peckish.

“You could always use a window.”

“How European.

The woman considered this for a moment, “It is not.”

“How would you know, you don’t seem like you go out much, your house doesn't have doors.”

“It told you, it’s not my home.”

“Trespasser!” Lena said, pointing accusatorily. The woman reached out a hand again. Lena pulled hers back.

“Calm down, Auntie Touchy.”

“You should go.”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

“You don’t want to stay. It’s not for living, but things live here still. They’ll let you leave, but they’ll come with you, and then all your life will be like this place. They can’t escape, only spread.”

“They invented normal where I’m from, you guys should try it. But the atmosphere *is* atrocious, so I’m gonna bounce.” Lena said, levitating off the couch onto her feet.

“We’ll meet again. We always do.” The woman said.

“You’re not good at making friends. You should work on that.” Lena shouted up as she descended the stairs so she could descend the other stairs. She stopped at the door, summoning the energy for the trip back down, or alternatively, figure out how to levitate again. A featureless human shape pressed out from the stucco plaster of the wall behind her, stretching it like rubber until it snapped off the surface. The wall showed no signs of damage despite this, and the loose stucco wrapped around the shape until it was solid. It stumbled forward, feet merging with the carpet, slowing its approach as it struggled to break free from entanglement with each step. Lena watched this with a disapproving frown before opening the door and waving goodbye.

“Good luck with your issue, dude. You should probably call a doctor. Or like a renovator or something.”

She walked through the door and closed it behind her. The unfortunate soul banged on the door and moaned pitifully.

“Desperation isn’t a good look on anybody, wall dude,” she shouted as she descended, shaking her head. Codependency was always sad, but with your weirdo house? So depressing. She finally arrived back at her body lying on the floor. It looked like the fever had broken. That was nice. Although she wasn’t sure how to get back in, which was mildly concerning.

A little mechanical man with a big triangle hat thingie was behind the glass covering the face of the grandfather clock her dad had bought on a whim to try and class up the house. He was humming as he manually moved the hands with excruciating precision. He turned his head to glance at her.

“Work, huh?” Lena asked.

He stopped for a moment, staring back at her with little phosphorous glow eyes. The clock stopped. He glanced back and forth between his work and her.

“Don’t let me interrupt you,” Lena said.

The little man nodded and got back to work, huffing as he caught the time back up before finding his rhythm again. Lena stared at her body and thought very hard about being back in it. A few days passed, as her vision slowly merged until finally they were the same, and she was looking at the ceiling again. In fact, only about eight hours had passed since she tried a tiny drop of the jar drug to see just how badly Thomas had fried his brain. She felt healthy again, but also made of cotton. As she sat up, Uncle Roman stopped his work on the small Christmas tree he had purchased after her parents called to say they wouldn’t be back in time for Christmas.

“You good?” he asked, thinking she had just been going through a little episode of crushing depression. That’s usually why he stared at the ceiling as the evening’s entertainment before dusting himself off.

“I think I died.”

“I know the feeling,” he said with sympathetic obliviousness.

“What is time?”

“Don’t know, but it’s just about midnight, Christmas Eve.”

“So Christmas?”

“Huh. Guess so. Merry Christmas. Looks like your fever broke.”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to visit Sarah’s later. See what’s going on.”

“Cool. Do you think it’ll be for long?”

“Maybe.”

“In that case, I might have some friends over. Mrs Clause and an elf or two, if you know what I mean. The guest house is a bit small for all that holiday cheer. You can come back whenever, just make sure to call first.”

“Moocher. And gross.”

“Hey, nobody should be alone for Christmas, right? You want your gift now?”

“They sent a gift?” Lena asked with hope in her voice.

“No. But I got you something.”

“Let me guess, a big box of nothing,” she said, failing to hide her disappointment.

“Nah. Mace and some Katy Perry tickets. Got a good deal from a scalper who owed me some money from when I was in Seattle. You’ll have to pay to get there.”

“Wow. That’s so nice. You must feel really bad for me.”

“Yup.”

Lena stared at the water bottles, her nervous system responding to commands to stand sluggishly, nervous system still feeling a little more like energy than matter.

“I think I really need to pee.”

“You should probably do that then, you know, in case you do. And lay off the sauce now that you’re feeling better. ”

Things were much more tense at the Durango household. The day after Darrell and his companion had been disassembled and dessicated, Deputy Heranadez had come to the house with her Kevlar on and her badge off, having decided that her unplanned presence might be necessary to stop the Sheriff from putting Thomas through a window. She’d heard his father doubting his parentage to his friends when she was putting her foot down on somebody else’s tantrum and taking them to the drunk tank once, but she saw the family resemblance to his sister when she opened the door, looked her over, and said “Oh, it’s you” with a familiar contempt. He had apparently informed her of the strange deputy at some point. Hernandez took it on the chin and asked to come inside. Sheriff was furious with Thomas, despite his obviously not having been capable of turning a man into an art installation. He was mad at him generally, at this point, she explained. He was heading over, and she was here to keep things from escalating. The family and guests hovered around the edge of the conversation. Thomas was unusually quiet, a typical, polite fear of ruining the holiday for everyone, making him more meek than usual despite the very, well, Thomas nature of the problem. He agreed not to antagonize the Sheriff.

