



**MARIN'S
DALE**

THE LAST ROAD YOU'LL TAKE...

EVAN BOLLINGER

Marin's Dale

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Moonshire Lake

10:15 p.m.

Teenagers on the dark shores wanted sex. They were already drunk, and as they jerked and jostled between warm blankets, the *beings from beyond* looked on. Older couples, sipping from the expensive wines, could only smile.

The lake at Moonshire was a place of beauty—it brought people together. It restored the spirit, and enlivened the jaded. It reminded every living soul, human and not, that life would sustain. It was nature's way of saying simply: Life is good.

But then something happened.

The people, all of the people, stopped and pointed. Nearby, the crickets no longer chirped; the deer no longer grazed; the wind no longer moaned. Life in the norm was coming to a halt, as a new force announced its presence.

Black humps, like bulges along the spine of a great beast, bubbled to surface. As they pushed through the shimmering water in all places, the humming began. The lake was not bubbling. It was *simmering*.

The humans could only stare, pale faces wretched in horror, glistening eyes struggling to comprehend the humming humps. Or pods.

And then the pods fired. They fired with the ferocity of rocket shells, exploding on trees and land, dissipating in crimson, sizzling capillaries of electricity. Adults and adolescents sprinted for cover. Their screams shredded the stagnant air, and as they ducked and dodged, tossing behind whatever they could find, the pods continued to explode.

This lake, a place of serenity and beauty, was no more. Instead the steaming lake groaned, giving its final inward protest before the impossible. Before it lifted, all of it, every square inch of it, shooting into the sky like reversed rain.

Humans caught in the chaos were no longer humans. They were ragdolls...

###

Miles away, the city of Marin's Dale slumbered beneath the stars. House lights and apartment windows speckled the foothills. Wind whistled in the farmer's fields. In a valley surrounded 360 degrees by the evergreens of Colorado, the crisp, spring air laid like a safety net.

A quiet veil that would soon be ripped...

"Stop!"

Michael Petrone jerked, half expecting to see the man with the black blood and ghoulish face. But instead there were walls. White, unpainted walls on all sides.

Although the nightmare was etched in his eyelids, the sounds bothered him the most. He could still hear that slime-slicked tongue slurping like leeches on a cut. It was terrible.

Michael rubbed his head. Normally he slept soundly, despite everything he had seen in his life: the psychos he encountered, the victims cast in bloody disarray across carpets and mangled fences, the families and lives ripped apart. The human mind could only take so much, but Michael had always been great at managing the madness. That is, until the past few days.

He eyed the small wooden floor of the bedroom. The floor was a cluttered space, and the boxes were still waiting. Boxes that undoubtedly contained a million different items and trinkets that would take forever to put away. *God* he hated moving.

"Go to sleep, Mi..."

The voice belonged to Kate, a curvy body with a cascade of blonde. She had this cute little habit of saying something, usually totally jumbled, and then she'd turn over and pull all the covers with her. Giving her butt a little pinch, Michael whispered, "Be back, babe," and slid to the floor. He grabbed his police badge from the nightstand as he checked the clock.

Out the lone window of the bedroom, the crescent moon dangled like an orange peel above the mountain crown. Somewhere beyond those distant peaks, the beautiful Moonshire Lake lapped at the peace.

It was probably just *sublime* tonight thought Michael. No matter how stressed he got, he could always thank nature for providing such breathtaking beauty. Life was simply better in Marin's Dalmar. Easier. Happier.

And Michael knew that no matter what happened, nothing could take that away.

###

Fire once. Crouch. Stray left. Fire. Mortar shell.

A plump Barkly Mendbrook moved in perfect frenzy. His fingers flicked, his head bobbed, his lips rubbed, his eyes darted. It was an algorithm and such—he knew how to do this precisely. It was his way and such.

Fire once. Dead. Second fire. Dead. Knife. Dead. Reload.

Barkly nodded, as he continued to bob in the small rocking chair, in the same rote pattern. From the corner, a lava lamp bled into the black—the only light Barkly permitted.

Stray, stray, knife.

