

## Undertow

*T.J.\**

It's ten o'clock and I'm rushing to do my laundry, if I don't get these clothes washed by tomorrow I will have nothing clean to wear for when my parents come to visit me. *Count up!* The corrections officer yells, signalling it is time to turn in for the night. My clothes are still in the washing machine. They won't be dry for tomorrow. The thought of having to visit my family in either wet or dirty clothes angers me. It doesn't anger me because I didn't manage my time efficiently enough, it angers me because I had to wait to be the last one to do my laundry. I'm a new fish, and that means I'm last for almost everything. Respect is earned the hard way, nothing comes easy, but I'm not willing to fight for clean clothes just yet. I make my way to Cell 18, 4D which is to be my home for the next two years, and the iron door slams shut quickly behind me. I hear the hard clank of the key as it turns and locks me in. I set a makeshift cardboard blocker on the floor to close the gap between the floor and the door. This should keep out the rats. The way they slam the doors at night bothers me, the face they make as they peer into my private space says I deserve it, I should be separated from the world, I must be. It makes me wonder if they slam the door of their son or daughter's rooms with the same disdain. I have watched zookeepers close cages with delicacy so as not to disturb the animals, so that beasts who lack empathy and compassion may slip off into a peaceful sleep. This makes me wonder where I stand in humanity.

I lay in my bed, the mattress a worn out shell of prisoners past, no thicker than a bible on its edges, the middle pressed thin from bearing the weight of the guilty men before me. I can't sleep, it's been four months two weeks and five days since I last touched another human being. I'm alone. I have never been so alone. I reread the letters my family and friends have sent me, these are my life line, the last connection I have to the outside world and the old me, the real me. I would take a life to protect these papers and words.

I'm afraid now, not for my safety, but because I am locked in a room the size of a closet sleeping with my head next to a toilet. I will never forget that smell, the smell of stagnant metallic toilet water, the scent that sets me off into my sleep every night. I am afraid for my sanity, because I can feel myself changing. My skin crawls because I know it is happening and there is nothing I can do. I have to be this way, I need to survive. The feeling is immeasurable, and I can't even escape it in my dreams. I am consumed.

Standing on a beach, the sun burns red on the horizon but the ocean is dark, like black paint. There is no light reflecting from the sun. It's as if the light is just passing by and I am transparent, the landscape absorbs anything it is served. It seems like a desert in the night, dark, cold, and empty. My feet in the soft, wet sand at the point just after the waves break, water half way up to my knees. I can feel the water being pulled in by the power of the tide, pulling it back as if it were running away between my legs, sucking up the water to then crash down onto the beach. With every crash my anxiety builds, the crashes get louder every time, I can feel them thunder through my body like a pulse led with a sledge hammer. My head throbbing and my heart

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pumping like my blood is as thick as tar. The sand from the bottom of my feet seems to dissolve and I sink as if in quicksand, all the while the undertow drags me deeper and deeper into the dark ocean, the waves crash with a dark weight, a pressure I can feel in my chest. I'm slowly being dragged into the depths of darkness and I'm drowning, suffocating, I believe that I'm fighting my hardest to stay afloat but I'm still as can be, I'm panicking and screaming on the inside, but it's too late, my head's under water, I'm lost now.

I wake up the next morning to the same heavy metallic clank that put me to bed. I didn't get much sleep but I have to get up, it's not safe to lay in bed with your cell door unlocked in the morning. I've seen many cells get morning visitors usually ending with screams and a river of warm red blood flowing out from under the door, smells like the toilet water, metallic. I don't want the same fate so I get up and jam my door shut so I can feel some sense of security while I get changed, a time where I am most vulnerable with my pants stuck around my ankles. I need to hurry so I can put my wet clothes in the dryer, at this point my parents should be going through security at the visitor's center. I'm nervous. I haven't seen my family in months, I want to hug them, it will be nice to speak to people who care about me and know who I am, and will tell me I don't belong here and everything will be okay. Be strong, they will say. Its hard to keep the smile from my face. I can't wait to see them. They will call my name soon to take me to the visitor's center.