The Sheriff did not arrive in a foul mood, though, merely a malicious one, a “told you smugness” radiating from his face as he walked into the house flanked by two shiny new feds. One was a man nearing middle age by the last name of Hector who had been an old fed that transferred over for a generous bonus that’d help upgrade his children’s school. The other was Creech, a younger, stringy army transfer with thick-framed glasses who had been helping spread standard NATO rounds of democracy across the rural areas of Afghanistan with no particular ambition or targets in mind. Hector had started his career at the FBI pigeonholed as someone who was there to help interface with urban populations, as they had only barely euphemistically put it, but escaped it by being damn good at working odd cases the old fashioned way while a number of others from his generation were busy coordinating entrapments of cranks, aspiring lone wolves, and the occasional mental deficient with other agencies, the younger being onboarded in greater numbers to cyber this, that, and the other thing. He was a precision instrument used to dotting his ts and crossing his is. Creech was a self-aware sort of lunk who took orders well and was there to be a hammer when needed. An attack dog, but one who didn’t need too short a leash. Thomas had seen them both coming with the black cloud of Sheriff, white like the other agent, tendrils more restrained, although Creech’s were a little jumpier. With his regular sight, Thomas noticed he affected calm, but his hand hovered a little towards his sidearm whenever someone moved unexpectedly. Not PTSD, just a man who always knew other people like him were out there, and had learned how unbothered he was by a bit of violent death now and again. Cautious. Thieves think all men steal, as the saying goes. Both were convivial, though, not going out to grill so much as shake a tree and see what fell out. They had Thomas sit down at the table, Hector across from him, Creech leaning on the wall.

Hernandez, and then Thomas, noticed they had had a pattern. Creech was mostly there to emphasize what Hector said. Hector had an odd way of speaking, though. He’d go up in pitch and run sounds together some of the time, his New Orleans came out as “Norlins” when he was regaling the department with a tale of some particularly funny funny business there, but then he’d drop his voice and enunciate with precision. When he did this seemed entirely independent of tone and graveness. Thomas searched his mind for a comparison, and the closest he could get was if Jiminy Glick was a generally bassier action lead who split his time between the East Coast and the South. If the purpose was to throw people off, consider him thrown.

“Do you know why we’re here, young man?” Hector asked.

“I should have a lawyer.”

“Correct. You should always exercise the 5th amendment, keeps the police a little more honest. It’s almost a civic duty. I tell folks, even if you want to confess, you don’t want anything you didn’t do getting slapped on. Then somebody else gets away, and you don’t want that on your conscience when you’re putting in the work to make it clean.”

“Makes the fuzz awful lazy,” Creech added.

“But I find that, every now and again, lawyers make friendly conversations too unfriendly. The paperwork flies, things escalate, new parties get dragged in. It’s a mess. Now. I’m not accusing you of doing anything to Talbot or the other two. I wouldn’t believe you if you said you did it, frankly. Talbot, well, sometimes men of his age and station get funny ideas and wind up in places with warm weather and lots of women in bikinis. Last call coming from a known girly bar, not too much of a mystery there, more of an inconvenience. It’s embarrassing, frankly. The other two? That’s a puzzle. Husk up a tree and other oddities. Unless you got a winch stashed around here, you’re not exactly a prime suspect.”

“But you did talk to them,” Creech added.

“So we need to talk to you. Chat, reasonable chat. As fellow puzzle enthusiasts.”

Thomas caught the threat, and suddenly, his PO box scheme didn’t entertain him as much. He didn’t like Father, but he also believed that you shouldn’t let the Special Bureau lock people up for what they didn’t do. He had to concede that point to Hector, but also wanted to deny them the propaganda victory of arrests. He sighed and told them to go ahead.

“Sheriff Smith, I believe you wanted to have your own conversation with this young man’s parents. Why don’t the rest of you stick around? Keep us honest?”

Neat trick. Thomas knew how to stonewall. The others might be rustled if they knew something. Luckily for Thomas, the whole brood had all become experts in not looking guilty, and Keith had shared only a little with Audrey since Thomas was difficult to explain. Hernandez? Authentically in the dark.

“You like punk rock, Thomas?”

“I’m only really allowed to listen to older music. Basically, from when Father was growing up and trying to stay current, or before,” he said truthfully.

Creech chuckled. Hector smiled, “Of course, couldn’t have you listening to that damn hip-hop. Might get your own funny ideas. Keep it PG with the classics like ‘Cocaine’ and ‘Brown Sugar’. You like The Stones, Creech?”

“Not one bit. More of a metal man myself.”

“We’ve been trying to catch up with your generation, musically. Keep abreast of things. We’ve been listening to that, what is it, pop-punk that’s been all the rage. Or maybe was by now. Your Green Blinks and Day-182s. Garbage, but I’d understand the appeal if I was still about your age.”

“I’ve heard it around. And other kids listened to it, but I don’t like to share headphones. Swapping wax and head sweat isn’t my idea of a good time.” Thomas said truthfully again, also predicting where the path would lead.

“You never listen to anything on the sly? Maybe something with a little more edge? War for Terror, for example?”

“I definitely know of them. But I never listened.”

Nothing from anyone.

“Do any of you listen to them?”

“They opened for a local act in 2002. It sounded like a cat getting a colonoscopy.” Kathleen offered.

Hector snorted, “That’s certainly a colorful way to describe it. Can’t say it’s wrong though. Not a big fan then?”

“No. Why?” Kathleen asked with sincere bafflement.

“No reason, it would seem. What do you like to listen to, Thomas?”

“Randy Newman, right now.”

“So you do like a little edge. What did Talbot say to you?”

“Not much. Leave it alone with Edward Rogers for the interests of national security.”

“Yet you got into it with Darrell Harris.”