He slurped from a Sprite can with the sloppiness of a first-grader. His trigger-tapping and button-hitting were rapid and clean; his drinking was not.

Fire. PM -9. Fire. MP7. Fire. Jump, jump.

Although his weaponry continued to explode across the screen in perfect order, something *else* was taking hold. His fingers slipped and the sprite can spilled. Suddenly the T.V. cut off. Alone and invisible, Barkly shivered amid the black.

How fun thought Michael as he gazed out the speckled window of the Crown Vic. The power was out again.

He was moving down Pulati St., 2 miles from the station house. His wife had fallen in love with the area at first sight, but the cozy townhomes were not cheap—for the rich, really—and it wasn't until Michael had explained certain “budgetary constraints” that Kate had finally come around.

Michael had no desire to rent and saw no need to. Their current flat was fine. It was spacious, clean, and most importantly, affordable. Sure, it didn't have some of the nice amenities of these historic townhouses, but it was comfortable and inviting in its own right. Not to mention, a *helluva* lot cheaper.

Michael knew the Department was far from rolling in dough, explaining why this beloved cruiser had been assigned to three officers. And it was always one of the other guys—possibly Joe, but more likely Mac—who kept ol' Victoria, as they called her, in such shitty condition. There were always Dunkin' Donut cups in the front seat. Sometimes the perps would crack jokes about it too. Always the stereotype—which Michael hated. "Had a few donuts, eh?" one of the lowlifes might shoot from the backseat.

Michael wanted nothing more than to whack them across the face. If they were already missing a few molars, what difference did it make?

He gazed at the buzzing letters of Seven-Eleven. *Thank god for back-up generators.*

Unlike a lotta the guys, Michael wasn't too big on the coffee or the donuts. He had a sweet tooth for other things, which could only mean one thing: blue raspberry Slurpee. What more could a man want out of life? Every day there were whack jobs blowing out each other's eyeballs over crack, money and whores—this would never change. But Michael swore, if 7-11 ever changed up its Slurpee selection and removed the Blue Raspberry...

Once inside the store, Michael exchanged greetings with the usual night-timers.

"Lookin' a step slow tonight," the Yeti-sized Paul Maier joked. Paul was always joking but he had a job probably worse than anything Michael could fathom. Paul's job description, in technical terms, was "wastewater treatment plant operator," but most people knew him as 'the sewer guy.' He was a brilliant man though, and always getting deep in the gunk. \$35 an hour starting salary, and the big guy had been at it for almost 25 years. Twenty-five years of human waste.

Michael took an icy gulp of his Slurpee before waving goodbye and heading out. It was then, as he looked absentmindedly to the black crown of the mountains, that he caught it. Nothing big, just a glimmer.

A strange, crimson blink from the mountains afar.

Barkly Mendbrook could feel *it*.

Surrounded by darkness and no T.V. and the dead lava lamp, Barkly knew what he had to do. He could not leave his room. Barkly recalled a time when power was cinched and it had become darker than normal. The dark did not bother him. But it did bother others who were not like him. Many others were bothered who were not like him—many others were not like him.

In the third drawer of the desk adjacent his bed, beneath two shirts and four boxers, there was a high-output LED Microbeam 128 light with a 30" beam angle and a battery life of 6 hours. It was a device designed for these exact situations, when darkness fell and other people, people unlike Barkly, became... 'unhinged.'

But Barkly did not want to leave his room. He recalled another time when this had happened, and the electricity was returned in less than 83 minutes. His parents had called using their cellphones less than 6 minutes following the loss of power. In that instance, the drunk driver of a purple Toyota Sequoia hit a pole and caused widespread power outages to the northern gridlines of Marin's Dale.

Barkly moved to the one square window in his room. Withdrawing the black sheet, he gazed out the glass into the distance. The oblong foothills of the mountains were like cutouts of cardboard. Beyond them: the mountains shot straight to the moon.

Those mountains were fourteen thousand twenty four feet at their highest point, and Barkly knew them to support everything. Sometimes the mountain lions would come down and kill the bighorn sheep, and the peregrine falcons would circle in the air, watching everything and anything with their sharp eyes. A lot of people wanted to hunt the animals from beyond. Barkly wanted to understand them. He would shoot them if threatened, but more than anything, he wanted to feel what they felt.