It's mid January and the mornings are still dark, like it's not hard enough to get out of bed already. The light in my cell has been out for almost a week now and I am starting to feel the effects of perpetual darkness. I hear panic and shuffling from down the range, sounds like someone had a morning visitor. I hear the officers speak into their radio "code blue," meaning someone needs medical assistance. The doors slam and the keys begin to clank one by one rolling quickly down the block. The officers are panicked; it was just a few months ago someone was murdered right where I was doing my laundry the night before. The blood stain was still on the floor. The only thought that runs through my head is for my parents. They drove three hours to visit their son, and upon their arrival the prison is locked down and there has been an assault on my range. They will think the worst. I have no way to contact them. The only way they will know I am ok is if they don't receive a phone call saying I'm in the morgue. This is lockdown - no in or out privileges, no visits, no phone calls, no showers, no clean clothes. I can't believe it. I want to tear the walls down around me. My vision rattles and shakes. I lose focus; my ears begin to ring. I can't hold it in anymore. Like a tea kettle whistling violently ready to blow, the levies break and I release a fury of punches into the century old brick walls keeping me trapped, as if I could break free from these walls with just my fists. I tear out my desk drawers, tossing them across the cell. Papers rain down like a bomb has gone off. My mind flashes back to the ocean and I'm stuck in the break, being beaten by waves one after another, I don't know up from down. I can feel my lungs filling up with water. I flip my mattress and let out a scream. My eyes well up. I've lost it. In a cold sweat, with my heart pounding and legs tingling, I catch my breath. I'm crushed, deflated, my knuckles bruised and bleeding.

I regain focus and as I look to my feet, there are my letters drenched in the water spilt from my rage. I can see the ink beginning to run. *What have I done?* I carefully pick up what's left of me and it melts through my fingers into an inky pulp, just another stain on the floor. I lay down on the steel frame of my bed and the distinct metallic smell of the toilet water fills my nostrils. Is it toilet water or blood I smell? This morning I thought my head would be above

water, a beam of light from the sun peaking through the storm clouds. Instead another wave crashes over me sending me further into the depths of darkness.

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Only weeks in a maximum security prison with rolling lockdowns makes me believe that these walls were meant to break me. I feel so delicate and organic; my juxtaposed composition is obvious to my senses. I can feel the callous walls absorb my body heat, consuming my humanness. Using me as fuel to strengthen its authority. Everything is made of cement and steel. Hard and infinite, the immortality of this prison is enough to make me question my own existence.

The doors unlock to the sound of a buzzer. Someone on the other side of the world pressed a button to release us from our cages. I doubt whoever did knew what the significance of pressing that button would be. Such an arbitrary deed carried out by a man who just woke up to go to work. We both put on a uniform this morning. Although different colours, they represent the same thing. Does he understand the significance of his existence? The role he plays in this charade? Every morning I wake up wishing to escape this place, and he leaves his family to work inside these walls. The toys he purchases for his children to provide happiness and joy are paid for by the suffering of others' lost sons. If there were no one willing to play his part, I could not exist. We exist only because of each other, an integral connection we share, but we perceive our existence as if we are not cast from the same mould. He born from the womb of a loving mother, and I from the egg of a cold-blooded reptile. I contemplate these thoughts as I am fed through a hatch by someone behind glass and I realize then, he never made that choice, it was made for him, like mine to exist here. Predetermined by each other's existence.

The feeling of the sun on my skin after such a long time is profound. I feel like a waking flower, soaking up the morning's sunrise, slowly standing upright. The warmth that rolls over me would bring tears to my eyes if I let it, the embrace of the sun is the closest to a loving hug I have had in some time. Even my mother's hands are cold when pressed up against the glass to mine. I long to walk barefoot in green grass. A cement box is where we will spend any and all yard time. Half open roof, covered in chain-link fence and razor wire, the other half galvanized sheet metal. The great outdoors. I watch the birds fly in and out of this cage with ease. I empathize the torment of a bird with clipped wings. I can't help but wonder if they, too, are unaware of their existence. The way they blissfully sail through razor wire, dancing through the threshold of freedom as if it didn't exist.

There is a door with grass sneaking beneath, growing as if it can sense another organism in need of connection to the natural world. I pluck as much as I can and inhale the sweet aroma. I transcend the walls that have been keeping me ensnared. In that brief moment I am in the grass fields of my childhood, the forests of my youth. The memory dissipates along with the scent. So I inhale deeper in hopes that the sweetness of the grass plunges so deep it can't find its way out. I miss this smell, it's one of the few that is familiar and this troubles me. I know along with the new sights there are new smells, and scent is like the vine holding the grapes of my memory together. I come to the realization that I might have a difficult time trying to forget what is happening to me, it will be much more difficult to bury this experience deep beneath the roots of my memory. I want to cut the vine and crush the grapes. I know that even if I try my hardest I may not be able to. If I close my eyes, my ears will hear, if I cover my ears my hands will feel.