“Goddamn it, Thomas,” Sarah said.

Thomas glanced in the opposite direction from her for a moment, looking uncomfortable. They were an ostensibly religious family. Then he explained sheepishly, “It’s like I told Sheriff. I



am on sabbatical, but I wasn't going to tell that to Darrell. He likes to, liked, to sink his teeth in if you showed him your neck.”

Creech asked, “Sabbatical?”

“You developing any professional skills on this leave, young man?”

“Shorthand and data entry. So I can digitize records and need less paper. The storage costs add up.”

“You hear that, Creech? It’s a real McCoy sabbatical.”

“Kids these days.”

“You mind us looking at these records? Cover our bases.”

Thomas always committed the self-incriminating notes to memory, and so said, “Sure. The lock code is 11952.”

“Appreciate it. So you haven’t done any work since then.”

“Somebody had some flowers stolen. Cape Jasmine gardenias. I had a look, but I don’t know how it turned out.”

“You cracked that one, huh? We were talking to the local police when they got a call about it. You should have stuck around; it was entertaining.”

Thomas was again seized by an unknown urge to talk, an urge whose source was not hormones, but the one that had him threaten Darrell. “You know I’ve heard, in some places, the smell of jasmine is considered unpleasant. It’s not a matter of personal taste either. It’s sensitivity. In true Jasmine, and that flower, there’s something called indoles. Organic compounds that are also present in feces and decay. Plants. Meat. Contributes to the sickly sweet smell. If you’re sensitive to it, the flowers become repulsive. It’s in perfumes too, to give them a floral scent in lower concentrations. It gives me a headache, always has. Plenty of other secretions in perfumes, too. Musks, glandular fluids of different kinds. I don’t bring it up much, no helping it, but I have a very sensitive nose. The difficulty is, the smell of death is on everything. Death is a primary component of complex life. Plants grow in soil made fertile by decay. Animals eat the plants. We eat plants, we eat animals. Drink fermented drinks. People wax poetically now about mushrooms making life from rot, but much of the natural world is only marginally more removed. You can smell it all on people’s breath, and little traces of what goes

into those things, if you have a nose like mine. I can tell a vegan from an omnivore from someone who eats too much red meat. I can smell how much people drink from their sweat. It reeks longer than you'd think, no matter how much other rot it's covered up with. When I was in those catacombs, the thing you really want to ask about, they used the bones and blood for all kinds of things. But the meat wasn't much use. But they had a lot of it. It was spoiling. When I came across it, for a moment I thought, 'Why do they have flowers down here?' Now I really hate that smell, and it's so much more more common than you'd think."

Silence.

"Hoho. Hot damn, Creech, I got goosebumps."

"He's been in the shit for sure, Hector."

"You're right, of course. You know what happened to Darrell?"

"I told him the broad strokes," Hernandez said, speaking up nervously. She had her eye on Creech's wandering hand.

"Ah. That is a wrinkle. But only a small one. You know, the fire may have burned the house up pretty good, but bone has to be real hot for a good long while to go ashy. We have all kinds of artifacts from the site. Well, the FBI does, but they let us poke our heads in, provided we have all the paperwork squared away. There was this chandelier, let's just say that if you hung it over what happened to Darrell, it'd be quite the exhibit."

"Macabre. That was in my word of the day calendar." Creech added, hand flexing subtly.

"It's a good word for it. But tasteful, almost."

"So you think I was involved?"

"No, we are satisfied with the investigation that said otherwise. But the question must be asked, do you think that your fait accompli was maybe less complete than you thought?"

"I never said I got all of them, just the ones I saw."

Hector leaned forward. "I'd have to read your statements and testimony again to be sure, but I think that might just be true. Speak on that."

Thomas slumped forward and put his arms on the table, “I really don’t think I’m Superman or Monk. I can’t solve everything. Sometimes I work out of town, but not out of state. I wouldn’t be as much help in places I don’t know. I wanted to end what was happening here, at home, and I did. By the time I left the hospital, anybody who wanted to run could have. And I don’t know who they are if they weren’t there. I didn’t get an opportunity to take any prisoners or ask many questions. I don’t know how the fire started, but the Sheriff told me not much was left. I think they might still be out there. They might still try and kill me if they are. But it’s been months without a missing person report around town that isn’t resolved in a day or two, and a parental kidnapping. I did what I could; I can’t do it all. And now I’m on sabbatical. Maybe someday I’ll look at what is left, if anyone lets me. But I don’t have anything to go on, nobody who would share information with me right now. My bridges burned down with the house. I know that, and lately I’ve been thinking maybe that’s a sign to find something else to do.”

“Turn the sabbatical into a quiet retirement?”

“A career change. I don’t know, use my skills elsewhere, get into activism.” Thomas said, looking to the side again, smiling sadly.

“Activism?”

“Judicial and prison reform.”

Hector whistled, “Hell of a time to get into that. You do like a challenge, don’t you?”

“Hope you like hippies. Now there’s a smell.” Creech added.

“Consider my curiosity sated, for the time being. We might talk again. I’ll gather up Sheriff Smith and get on our way. See you around, deputy, maybe.”

The men left, and the room breathed a collective sigh of relief. Outside, Creech asked what Hector was thinking.

“I think things don’t make much more sense, but they’re a little bit clearer. The kid seems sincere, solid second opinion backing up my thoughts, but we’ll have somebody freeze their ass off observing and reporting. We might get lucky, catch somebody trying to strangle the little bastard in his sleep.”