Barkly eyed the gleaming half-moon, so orange it almost resembled a strip of some bloody organ.

And that's when the flash exploded.

Barkly jerked back from the window almost instantly, the bright crimson blowing through his retinas like shrapnel. His hands shot to his face. His pudgy features twisted. He spent a few moments on his back, trying to catch his breath.

Recovering, he climbed back to the window. But the flash was gone. The black mountains of the black beyond were silent.

###

Kids these days...

Michael could see them standing behind the abandoned warehouse. It was the usual group, a bunch of ruffians with big tats and big mouths who thought that pissing on walls and smoking dope was going to change their world. Michael had been like that too at one point. Back in the day, all his buddies didn't care about the law. Hell, back then they used to call the cops "puppets." Whenever a patrol car rolled by, they would say, "look at those puppets" and then they'd sneer and spit on the ground.

It must've been the group mentality—that 'fuck the world, I'm just a kid' mentality. Back then Michael had his whole life ahead of him. And yet, somehow, he was always convinced the future held nothing.

As he pulled his Crown Vic inside the mangled fence surrounding the south face of the big brick building with the shattered windows, Michael could see them looking up. They looked up, like deer under headlights, but they didn't dare run or hide. Instead, they merely stared. Michael knew they were not the type to flee in fright. He also knew that they had no qualms about another misdemeanor on their record.

But he didn't patrol the streets looking to take out his anger. Four consecutive 12 hour shifts a week and Michael didn't take out his rage on anybody. When Michael and Kate had moved from Denver Michael already had almost 4 years under the belt. He was on pace for promotion to corporal, enjoying the highest pay grade for the bottom of the ladder, deputy. Though his transfer to Marin's Dale was lateral, they had still required him to do ride-alongs the first few weeks to get "acclimated" to the new department.

Which was fine.

Of course, back in Denver things had been different. The academy itself had been nothing—half a year of meaningless preparation. The real learning had come in the field training. In Denver's 6

district—the downtown—Michael had become acquainted with the ways of the streets swiftly and harshly. ~~Marin's Dale by comparison~~—was a joke. Other than the occasional junkie and small thefts, the streets of the 'valley city' were clean and friendly. Denver had been like a torture chamber. Marin Dale—a picnic.

So how could Michael complain? They had moved because the Dale's reputation preceded it. In Denver, Kate worried about him getting hurt, but here, with the increased pay for less risk, Michael was hard-pressed to say no. Besides, they were planning on having a child. The school system here was great. The people were great, generally speaking, and according to MONEY magazine, this little slice of Colorado fresh air was the #12 spot in the country for raising a family. Sure, sometimes Michael wished there was more action, but many days he was happy to have it easier.

In due time, if all went well, he would get his way. One day, Michael hoped—one day. And when that day finally arrived, Michael Petrone would be the one running the show and sending the dogs out to bark. It was only a matter of time. He'd get to Captain before they knew it.

Michael continued to stare at the teenagers with the torn clothing and the disheveled faces. What were they holding? Weed? Poppers? Crack/Coke? It didn't matter to him, really. Most of them would probably end up fine. They'd experiment a while, get into trouble here and there, but Michael knew that deep down, most of them were good kids. Pains-in-the-ass, but good kids.

Only a select few irritated him beyond all hell.

He stepped out of the car. His flashlight hit their pocketed hands.

"How ya doin?" one of them said.

Michael smiled. Trying to keep cool, were they? He eyed them thoroughly. They weren't as scummy as he had thought. Maybe these weren't the same kids. Michael rubbed his temple. His ears felt like somebody had jammed in one of those goddamn examination things from the doctor's. Maybe they *were* the same kids. Their faces looked muddled. Michael squinted.

Or maybe he just needed some sleep.

"You boys taking care tonight?"

They all shared a look, and what seemed a collective breath. Michael could see fingers squirming inside pockets.

"Yea, we good—hangin, *you* know."