There is no escape. Even the cuts I don't see will scar. As I lay my head down to sleep, my cheek presses against the mattress. Like holding a shell to my ear I can hear the ocean waves begin to swell.

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I'm woken by the sound of keys opening the first cell, I hear the other inmates yell "search up" between the crack of the walls and the doors, warning the rest that a band of corrections officers are entering the range to conduct a search for weapons and contraband. The next sounds are toilets flushing and windows opening. They won't find anything. I can hear the key turning slowly getting closer to my cell, one after the other. My anxiety grows with every turn, because I know I will be next. I have nothing to hide, yet I still dread the searches, because they come with a mandatory strip search. Three officers stand at my door. As I take off my clothes I hand them to the officer and I watch as he goes through them, feeling for anything hidden in the cuffs and collars. The officer behind him peers at my body as I remove layers of clothing. All four of us share the same blank stare, just trying to keep our composure until it's over. I slide my underwear off and hand those to the officer. Last to go are my socks. As my feet touch the cold floor I am completely naked, standing in front of three strangers. Humiliated. I'm then asked to turn around, lift my right foot then my left, and bend over. I turn around and blankly face my assailants, they ask me to tilt my head back, open my mouth and lift my tongue. The three of them are satisfied with the search. They hand me my clothes and I hurry to put them back on. This process takes all of two minutes, but it feels like an eternity. I step outside my cell, so I can watch as they tear my cell apart, my bedroom. Throwing my pillow on the floor, stepping on my mattress with their dirty boots. Dumping my only belongings to the ground. Reading my letters and looking at my pictures. I sit and observe them grinning as if they get some sort of satisfaction making a mess of the place. At least cleaning up the mess will take my mind off the humiliation.

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It's midnight on a hot and humid summer night and I can't sleep. My fan hums, slowly oscillating back and forth, achieving nothing but the circulation of hot air. My skin sticks to what little clothing I haven't torn off. I can feel the sweat seeping out of my pores as I lay sleepless in a cement box that receives afternoon sun with no air conditioning. I'm missing love, friendship, compassion, emotion, feelings. I want to feel again. I want to fall in love, lay awake in my bed thinking about a girl, a girl I just met and can't get out of my head, the girl I kissed and I can still taste her lips. The flutter I get when I pick her up from her parents' home for the first time. The tingling sensation the first time she touches me. The red glow from an emergency exit sign cascades down the hallway and into my cell. It casts a dramatic ambience, like the glow of a convection oven. As I lie there cooking, a shadow wisps by my door. I hear a door open and the sound of Steven's muffled voice; he sounds frantic. I jump out of bed and peel the sheets off my back to peak through the window of my door. I see Steven standing in Francis's cell, shaking his unconscious body. Francis has overdosed on crystal meth. He's not breathing. Instinctively, I reach for my door handle to open my cell to help Steven revive Francis's lifeless body. I twist the knob, but then I hesitate. I don't dare leave my cell. If he dies and the surveillance cameras record me entering his cell in the middle of the night, I'm in a world of shit. I slowly release the doorknob and tell myself that this is the reason I don't help save this man's life. The truth is I

want him to die. As I watch Steven bang on his chest and breathe into his lungs, I hope that his heart has stopped and his lungs have collapsed. The longer I watch, the more I wish Steven would give up. Francis infuriated me, to the point where I considered attacking him, jeopardizing my release on good behaviour just to fuck up this piece of shit. He disgusted me, the way he spoke about women, using them, beating them. Giving them a free taste of meth or heroin just to set the hook. He would explain fucking their almost comatose bodies after they would take a hit from him. Rape, with a hint of necrophilia. I hated everything about him, the sound of his whiny voice, how his face narrowed down to a point like a rat. How tough he pretended to be. He repulsed me, he was a coward and I saw right through it. Just as I thought my prayers were answered, that son of a bitch comes back to life. As if his black soul was dropped onto his body like a ton of bricks forcing life back into him. Foam erupting from his mouth and gasping for air, his eyes shoot wide open rolling straight ahead, staring right at me, like he was frozen. He's probably still fucking high, I think. I couldn't help but imagine if I was the one who had found him laid out on his bed foaming from the mouth and turning cold, which would be an accomplishment in this damn heat. I would have let him die.