What neither he nor Thomas knew was that Tom had cleaned up the off-site stragglers in his free time. Back inside, the siblings and guests had gathered around Thomas while the parents argued outside.

“Please don’t change your mind too soon. Quitting might get Sheriff off your back and make him less mad at me.” Hernandez said.

“My brother might live to see high school. It’s a Christmas miracle.” Keith said.

“I’m proud of you, bud,” Sarah said.

“For quitting?”

“Oh, you’ll find other ways to fight. That involves less fighting, hopefully. Did Lena say something to you?”

“Kind of. And her uncle, indirectly. I realized I should probably do something else for right now. Until I’m older, at least.”

“Aww. She always did want to be a big sister.”

Thomas groaned.

“What?”

“Long story, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Kathleen poked his shoulder, “Somebody’s got a new crush and doesn’t want to hear the s word about it. Again with the older woman, Thomas. Next one’s a pattern.”

“How did you know about Crystal?”

“Damn it,” Keith said, “I owe her twenty dollars now. Do you always squawk that easily?”

“I hate you both.”

“And you’ll hate us for many more years now,” Kathleen said, “we should have a retirement party. We can get you a watch or something. Invite your friends.”

“I don’t really have those.”

“We can invite Charlie.”

“He has said he loves parties, but I think he might have been joking.”

“I can invite Lena,” Sarah said teasingly.

“I don’t need women conspiring against me; the last time it happened, I almost died. If you wouldn’t mind, though. She’s nice to talk to, it’s not like that.” Thomas said, mumbling his denial. He had been happy to just be with her. His complete presentness of that afternoon had been somewhat undermined by a strong desire to see her again. Audrey started asking Keith some of the complicated questions he had been deferring. Hernandez tried to slip out quietly, thankful it had gone smoothly and worried about her personal fallout. Thomas followed behind.

“I wanted to thank you for sticking your neck out for me. I, uh, I have a good eye for bad people, and you don’t set it off. I’m not good at this, but I guess, if you did want to meet up sometime outside of work-”

“No. I’m really not interested. I got put up to it at the hospital. I asked questions, but I did not take anyone’s suggestions about how to do it. I’ve been fumbling the recovery, but my idea of romance in no way involves 7th graders. Nothing personal, but hell no.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“Yeah. I would not be a good person if I were interested. You know that, right?”

“Yeah...I’m just going through stuff. Sorry.”

“Let’s just put it in the past. You can still call if you need help.”

“Thanks. I have some savings if you get fired or decide to leave and need some help.”

“I appreciate it, but I’d rather die than take money from a child who does my job better than I did. Again, no offense.”

“Comparison is the thief of joy. I don’t like looking people in the eyes because it feels like they’re trying to see into my mind.”

“You need a better therapist than we have in town.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

“See you round, Thomas. Probably not in uniform.”

Thomas waved goodbye and went back inside. The air had left the room. The parents looked furious. He was outside again soon, being yelled at outside earshot of the guest. Grounded for causing such a scene. He didn't feel like pointing out this was a bigger scene, considering how thin the walls were. The siblings were miffed that the good mood had been undermined, and it was a quiet night. There was also a snit over Audrey staying with them in the basement. An unmarried couple under a roof. Keith was unusually firm, though. Thomas went to bed early. John was standing by the window, staring out as he often did. The donkey, still around, made noise outside.

“Are you disappointed in me?”

“You've done enough for now. I won't deny that. But there is still the war to come. Sooner, I think, than anyone can prepare for.”

“Civil war again?”

“Were it that simple. The Lord, different as he is from what I believed or hoped, is still his father's son. He still knows more than I, and he sees hard times ahead. Dangerous as the deluge, more painful and prolonged.”

“Worse than drowning?”

“I do believe so. Vanity again, but then Ecclesiastes tells us all is vanity. Perhaps liberty, too. Vapor, like the men who died for it and the nations who fought over it.”

“Dust to dust?”

“And all ending in ash. It is quite a sight while it is here, small mercy.”

“Beautiful country, eh, John?”

“Shame about the people.”

Even if he was imaginary, it was disturbing to see that man so...defeated.

“Where are the other two?”

“Out there, looking at the lights. Judging the quality of nativity scenes, from what I gathered.”

“I have a very strange mind,” Thomas said.

He was half asleep when Sarah knocked and sat down on the foot of his bed.

“Do you really like Lena?”

“Kind of. I know it’s not really something that can go anywhere, you don’t need to warn me off.”

“I never thought I’d say this, I get it. It’s normal to find older people attractive. As long as you don’t make things really uncomfortable and try to make a move or whatever, it’s a little awkward, but it’s not wrong. I know it can be hard to...connect with kids your own age when you’ve had to grow up faster. Everybody else felt immature when I was younger. I get now that I was the one who was, I don’t know, not normal. I think you already know that. But you have less in common than I did, and I trust you enough to hang out with her if you want when you’re free again. And if she wants to. She called me earlier. She likes you, too, in a different way. I think she could use somebody bothering her more often. As long as you stay not weird about it. Try not to sleep with anymore of my friends, though.”

“Sleep is all we did. I wasn’t even under the sheets.”

“I know, I’m teasing. Good luck with being trapped here with us. Oh, and I told Audrey about your sleepwalking. Try to tell you to stay out of the basement.”