Michael nodded. "Sure, sure. Hanging." He motioned with his flashlight. "And you know the deal, need you outta here."

The boys didn't look convinced. "We ain't got nowhere to go, yo," one of them said.

Michael stepped closer. "Let's go, I don't wanna have to say it twice."

One of the kids, a cleaner, healthier looking teen, was watching Michael. His eyes flicked to the gun at the officer's hip and then back to Michael's face. This kid didn't fit in, Michael thought. Despite his shaggy black hair and loose pants, he looked years ahead. Too wise and too smart to be messin' with the others. They had something he wanted, and aside from that, he wanted nothing to do with them. Which only meant one thing in Michael's mind:

Somebody was holding. If not more than one.

A kid's fingers twitched in his pocket. "Come on *maan*, we mindin' our own business here man, we ain't hurtin' nobody."

"Just do what I say." Michael gripped his holster. It was not intentional, it just happened. A reflex. But then one of the kids, with this scowl, was reaching into his pockets. He did it so abruptly and Michael could see the glaze in his eyes, somehow, impossibly, through the dark and glinting. He wasn't going to stop.

Michael raised his firearm.

The burst from the sky that followed was enough to blow him off his feet. Like a shockwave from

nuclear explosion, the ground rattled and fell away, if for even a second, and the blinding crimson flash from the mountains vanished as quickly as it had come.

Michael was coming back to his feet but everybody was already taking off, and he did nothing to stop them; as he brushed his pant legs off, he merely stared to the distant jagged lines of the Marin Dale mountains.

Was that a plane crash?

Sunrise.

A golden rose bled over the evergreen crown of Marin's Dale.

Far below, the boulevards lined with watering holes, fine eateries, and a smattering of antique shops and trinket stores were opening. Shop signs turned in display windows. Small business owners grabbed their coffees. Elementary School students boarded buses. Middle School students boarded buses. High School students boarded buses. From suburbia and row-homes and estates, they came. The power and life of Marin's Dale was restored.

Or so it seemed.

Many of the buses turned into a cragged parking lot. A building, looking everything like a jail with black slits for windows, sat in waiting. The center display read: "Marin's Dale Senior High."

It was 7:00 am.

###

You're higher than the goddamn peak of K2

Tyler Diehl gave his face a touch. The numbness around the right jaw was already setting in. His tongue was barely there—if there. And there was no guarantee that it was there.

Are you there?

"Mr. Diehl."

Tyler nodded with a soft "yup." He pulled alongside the yellow hallway with the yellow lockers looking like an endless honeycomb wet dream. There were kids everywhere, with funny eyes and buzzing mouths. Their faces looked like that one painting with the stars and the night and all. Aw hell... what the hell was it

This shit is ridiculous

He shoved his backpack into his locker. He didn't have any of his books today because they were "lost"—and who wasn't? Tyler knew the Gaylick would be offended as usual, but the chum would blow it off soon enough.

The last few days had been weird. Last night had been funky—real rare shit that just hit you out the b—

"Tie Die!"

Tyler gave a quick fist bump to one of the bros. He was some junior, thought he was hot shit cuz his girlfriend did gymnastics and he had like, maaaybe two receptions on the season. Tyler pretended to know everybody. What did it matter? He was outta this scumhole at the end of the year. Peace *suckaaas!*

It was right about then that Tyler remembered he was supposed to meet his girlfriend. He frowned. After all, that was the plan from the beginning. Plans got amended of course, but it was usually a good idea to at least *attempt* to remember them. Tyler chewed his lip. Total numbness now. Total.

But he had to meet her. She probly had his books. And she was probably freakin out without the shit. Tyler chuckled, *nah*, she'd be fine. The freaking-out would start later when Tyler told her about

the crazy night it had taken to pick up. And about that weird flash from beyond the Dale.

###

The face staring back was not his.

Mr. Malcolm Ghulic eyed that cadaverous reflection in the T.V., that skull of receding auburn hair and premature baldness. His flesh was plaster white, his clementine eyes burning with intelligence and infallible 20/10 vision. Although many believed him to be afflicted with the condition of albinism, Ghulic knew the truth. But today that truth was murky; the face staring back, impossibly different.