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It's spring, on an overcast afternoon. The air has a cool damp smell that gets pushed around by a warm breeze. As I'm walking through the courtyard, I can feel a soft mist roll onto my face. I feel refreshed after spending the first half of the morning rearranging books in the library. The heat from the baseboard radiators had dried out the air. Consequently, the air has pulled all the moisture out from the books, leaving me as the only source of humidity left for the air to feast on. Even in the library, there is no refuge from consumption. As I wipe the sweat off my forehead, I can smell the scent of old books, a musty, pulpy aroma that has been activated by my dry palms, the result of handling dehydrated books all day. The library was simple space but different from the rest of the prison. It was in a new section and had a high, almost barn-like ceiling, in it I shed the claustrophobic feeling from the centuries old dungeon of a cellblock where I spent most of my time.

I was fortunate to land a job in the prison's library. I managed to convince the librarian, Louis, that organizing books was my calling. Louis would kick out any black man who stepped foot into the library without a pass signed by a corrections officer. Whites were rarely ever questioned. Al, who was black, worked alongside Klaus and me. Louis would give Al a hard time, always on his case for being late, and asking him his whereabouts when he was absent from work. What a stupid fucking question. Louis's lack of awareness of our incarceration really pissed me off. The way he would speak to us about our positions, condescendingly reminding us that it was a privilege to work there. Sometimes I felt like telling him we only make seven dollars a day, and why does he even give a shit, he sits in his office all day staring at his computer screen. I'd sometimes watch him through the large window of his office wall that he pretended wasn't a window at all. Some days he would parade other prison librarians or management through the library, showing off the collection of books he had managed to incarcerate. They would walk between the library shelves as if using them as a protective barrier, and try not to make eye contact with us, as if we were wild animals ready to attack. It was almost as if Louis had warned them before they entered. I would purposely stare at them; the way a lion watches his prey. I figured, if you are not going to acknowledge my existence, I'm going to make you feel it.

I could sense it worked every time because their body language would give them away. Their faces would hide their fear when discussing library prisoner traffic with Louis. Louis would lie to them and give them an obscene overestimate, half the population didn't even know where it was. I could see their shoulders cave inwards, and the sound of their timid steps on the polished linoleum floor, as if not to wake the beasts. They were terrified of us – of me.

Klaus was an older gentleman, he looked as if he was in his mid-sixties. His thinly framed body supported a large head that held a saggy jowl of a face. He wore a pretentious moustache under his nose that he used to support his glasses which were mended with tape and pieces of wire. He wore his thin salt and pepper hair wisped to the side just above his freckled forehead. Klaus and I would sit across from each other at a desk by the large window of the library and play chess. He was the best chess player I have ever played against; it was no competition. He would tell me stories about sitting in cafés in Vienna playing against other chess masters while smoking cigarettes and discussing more important things than he thought I could understand. It insulted him to have to play chess against a player of my skill. He would read a book while rapidly responding to my carefully considered move. I could always tell when he was annoyed because he would click his dentures in and out. He told me that Canadians had no culture and we were all a bunch of puritans. Klaus claimed to have a Ph.D. in Psychology and said that he spoke several languages. He conducted himself like an academic, constantly reminding me that he was better than me. The way he spoke and the degrees of knowledge he exhibited led me to believe him. It would frustrate him when I would question the things he said. It was hard to tell if he was who he said he was or he was just full of shit and had read too many books. Maybe the walls got to him. Either way I wanted to believe him. Klaus did my time. Between reading Ernest Hemingway novels and the way Klaus would go off about his life travelling through parts of Asia, and how he became a Buddhist monk for several years, I would sit and stare out the window watching the clouds disappear over the walls, daydreaming. If he ever got out of that damned library, I knew I could find him in a little farm house in Ghana, feeding his chickens and making love to a beautiful black woman. He wouldn't shut the fuck up about Africa. Late one spring night, Klaus slit his wrists.

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As I enter a bar, the bouncer asks me for my ID, and asks me my age. I have to think...25. He gives me a puzzled look, verifies my age, hands back my ID, and tells me to enjoy my night. As I'm walking through the crowded bar bumping shoulders against strangers, I try to understand what just happened, and why I feel so anxious. I keep thinking I'm 21, the age I was when my life turned upside down. Where did those years go? I lost them. Like I slept through my early twenties. Time flies, and I get an uneasy feeling in my stomach because I almost wish I was back between those walls where time moved slower.