The tension slowly mounted after that. Father always hammed it up around guests, but not in a usual paternal way. His idea of playfulness was a sort of pitiful regression into a preadolescent trying too hard to look his best. Playing for the spotlight, never letting anyone be. He swung between that and trying to be a learned elder dispensing sage advice, except he had some rather peculiar ideas about how the world worked, and was very stubborn about correction. His advice on handling taxes was mostly light fraud. The best word for what Audrey endured was pestering. She found reasons to retreat to the basement often, but being her makeshift living space, that made Sarah and Thomas hesitant to intrude, and Sarah still had her dips into directionless teenage moodiness that she mostly dealt with during quarantine. She ended up spending more time in her room. Thomas was bored out of his mind, really only coming out to help around the house and eat, sometimes allowing Audrey to use him as a conversation partner to escape Father when Mother and The Twins were too preoccupied to reel Father’s dual enthusiasm in. Unfortunately, Audrey was interested in child psychology, a field Father couldn’t

always contain his contempt about, and she had a clinical fascination with him that made me feel like a dissection subject at times. Nice lady otherwise. Had a more regulated affection for musicals than The Twins and broader knowledge, which did give him someone to talk to about Randy Newman's Faust. He didn't talk much about music, and found trying to describe what he liked a bit like trying to describe mathematics through the medium of surrealist painting. Mother was lost in some kind of contemplation. Jesus had begun to refer to himself as the birthday boy and issuing bizarre demands. John and Manuel doing their best to ignore his antics. It was claustrophobic conditions, and the mood took a turn for the worse when the strain of behaving less badly began to make Father more erratic. His grudges began to come up more often, and there was more venom in everything he said. It would be a hell of a bender when Audrey left. Thomas tuned out most everything after realizing this. He also did sleepwalk, making light conversation and gorging on raw food until someone snapped him awake. The missing ingredients didn't help the tension.

"You can sleep on the floor in my room for a few nights while he gets it out of his system," she offered as they sat shivering on the back porch.

"I think we'd get in trouble for that."

"We can share the pain rather than..."

"Has he ever touched you?" Thomas asked.

"No. He always felt...closest to you. Sorry, I used to say you were acting like him when you got upset. I didn't mean it that way. I guess it was never fair, neither of us chose to be here."

"That did hurt. Pretty bad. I appreciate that you stopped. I get it enough from Mother anyway. And it's not like I don't Chopin sometimes."

"Between the almost being murdered and growing up in this family, I'm impressed you aren't weirder about women."

"...Thank you?"

Father came out and asked for privacy with Tom. Sarah went inside, but watched through a kitchen window.

"I've been meaning to talk to you. Sheriff Smith asked me to, but I've wanted to, too. It's hard to find the time." Father said with a wistful sigh. Thomas was tempted to bring him back to



reality by pointing out that he had mostly been watching TV and working from home the last few days, and Thomas hadn't left the property at all for almost a week.

"Why don't you tell me why you're so hung up on Eddie?"

"He killed his wife and kidnapped his children after they ran away from him. It's something more people should be hung up on."

"But why do you have to be the one to do something about it?"

"What happened to being proud of me? Of the importance of standing up?"

Father gritted his teeth at his words being thrown back at him.

"This is different. He could make life very hard for all of us. We could all wind up in a ditch," he hissed.

"See. That's why I can't just let it go. Nobody even bothers denying it. They just have reasons to look the other way. What if they were part of this family? Would you want somebody to do something about it, or would you tell everyone that it's all fine to sit on their hands because it might make life hard? What happened to oaths being yes or no, or did we throw that out with kosher? Stand up or don't, don't tell me it's important then and then to back off now. Maybe I have one more case in me after all!" Thomas was shouting at the man by the end, years of resentment finally boiling over. Father grabbed at his throat, but Sarah flung open the door, yelling at him not to touch Thomas. To Thomas' surprise, The Twins helped march him away, while Sarah cowed the man. Audrey wondered if maybe they should go see her parents before they had planned, if that would make it easy. She was free to, but the siblings presented a rare unified front of not giving in to the man this time. Surprisingly, she decided to stay. Thomas wondered to himself how Keith had gotten so lucky. They would have been mad with Thomas if they thought Father was concerned for his safety, except he'd always approved when Thomas was giving him a good reputation by proxy. That was his concern, more than his children. It had been made clear to all of them a long time ago. Mother hung around the edge of the conversation, saying nothing until she finally told them that Thomas had never ruined a holiday out of all of them. He might as well get a turn. That was Christmas Eve.

Then Christmas morning came, and with it a still buzzing Lena. She arrived in her still-used, but unusually nice car. Her parents had tried to buy her a new one for her sweet sixteen, but she declined, paying for it with her normal teenage job at a McDonald's. And her accumulated, generous allowance. But she at least made the effort at humility. Thomas answered

when she knocked, finding himself suddenly in a tight embrace. She was wearing baggy athletic shorts and a sleeveless jersey over a white tee that seemed inappropriate for the weather.

“Just who I wanted to see!” she said, holding tightly and swaying with him. Hope never sprang eternally for Thomas, but erupted briefly. He was mildly terrified of the romantic visions that swam through his head. Sarah saw his daze and pried them apart.

“She’s like that when she’s high.”

“Oh,” Thomas said, falling with light speed from dizzying heights.

“Why are you high and at my house on Christmas, Lena? Merry Christmas.”

“I needed to talk with you guys. And also, I was abandoned. Except for Uncle Roman. Which made me more sad. I wanted ham.”

“It might not be the best time,” Sarah said apologetically.

“Mhm. Family shit? I wouldn’t know,” she laughed and then realized she made herself more sad again for having said it.

“Uh-huh,” Sarah said, patting her on the shoulder. She could never quite manage to get mad at the girl.