He clicked the television on. He cycled through channel after channel. They were all blank. Nothing but the proliferating static of empty stations—snow. And that noise. *White noise*. What a vacant, more lonely noise thought Ghulic. Though in some ways, somewhere, it was beautiful.

Malcolm Ghulic could not breathe well, not now, not like this. He had prepared a video for his morning AP class, one that would excite them surely and sustain a strong educational value as well.

In AP he dealt with them all—the underachievers, the overachievers, the midliners, the pranksters and the MIAs. He took it as his personal responsibility to inform the brightest minds in the school. He took it very personally. Which was why the T.V and DVD player had better start working.

Ghulic had not prepared a backup.

Another empty station flicked before him. More snow with a million different zigzags. The patterns were so clear, so lucid... but if you made yourself view it through a different filter...

Quite an underappreciated visual manifestation, quite indeed.

Ghulic, age 31, high school teacher for half a decade, could feel his eyes giving in. The anomaly had a hold on him and if his rational mind had turned against him, he might've thought differently. Because what he thought in that moment, as he stared at the buzzing snow displayed on the screen was one thing. But what he *felt*. What he *felt* was terrible. Like the worst gnawing at the pit of your stomach, before the worst onset from the bowels of Hell.

He switched the screen off. The noise ended.

The spell broke.

Mr. Ghulic could see his reflection, once again, but he seemed paler. And his eyes, a little less bright. The pupils had shrunken considerably.

"Ghoulz?"

Ghulic turned to see the attractive senior.

She wore frayed jeans, a pea green blouse, and an array of multicolored wristbands and bracelets. Her highlighted brunette hair was fastened in a bun, pulled back to reveal a face of soft, alluring features.

Bold brown glasses rested on her nose. Behind them, oceanic eyes topped with purple mascara appraised the teacher.

Ghulic gave a smile. "Miss Jennings, you're awfully early this morning. Class doesn't start for another 5 minutes.

"Shouldn't you be arriving in 20?"

The girl rolled her eyes. Despite her tardiness, she was his best student. Highly intelligent, highly capable of modifying her inner and outer environments to satisfy her queries.

"Ghoulz... I never miss the days that matter!"

"And you flatter me mightily, Miss Jennings," the teacher said. She was in no danger, academically speaking. She would graduate top of the class, Malcolm knew, and probably excel even more so in her

further pursuits at Rutgers. In fact, they were lucky to have her. Why she had turned down the other schools, Malcolm would never fully understand. But then again, it was her path to choose, and once she could walk it in confidence. It didn't matter where she went; Audrey Jennings was going to make it.

Malcolm tossed the remote controller to his desk and moved closer to the girl.

"What can I help you with, Audrey?"

She rifled through her purse for a moment before finding a folded piece of paper. She unfolded the paper and held it out for him to see. Malcolm scrutinized it for a moment.

"This is good."

Audrey followed his facial expressions as he read. She bit her lip softly.

"Actually, very good."

He scratched the back of his head. "You might run into some ontological issues, but other than that—"

"Oh, yea, well I have an alternate thesis too, so..." Audrey withdrew another folded piece of paper from her purse. Malcolm was nodding with an expectant smile.

No matter what life threw at her, she was ready.

It was the kind of bullshit Michael was tired of hearing: "*Out of our jurisdiction. If it's a problem we'll hear about it. But it ain't our problem.*"

Michael sat inside his cruiser, parked away from the others. The rusted iron fence rattled around the white box of the police station. He had stopped by to report the explosion. That flash from the mountains was unlike anything he had ever seen. In Denver, the boys would've at least taken a look to see what was what. But here... here in the Dale, the saying was simple: if it's beyond the valley, it's beyond our concern.

Michael frowned. The sun looked like a sweltering cherry bomb. It was so red, Michael couldn't remember the last time it was so red. He tapped his computer. It *bizzeed* and *bizzurped* as if a faulty robot. The damn thing was fried. Nothing was working.

Inside the station, his chief was too worried about the loss of technology to focus on "some bump in the trees."