I've never been so aware of time in my whole life. How long a week could feel or even a night, but it was only recognizable to me how much I lived during the incarcerated time. A year on the outside flies by and it scares me how fast life passes by. On the inside, a year can feel like an eternity, sometimes even a night can feel that way. Maybe because I wasn't sleepwalking through the monotony of my old life. I was alive. My senses were being overloaded every day. Senses I never thought I had or used. Every day I felt stimulated. It was like I was given a shock and I woke up. Every day I lived. The repetition of daily regimented schedules made me lose track of whether it was Tuesday or Wednesday, but I never lost my concept of time because I

knew every waking moment I was confined between those walls I was losing those precious minutes out there. My real life. Whatever that means.

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Pain and anger are like shards of glass in a wound, keeping it open, preventing me from healing properly. I am poisoned with anger and hate. A thorn in my side that makes the chip on my shoulder heavier each day. The walls seemed a little higher this morning. The meeting with my institutional parole officer didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped. The night before, I rehearsed the conversation over and over in my head. Quietly mumbling to myself alone in my dark cell. It is a dim cloudy night. A small lamp boils a circle of light onto my desk. There's a storm coming, I can feel the static in the air. A warm dry wind blows through the crack of my barred window, causing the pages of my book to turn. I have found myself reading books about our universe. Space, time, quantum mechanics and relativity. I can't say I fully understand this other language, but I don't need to. It's a place far beyond these chains and walls. Not subjected to the laws of man. Only to obey the laws of physics. Maybe I belong somewhere out there. Beyond the earth that imprisons me. Maybe I can find solace with the others who have also been banished from their world. The universe makes me feel so small and insignificant. It makes my problems seem irrelevant. There is more going on than me. More significant events that affect my being. Matter colliding at unfathomable speeds organized into a chaotic symphony to advance our existence. I can escape into the vastness of space, but I'm afraid I will just trade one cold dark place for another. I look out my window and I can see the renegade moon peak through the cloudy divide. my brother moon you are not alone, the storm will pass soon enough.

I am awoken by the sounds of rolling thunder, crashes and bangs. Rumbles and cracks. A sound I find soothing. Something about thunderstorms steadies the waters in me. I draw away my sheets and the static creates microscopic lightning bolts cracking against my pant legs. I press my bare feet against the cool floor and walk towards the window, peaking my head between the bars to try and catch a better look at the storm. Flashes of bright white light fill my cell like blinks of an eye, gone before I know it. I remove my hands from the conductive steel bars and open my window so I can take in the full experience. The storm is directly over the prison. I try to remember all the storms I have ever seen; this must be the most violent of them all. I oddly feel safe at the moment, probably the only benefit to being sealed in a cement block. The rain is falling with a heavy downward force. The sound against the sheet metal roof is overwhelming. The rain is coming through my window. I can feel a cool puddle beginning to grow at my feet. I can feel the sound of the crashing thunder pounding through my chest. I realize I'm holding my breath, so I exhale and then breathe deeply. As soon as my lungs fill with air a lightning bolt tears down from the sky and makes contact with the prison wall no more than a stone's throw away. Sparks fly and barbed wire glows. The lightning strikes with a simultaneous report of thunder. The blast sends shockwaves through my body. All the hair on my skin stands up. My ears are ringing and my vision is distorted. Like a bomb just went off. The shape of the lightning bolt is seared into my retina, a glowing branch in the middle of my vision. I step back from the window. I'm shaking like a leaf. I can feel the static fizzing in the air around me; the smell of dampness still lingering as I try to blink my vision back to normal, and snap my fingers to my ears to make sure my vibrating ear drums are not ruptured. The storm seems to have expelled all its energy above us, and has continued to roll off into the distance. As I watch the spider webs of lighting

drift away though the dark distant clouds, all I can do is admire the grandeur and profound power of this moment. I feel small.