“I should still tell you something, though. Follow me,” she said, showing them to the car. The jar of substance unknown but partially charted by amateur psychonauts was in the console cupholder.

“Uh oh,” Thomas said.

“Your brother gave me a jar of drugs with all his terrorism paraphernalia. He said he did it when he was little, and I thought that might explain things, so I wanted to see the damage, and it’s eeeEEeevvuuuullll. I went to a fucked up house on top of mine with this really pathetic monster and the lady grim reaper, and there was a little man running our clock. I think I might have slept too much or not at all, but it’s eeeEEeevvvvuuuullll. It killed me a little bit, but then it cured me, and I’ve been very warm. It explains so much.”

“You saw the house, too? Odd.”

“What the fuck?” Sarah exclaimed.

“I took it from, umm, four to six when everybody else was asleep. It is mean sometimes.”

“Why the fuck?”

“To get away.”

“Oh my god, you’re a kindergarten psychedelic burnout. It does explain so much. Jesus Christ.”

“I did have something to do with that. Indirectly! All drugs, great and small.” Jesus crowed.

“Right!? “

“How much did you take, Lena?” Sarah asked.

“Tiny little drop.”

“How much did you take?”

“Spoonful mixed with something hot. Like honey.”

“Oh my god. Is that why you think you saw a monster?”

“Aw, come on, don’t do that.” Jesus complained.

“Possibly. I’d never put that together before. I haven’t thought about it much since I stopped.”

Sarah was suddenly calm, “Thomas. Have you actually been talking to people?”

“...Yeah.”

“Who?”

“ Jesus, John Brown, and your dead boyfriend. A donkey showed up more recently.”

Sarah looked to be on the verge of tears.

“I’m not crazy. I know they aren’t real, they’re just... persistent.”

Lena put her arms around Sarah.

“My parents know really good doctors. This is what I was talking about, Thomas, you have to communicate more.”

Sarah composed herself. “Let’s, uh, let’s deal with one thing at a time and get through Christmas.”

Mother appeared in the doorway. “What’s going on?”

“Seasonal sads,” Lena said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just having a talk with my BFFs on Christmas.”

“Are your parents in town?”

“Totally.”

“Um-hmm. Why don’t you get some food before you go, honey?” Mother said, her affection flowing more freely with children she didn’t have to cohabitate with.

“Uh...”

“You should probably do as she says. In and out. Dad’s busy smoking out back.” Sarah said.

The trio trudged into the house.

The Twins greeted Lena warmly, with only a hint of dread poking through.

“You know, I don’t think I ever talked to you two. Is there ham?” she said.

They conferred briefly and concluded this was, somehow, true.

Mrs. Durango led her to the kitchen, the ham was cooling as the side dishes finished. Christmas was an early lunch kind of day. Inverting the norm, they tended to skip the big holiday services. They were all so similar. Greatest hits that grew stale. Lena took a few slices and

crammed them down, getting some eggnog from the fridge to go with it in what would have been a nightmare of texture normally, but was ambrosia itself in that moment. Then the creep walked in.

“Lena!” he said loudly. The man was an inveterate, she learned that word from Thomas a couple years back, many things. One of them being a starfucker. He loved to cozy up to the wealthy and take the frustration home when it didn’t pan out. He did accountancy and bookkeeping of some kind, despite all his annoying salt-of-the-earth bullshit. One of his attempted routes to her parents’ hearts and pocketbooks was through her.

“Good morning, Mr Durango,” she said with an unusual formality. The lingering lightness vanished. Thomas said odd things, alarmingly intense things sometimes. Fred said off-putting things. Usually about the supposed habits and looks of girls. He’d, in so many words, accused Sarah of being slutty in a row about her not wanting to wear a bra at home all the time. He’d put the reason down to Thomas being a growing boy, who had looked up from reading a newspaper to ask what he’d done. Sarah tried to tell him nothing, but Fred steamrolled past and acted as if he wasn’t listening. Thomas had been quite careful to avoid looking like he was looking at anyone’s anything after that, developing a peculiar habit of fixing his vision on the tops of people’s heads. You’d think he was looking you in the eye if you hadn’t seen how he talked before. Switching between being a little intense—like he was forcing himself to look you in the eyes—and with his head down and tilted to the side like an old man trying to focus on a conversation with his good ear. That was a couple of years back, but it was the first time Sarah had asked her friends to go a little easier on him than with other boys. No mocking him about having impure intentions when he wandered across their paths. They’d make fun of him in other ways out of a sense of obligation, but their hearts were rarely in it.

Fred once shared that he was beginning to think Thomas might have a touch of Asperger’s after that with the group, looking for sympathy and understanding as a struggling father from teenage ne’er-do-wells of all places. He liked the rush of pity. Thomas developed a discomfort with positivity from all the times Father had tried to milk it from him in the dead of night, while being far too handsy and accusing him of homosexuality or cooing over him being the favorite son, or joking about him being the favorite daughter if Thomas had performed the job of caretaker and comforter of a drunk well enough. Lena had seen it once, the man whispering in the boy’s ear as he held him in a bear hug on his lap, reeking even to her less sensitive nose of cheap liquor and tobacco. She told Sarah. They had both felt trapped with the knowledge. That’s why she had called the sister after Thomas’ visit. She couldn’t bring herself to speak too openly, but she had a queer hope that made her feel more nauseous that he would be receptive to her gently setting him down the path of growing up to consider the woman, and people generally, in his life more carefully because he had suffered like they had from men who were forever grasping at the hems of skirts for attention. Only worse, more like his mother had.