Of course, the point Michael had tried to make was simple: the "bump in the trees" could be causing the equipment problems. If power lines or frequencies were somehow disrupted by whatever had made that big flash...

Michael wasn't an expert at this stuff for christsakes, but he had enough sense to question it. And why his buddies in uniform didn't take the time to question it too, was baffling.

Michael had patrolled up until 7, and that's when his equipment had gone south. Immediately following the flash, he had called it in. But these weren't the kind of things you just reported over the airwaves and forgot about. After hours of mindless patrolling, as the sun had finally come up and the rest of the world awakened, Michael had thought it necessary to make a personal appearance.

The guys were acting strangely today.

Michael rubbed his head. The dull throb was still there, like somebody slowly tightening the screws on his brain. He peered into his Excedrin bottle, to find that it was empty. Cursing, he stared into the rearview mirror. The lines and tread marks of his face were beginning to show—he really did look like shit, didn't he?

Amazing what a period of bad sleep could do to you.

Michael squinted. He already had a few silver hairs along his head. And that's when he noticed his eyes. The brown of his irises seemed fainter. The eyes themselves were glassy. But the pupils...

They were so small, they looked like pinheads.

###

Students filtered in to Malcolm Ghulic's room. Some offered greetings to the teacher; others dragged their feet, heads down, eyes baggy with sleep deprivation. The homeroom bell would ring any moment.

Mr. Ghulic looked once more to the television screen. It was still turned off, because it didn't work. Not a single channel worked.

A senior of athletic build, with pajama pants and a faded red shirt that said, SWOOSH, strolled into the room. He sported a thick black beard, and an even thicker mane of hair. His dark olive eyes discerned the teacher, awaiting a rote response.

Malcolm allowed himself to smile. Despite this student's mediocre grades, he was quite a joy to have in the classroom. Every class needed a clown, and in those unexpected cases where su

tomfoolery could be coupled with a genuine curiosity, Malcolm was not averse.

"Mr. Diehl, how are you this morning?"

"I came ready today, Mr. *Gaylick*."

Tyler plopped a large notebook on his desk and assumed his seat. He offered a sly grin, as Malcolm was sure the surprise in his eyes was evident. It wasn't every day the lackadaisical student came with the required reading. In fact, it was maybe 6 days—6 or 7—a semester. That was all.

"So I see, Mr. Diehl. Dare I say this is the start of something good *and* consistent?"

"Don't be too optimistic. Ty's not one for consistency."

Tyler shook his head with a chuckle as Audrey wiggled an index finger into his shoulder. Then, placing both hands on his shoulders, she leaned over and gave him a kiss.

"Merry morn to you as well, babe," Tyler shot.

Audrey flicked his ear playfully before assuming her seat at the back of the classroom. Other students filled in around them, and Mr. Ghulic acknowledged each with a "hello" or "good morning" occasionally interspersing with "Haven't seen you in a while."

A chubby boy with squinty eyes and a ruddy face made way to the center of the classroom, pausing at each seated person to be granted passage through the tight maze of desks. He finally reached his destination and plopped down. A wrinkled notebook paper was in his right hand. Answers were scrawled illegibly in dark pen.

"Barkly," said Ghulic, a little louder than usual. "How does this day find you?"

The student stood up and removed the backpack, letting it plop to the floor. Then, lowering back into his seat, he placed the wrinkled paper on the desk in front of him. He smoothed out the paper with both palms. At last, he seemed to exhale.

"I'm..."

He breathed.

"O K."

###

Michael stared into the mirror of the empty bathroom. He wanted to fuckin break it. This thing—this.. pain—it was killing him. He never got headaches. Not like this. It was like they were pumping acid through his forehead.

And everybody in the station was yelling. He stared into the mirror. Why was everybody yelling? They were either yelling or standing still, not saying a thing.

Everybody was acting strange. Michael slapped his face. The face in the mirror was slack and white like paste. It was a disgusting face. Michael shook his head. And slapped his face.

He looked like crap—like he used to in his days of frat parties. Waking up for 8 am classes. He used to have to wake up for EIGHT A M classes. That used to be tough to him—a stressor. Boy oh boy, he hadn't had a clue about stress back then.