It's a Monday morning, the steel gates roll open to let four new fish onto our range. With mesh bags full of belongings in tow behind them they slowly make their way to their new homes, like walking the plank. They know they are being sized up, that feeling of a deer walking into a lion's den. The smell of fresh blood stirs the range. The way they walk reveals more about what these men are made of than their rap sheets. I can already tell two of them may not make it on this range. The other won't last the night. The fourth walks like he's been here before. Chin up chest out, walking with some sort of thug swing. Eyes straight forward and unfocused. That bravado will be challenged very quickly. The first one cracked before the end of the day. He couldn't cut it. Terrified of the inaudible violence, he checked himself into protective custody, not a good idea. Protective custody or "PC" as it's more commonly referred to, is reserved for rats, rapists, and the child molesters that the general population prays to get their hands on. They need to be separated from other inmates for their own safety. But sometimes one or two slip through the cracks, that is when justice is served from the hands of the judged. "Rat patrol" has turned into a sport. A hunt or purge. Snitching is not tolerated, period. It is the job of the inmates to sniff out any rats and dispose of them, to deter others from snitching, and to cleanse the general population of that "disease".

That evening I return from the yard. There is a heavy tension on the range, like humidity. Something is up. I walk towards my cell on high alert, there are several other men in a room beside the showers. This room holds a sink, microwave, and a toaster oven. It's an old dimly lit storage closet turned into a makeshift kitchen. It smells like mould and watered down dish soap. The men are standing in front of one of the new fish, who is slouched over in a chair. They must have sniffed out a rat. I continue to my cell. I carefully slide my door shut behind me and turn off my light. I cannot help but watch this torture through my narrow window. The man slouched over in the chair is unrecognizable. I can only identify him from the tattoo on his neck. He goes by the name West. West's eyes are swollen shut, his nose broken and bleeding, his mouth hangs open as if his jaw is dislocated or shattered. I can see his bloody saliva drip out over his trembling lips onto the floor. I watch as the men take turns laying punch after punch into his face and body. The sound of knuckles pounding flesh is unique. He's helpless while they enjoy themselves, laughing savagely as they devastate him. West's hands are bound to the arms of the chair with torn T-shirts; his feet strapped to the legs of the chair with belts. I can hear him squeal through his broken jaw as they slash his flesh with makeshift knives. The holes in his chest and stomach pump warm red blood out onto the floor. I can hear the fluid in his lungs as he coughs and wheezes for air. Fighting to hold onto his life. One of the men leaves the kitchen only to return with a mop to clean the blood. Another, sweating from the hard work it takes to destroy a man, leaves to change his blood stained shirt. An inmate from the front of the range yells "on the block" to warn everyone that a guard is entering the range. She has come to do the hourly rounds. The light goes off in the kitchen and one of the larger men stands, blocking the tight doorway. The guard walks by the kitchen, stops and peers past the frame of the man blocking the door. They exchange words I can't make out and I think to myself this is it, he's going to be rescued. But she keeps walking, continuing her rounds as if there is nothing the matter, as if West isn't bleeding out in the corner of a mouldy kitchen. She exits the range and the torture continues. The light back on, the brutality is clearly visible. I watch as they break his fingers, his squeals echo through the range. I'm thinking that at any moment the guards are going to enter the range and



save him, surely they will put a stop to this, they have the power to – the duty. I'm wrong. They won't enter the range at all. It is too dangerous for them. They know there are weapons on the range and they are scared for their own safety. This man will pay the ultimate price. After almost two hours of suffering I watch him beg for his life, as the last devastating blow is delivered to his temple, his body turns quiet and still. They unstrap him from the chair and dump him into a pile on the floor. They drag his limp body into the empty shower beside the kitchen, and one of them slides the shower curtain shut. He is left to die alone on the cold wet floor.

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There is a knock on my cell door. As it slowly slides open, I jump out of bed to greet my visitor. His name is Odin; well, that's his nickname, and I can see why. He towers over me by at least a foot, and he is built like a truck. I get it. I catch a glimpse of his fists, his knuckles are scabbed and swollen. He speaks calmly and doesn't use his gigantic frame to intimidate me, which is unusual here. His presence alone is enough of a threat. He meticulously interrogates me. I know what he's doing and I'm used to it. He wants to know what I'm about. If I'm going to cause any trouble. Who I am, where I'm from, what got me here. I get it, this is his home, you don't just let a stranger walk in your door – my door. I'm careful to make sure my answers are the same as I have given others because I know he will ask around and, in here, inconsistencies are the same as lies. I am new and still waiting for my personal effects to be shipped in. He asks me to send some of his own personal items in with mine. When you get into the prison you only get one chance to send in belongings, after that it is quite difficult to receive new items. I politely explain, while trying to hide the trembling of my voice, that my personal affects have already been shipped and there is no more space for his. This is a lie, he knows it, I know it, but there is still time for him to change my mind.