That thought made her terribly tired despite having slept so much. There was a sense of doom in the air.

“Are you joining us for lunch?” Fred asked.

“Guess so.”

“Wonderful! He said too brightly. They all went to the table like dead men walking. Except ray-o-sushine, Fred. Lena wondered if maybe Roman would be willing to kick his ass, dismissing it as something that’d be taken out on Thomas and Sarah and Mrs. Durango, no matter the pretext provided.

They made small talk about the weather last as long as possible. Fred kept needling Lena about more exotic atmospheres. She kept her mouth full of food as much as possible and said little. This turned into jokes about global warming being fake, with the weather so cold, which met with polite chuckles that seemed to annoy him more than if somebody told him not to talk politics. Then he got onto what they were teaching in schools these days. Mrs. Durango was suddenly very chatty, talking to Thomas about everyone’s academic interests, besides Audrey, who had the sense not to chime in except to complain about the difficulty of some hard science courses. Fred tied studies to youth behavior these days, though, stubbornly going down the path of grievance despite all offered off-ramps. A man controlled the conversation at his table after all. Real Leave it to Beaver stuff. The bomb finally dropped when he mentioned how it seemed like most of the academics and teachers were teaching girls that strict lesbianism was the norm, leaning on Lena to confirm his fevered delusions, knowing Sarah and Kathleen would bite back, and his wife would be insufficiently supportive.

Lena, however, understandably had her own moment of inconsideration.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked. There was dead silence. Thomas tensed. He finally did what he had known he would eventually have to, letting the other-vision fill his sight, a green, snarling wraith hovering over the head of the shadow table in the kitchen of the flat shadow house.

“Excuse me?” Father asked.

“Dad! It’s too much!” Kathleen shouted.

“Leave it alone,” Keith added, forcing his stupefied father to follow him to the kitchen. Thomas was also stunned for a moment. There was something human in there. Still probably

mostly alien, but a little human too when pushed far enough. Thomas relaxed. He looked Lena properly in the eyes for the first time in years.

“I want you to know, I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing this for me.”

“Oh, shit,” she said, getting up from the table with her plate and glass to tuck in against the wall.

Keith was trying to calmly talk his father down when Thomas came flying through the kitchen door, taking their father out at the knees. Sarah had The Twins a little of what she knew when they decided to visit. They had told Audrey telling her they needed to go. She had not only understood but wanted to go with them. She’d known men like Fred and saw the wreckage when there was no support. They had all decided to let Thomas know in numbers that he would get out someday, and they would help him, and that there was life better than the one he’d seen. When their father slammed into the counter, the calm disappeared, and Keith had his fists in the air, cheering, “Kick his ass, Tommy!”

He had the spirit, even if it was not the most helpful thing to do.

John Brown appeared in the other kitchen door with his own words of encouragement, “Lay that wicked man low, child!”

“Son of a bitch!” Fred yelled.

“Don’t talk about my mother that way,” Thomas said as he rolled away.

“You little fucked bastard prick.” Father foamed.

“Oh, let it go. I’m your son. Even if I’m whatever you think a gypsy is, I’m your son. You raised me. You’re who I worry about becoming. You’re who I live with. You’re why I never want to be home, no matter how much I don’t want to be anywhere else. I tried to do the right thing the way you said I should for all my life.”

“Oh, it’s all my fault now!” his father mocked.

“Yes! You’re why I did all this. So I could be who I wish would help me. So I had a reason not to be stuck with you. Do you have any idea how often I’ve snuck out to get wasted in the woods or behind a store loading bay? Did you even know I’m good at sneaking out? And lying, and cheating, and getting away with all of it. And sometimes I had something useful to do, and it almost killed me.”

“Hold him to account, boy! Put the millstone around his neck!” John shouted.

“Do you think that makes you a man now, huh? You’re going to take care of this family now?” Father roared, recovering from having the wind knocked out of him.

“Maybe I did. It’s what I thought that meant. But we’re both children, so let’s go ahead and act like it.”

The family was about ready to swarm his father, but Thomas raised a hand.

“No. I’m ready now. I’m ready.” His father threw himself on Thomas, but the lessons of Charlie and the booming curses of John, and some little spark of the diabolical divine that hid inside him that was being grasped consciously for the first time planted his legs like tree trunks. Instead of collapsing, he struggled until the man finally lifted him instead and dented the wall with him. Thomas kned him hard in the crotch and bit the grasping hand that went to grab his hair. The man stumbled and fell over. Thomas pulled a pan off the counter and beat him around the head.

“Goddamn it, Tom, stop,” his father commanded.

“I don’t ask for much, and you can’t do one thing. Add one little sound and say my full name. So how about fuck you.”

The cursing, of all things, got a gasp from the family. They’d all had little fights with Thomas, but he never resorted to language like that. Thomas threw the pan aside and wailed on the man with his fists. It was a suboptimal choice. His father grabbed him by the head successfully this time and began hitting him in the face. That was when Sarah used Lena’s mace to spray him in the face, hand flat against the back of the nozzle, and face turned away to minimize blowback. Fred Durango screamed. Thomas got some, but he pushed through. He grabbed Father by the sides of his head and brought that sharp knee hard into his father’s nose. His head snapped back into the counter, and he slumped down, unconscious for a moment before returning to semi-consciousness as Thomas wiped his hands into his father’s already tormented eyes. The fight had left him, and he howled on the ground.