Michael slapped his face.

Why the fuck are you doing that

Michael turned.

He turned back to the mirror. His teeth were tainted. And was that... corn? He felt along the once smooth enamel. Something brown. What had he eaten? He couldn't even think straight anymore. H

thoughts were like circles. This sleep deprivation thing was really getting to him.

Michael turned on the faucet.

Still nothing. It didn't make sense. Why the hell wasn't the bathroom running?

Michael slapped his face.

You need to stop doing that

But it did make sense. It made perfect sense. Everything else was screwed. The whole system was screwed. It was like a mouse on a wheel or; it just went around and around, but it was all the same system.

Michael stopped himself. He turned the faucet off. There was a plop. He knew he had heard a plop. Between the thoughts and the mouse and the headache and the... the.. damn corn in his teeth. He was tired, he just needed to sleep was all. That was all he really needed. Michael nodded.

Sure.

plop

Michael turned toward the sound. It had come from one of the stalls. He waited a second. It came again. He waited a second. It came again. He waited a second. It came again. He waited a second,

"Got ya, ya sunnavabitch!" He jumped on the fourth stall down and ripped open the door. The light was up. The toilet was empty.

"What the fu..."

And that's when thick red goop, like tomato paste, bubbled into the white basin.

###

.

Audrey saw everybody and everything.

She sat at the back because she liked watching people. Not in a creepy way, she just liked it. It was dark still, since the blinds were drawn tight and only odd orange slivers of light could make it in. But she still knew everybody. There was Mark doodling probably severed heads or dragon monsters on his ripped handheld agenda. There was Barkly sitting very rigid and robotic, and only moving the pencil in his right hand. There were Susie and Cait talking quietly amongst themselves, probably about the YA romance novels they had just finished. There was Laura with her little flower necklace collection. There were a few kids who didn't know why they were in the class. There were a couple kids that barely ever showed up to class. There were a small number of kids Audrey had never talked to. And then there was Ty. Ty was being Ty.

And then, in front of all of them, there was a pale skinny guy with a huge brain and a warm heart, trying to rule the roost.

A smattering of students look intermittently at the teacher and then at their periphery, eyes darting quickly and restlessly; glassy globes at swivel.

"...Who's excited to be here?"

All eyes were now locked on Malcolm. One student delivered a cupped mouth fart.

Malcolm nodded. "That's one response, Mr. Colbanowski.

"But I must admit, your technique is diminishing."

The students laughed. Audrey followed the lanky redhead with her eyes as he assumed a position near the chalkboard. There was a quote written behind him, but it couldn't be read in the dark.

"Who is excited to be here? Show of hands."

Many students exchanged puzzled looks, some reeling off dryly sarcastic remarks, others dazed at their desks, or, even: completely motionless.

Malcolm tapped the quote.

"We can't see it, Ghoulz," Audrey said aloud. "Nobody ever turned the lights on." Audrey smiled internally. What other teacher would let her call him by such a nickname? He really was *something* sometimes. He was a very bright man.

"Got it!" Ty said, and he shot straight from his seat to the wall, flicked it on, and the dark crevice of a classroom instantly burned with artificial light.

Some students seemed to wake up at this. Audrey could see that Ghoulz was unaffected. Others stared blankly at the chalkboard, the white of their eyes gleaming with slivers of sunlight. Everybody was in zombie mode.

Audrey exhaled slowly, because something was off. This shit was freakin her out. But it wasn't just her. For the first time all semester, Barkly was moving something other than his pencil. He was bobbing back and forth, head tilting, face filled with the biggest, silliest, most fearless smile Audrey had ever seen.

###

A rusted iron fence rattled. Through the bars, the monochromatic white of the police station.

Michael was in his seat. The only thing working inside the car was the clock which read 8:05. The sun was still red as hell, like whatever had come through the pipes in that bathroom stall, and Michael's head was still swimming—and his eyes were too. His flesh was too.

He was sweating profusely. Stained, and he hadn't even noticed.

~~Michael slapped his face. His pupils grew back to normal. At least his thoughts were okay.~~

He needed to get out of here. Not just the police station, but the whole place... the whole system. He needed to get out of the Dale while he still could. Michael didn't know why or when it was going to happen. But he knew it would soon come; whatever it wanted, it would soon come. He needed to find Kate, find anybody who was willing to listen, and get the hell outta here. The others were turning on him.

Something was happening today that he couldn't put words to. Michael stared through the window of the Crown Vic into the distance. The fence surrounding the police station gave way to fields and shrubs.

Figures, blurred by the distance, stood at various points, motionless aside those shrubs.

Paul Maier trudged through the dark grime of a pipeline. He moved along the worn brick curvature of the wall, the occasional circular light illuminating the sludge beneath him. His thick gloves and headlamp added additional light, but the pipeline was, all in all, a tunnel into the abyss.

Quiet. Aside from the swish of water.

And then a rumble.

Paul fell to a knee in the grimy water. He steadied himself against the shuddering walls. He hated the tremors. Back in the day, it was something he was used to. When he used to tend to these lines he always had to expect the unexpected. Manholes exploding off, laterals going haywire, improper runoff construction, botched implementation of pumps, big-time floods, clogs, infiltration/inflow hazards due to age—Paul had seen it all.

They had called him down from the plant because his boys were a little worried about the pace. Things happened, pace got fucked, but what could you do? Paul trusted in his men more than anything. They were smart, motivated, and best of all, knew how to keep their cool when the heat was on. What more could a boss want?

And besides, Paul knew how to work it. Some people took the position of "boss" with a sort of authoritative, almost dictator-like attitude. Paul didn't understand those people. For him, being in charge meant knowing when to get to work and knowing when to blow off steam. He hadn't made it all these years by walking around and stressing about every hypothetical thing that could go wrong. Because, honestly, in his line of work—anything *could* go wrong.

Paul walkie-talkied to Terrance. Terrance was down the line a bit, out of view at this point. Paul had sent him to check the source. There had to be a reasonable explanation for all this.

After a few more minutes, Paul checked his walkie. Damn thing was nothing but static. Still.

But then...

Paul looked up. And from the dark mouth of the endless pipeline, it came:

The most searing, inhuman utterance he had ever heard.

"What is that?"

The class turned to the back left of the classroom. There was a single door which led outside. One of the quiet hooded students pointed to the door. A rectangular wreath of light, the outline of the door, faded and flared as something moved on the other side.

THUD

THUD

THUD

Mr. Ghulic stood near the chalkboard. "Open it," he said softly.

"Maybe it's paranormal activity," Tyler joked. A few students chuckled. The quiet hooded student stood up, reached his arm out. As he fastened his hand around the doorknob there was a gruff exhale and for a second the door's luminous outline went black.

Then it returned and there was silence.

Another student leaned closer. "Come on man, open it dude." He raised his eyebrows in exaggerated motion. "Dooo iiiit!"

The student opened the door. A rising sun bled into the dark classroom. Twenty feet out, standing on a manicured lawn of the school, a doe stared right back at the class. Its ears twitched. Its tail swung.

Its eyes were entirely white. Dark blood leaked from the deer's head. The fur was flattened and the skull slightly misshapen along the flat top. The outside of the open door was caked with blood.

"Holy shit..." somebody mumbled. But like that, the deer went off at a canter, and was gone.

"It was trying to get inside," murmured Tyler.

Mr. Ghulic was still standing before the chalkboard and he did not budge or twitch at this comment. He was in a daze, eyes facing outward but seemingly seeing nothing. Audrey looked around. Everybody was in a daze.

On the board, a quote was circled about a thousand times. It read:

"Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect as well as the star. Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper."

-- Albert Einstein

There was a jumbling of sounds over the speaker. The students jerked to life. Then a pause. Then, a voice. A monotone voice:

"We are letting out early today.

"Today will be a day of early closure.

"Students, you may leave at your discretion."

There was another jumbling of muffled sounds.

"That is all."

A hush fell over the students. Barkly's finger tapped the desk slowly; the only sound in the room.

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