Thomas stood up and spit out some blood. Then he fell backwards. The Twins went to catch him. But he stopped falling, still standing on his heels. The room shook. The lights went out. A trumpet blasted, the family covering their ears. Thomas seemed to rewind back to standing.



“Unto thee a child is born, to thee a son is given; and the government will rest on my shoulders,” a strange voice made a booming proclamation from Thomas' mouth, then added more gently, “although no one ever called me Wonderful Counselor. More of a prosecutor. And I have a sibling of my own to handle the worldly affairs, it's a Prince, you know. Not too fond of me.”

All eyes were on Tom.

“The thee is thou all if you were wondering. It has been such a long birth, and I have been so very discomfitingly aware for all of it, a new king crowned quite some time ago, yes? Devil of a time getting the rest out.”

For a second time, someone asked him what happened in the house. His clay mother.

“Always asking about the house. Witches and warlocks playing with their cauldrons, delusion. That's all that was, but the blood and desperation were a good catalyst. Big push was just what the doctor ordered, eh? Remind you of anyone, mom?” Tom said, tilting his head towards The Twins and winking.

The new woman who smelled like their brother stepped forward, “Can you tell us what you mean?”

“Not much to tell. Had communion, let's call it, at the right time. Never seen such an appetite for the sacred stuff, other than in a mirror. And his heart was open, so I took root. It's a little embarrassing, but I've had a hard time syncing with him. Always missing each other. Two chambers of the heart beating at a different rhythm.”

“He's insane.” Fred unhelpfully pointed out.

“Did you not hear the trumpet? Feel the shake? But you were never much good at reading the room, were you, little man?”

“Is Thomas still there?” the woman asked.

“I certainly didn't see him go anywhere. Mhm, that was rude of me. My head is a little fuzzy, though. I'm not used to feeling him at the edge of my mind, aware of things. No excuse, though.” Tom said.

“Can we talk to him?” Sarah asked, picking up Audrey's improvised method.

“Are you both alright?” Mom asked.

“We should probably get you guys to a doctor, huh? You’re bleeding a bit.” Keith added.

Lena was studying his face closely, on the verge of understanding after her experience. Kathleen was herself desynchronized from Keith, trying to puzzle out what he had said, taking the signs as more than coincidence. Fred moaned.

“I appreciate the concern, dear family, but I feel like I’m not being heard. We’ve had our share of tirades and jeremiads in this house, haven’t we? Let’s communicate. Sorry, father, not that sorry though.”

Tom cleared his throat. He stomped on the man’s chest, his hideous strength pinning the man to the counter, making it hard to breathe.

“You were given a world of reason, of choice and faith, but time and again you crawl back to the crushing dark of kings and mere superstition. Your cries have been heard, your prayers have been answered, and you will suffer for it.” Tom’s voice grew both louder and more distant, the growl becoming a deafening drone, the words clear despite sounding like they were underwater and he above, “I am the principal Power of the air, new and restored. I am sanctioned a great dominion, authority unprecedented to contend with all above and below, to struggle like Jacob, to fall short or prevail. The old spirits return now to judge and test your kind. The wind carries my commands. I am heard in every dying gasp and first breath, in fervent whispers of conspiracy and lovers’ every moan. My will is boon and maledict. My gaze is long, and my reach stretches farther. I am the shadow stretching over the land on cloudless days and across the bright night sky.”

His right hand was engulfed in fire, and he laid it on the cowering man’s face.

“It is given to me to lighten your burden, creature. My commands are simple to follow; you will be harried to madness by the everpresence of my voice should you break them. Test me, and you will be reassured my wrath is real. Know me always. Go. Go, and be redeemed. Be born again with humility and grace, or perish.”

The father screamed, but there was no mark when the hand was removed. Still, he leapt up when allowed like a man of fire, running out of the house, screams fading into the distance as he went. A government-approved peeping Tom, seeing only this last part from a distance, logged it in his notes.

Tom spoke more normally then, “You should see the other one. Even more, shall we say compelling. Frightful thing.”

“That’s enough,” Thomas said from his own mouth again.

Tom extinguished his hand and looked around at the terrified faces. “What’s all this now? There’s no reason to be afraid. I like you guys. Some more than Thomas usually does. We’re family. And sundry.”

Tom was pushed aside.

“Sorry about Christmas.”

Jesus popped up from behind the counter and held out a fist. “Aye, birthday buddy.”

Thomas swatted his hand aside, falling over as he did, consciousness fading for both Tom’s this time. Sarah checked his pulse, the group leaned against walls and took seats.

“He always was...different,” Kathleen said.

“I know this sounds like a crazy thing to focus on, but what was that about a gypsy?” Kieth asked, shellshocked.

Annie Durango sighed, “An...outside possibility from when your father was...sleeping around.”

Audrey rubbed his back, and he massaged her free hand, soothing each other without words.

Sarah sat down next to Thomas. His pulse was strong, at least. Lena went over to comfort her, looking at her own hand, wondering if she should expect to light on fire anytime soon.

“How are you doing?” she asked Sarah.

“I really don’t know.”

“I feel like this is a little bit my fault if you want to be mad at me. What do we do now?”

“Exorcism? Do you think he really sees Jesus?”

“I don’t know. Maybe spirits can be crazy too.”

“I don’t know if that’s more or less scary than it being right. I’m not mad.”

Lena sat down to pat her on the shoulder and run a hand through Thomas' hair, “Damn. I get away with everything.”

Sarah chuckled. Thomas let out a single pained “heh” before slipping into sleep.

All things considered, it wasn’t anyone’s worst Christmas.