There is another knock on my door, and this time there are two men standing there. I don't know their names. One has braids and looks like he is from east Asian descent, the other maybe from the Caribbean. His white teeth are what stand out the most. They don't look anything like Odin and I feel somewhat relieved. I ask them what they want, they proceed to ask me if I would like to hide some homemade brew in my cell. This gets me very nervous. I know if I cave now, it's all downhill from there, I hide this, then I need to hide something else, then this, then that. I won't fall into the trap. I know if I give an inch they will take a mile, and I'm running out of road. I politely say no, but they proceed to explain they will give me a share. I explain I don't drink and there is nothing in it for me. They try to bribe me with tobacco and marijuana. I tell them I don't smoke but thank you for the offer. They continue to insist I allow them to stash their brew in my cell. I am starting to arrive at the conclusion that I may not have a choice in this matter. Now I begin to get upset, telling them I didn't appreciate them coming to my home, making me uncomfortable, and I want them to leave. As I begin to think my resistance is working, the one with the white teeth sends a hard push into my chest, and my back hits the steel bars of my bunk bed.

I can feel the fear and anger building up inside me, the waves crashing down on my chest, my hands trembling like leaves in the wind. My heart pounding, my breath short. My mouth is dry and my vision pounds in and out of focus. This is it, this is the turn I've been dreading, prolonging. My feet feel as if they have left the floor. I squeeze my hands into fists and I can feel the sweat seeping through the lines in my palms. There is a ball of anxiety building in my gut,

growing large and I can feel it pressuring my lungs, fighting for space inside of me, burning its way out. I swing my fists, strike after strike, making contact with flesh, bones cracking. Punch after punch I can feel the warmth of his blood on my cold knuckles, soothing their ache, fuelling my rage. It feels good. I want to destroy him. Kicks and fists fly into a cruelty I didn't know existed in me. I'm watching my body's actions through my distant vision, like watching a film through my own eyes. I'm so far away from this moment, my mind so far removed from this cell, I have become two in a place crushing me to become nothing. The screams echo through my head. I wish he would shut up, why won't he give up? I thrash and throw in a cruel synchronization with the waves as they crash. It's dark and violent now, he's still moving, my merciless foot crushes his fucking head into the cement floor, and with that thud, the silence is deafening. I am at the mercy of this storm, riding out my terror, dark sea water filling my mind. I have made my own waves in this ocean, a part of the violence, a part of these walls. I've laid a brick in the foundations I've tried so desperately to escape. No one will ask me for anything anymore.

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It's been several days since my cell light burnt out. I have been living by the dim light of the window and the cold blue sting of my 13-inch television screen. I just brought my dinner into my cell to eat alone in the dark on the edge of my bed watching the 5 o'clock news. Its going to be change over soon, meaning it is time for yard, in or out, on the range or locked in your cell. The guard makes his way down the range locking the cell doors shut. When he gets to mine I ask him politely to please keep my door unlocked so I don't have to eat dinner in the dark for the fifth time. He looks at me and says "what do you think you're special?" "I'm not special I'm a fucking human being," I reply as he closes my door and locks me in my cell. Instant anger. It happens so quickly now. There are no more build ups. It's like the kettle is always hot, ready to boil as soon as the heat's turned up. I could have killed him. I wanted to. The thought makes my vision pound. I wanted to see his eyes reveal his humanness as his throat bubbled blood. I could imagine his face as I stand over him, no longer a callous stare and smug grin. His eyes would weaken and tear with the fear of dying, lips trembling, begging for the mercy he would never show me. We've been slowly murdering each other all along, I would whisper in his ear as he tries to shake his head to remove my hand from his mouth, forcing him to suck air through the new opening in his neck. I had no choice but to kill you, too. That's the point of all this, isn't it? The reason you are here to torture me? You are just doing your job and I am doing mine. Don't be so shocked. Don't be so disgusted, this is what you wanted. This is what you created. Don't be afraid. You killed yourself.

My life is meaningless. I used to think this. Life's purposes are fluid. The fluidity of life's meanings are infinite in their possibilities. One may assume that life may be constrained to one or two purposes, or nothing at all, but also many and all. An astounding piece of my existence is the fluidity of my meaning to others. The transformation and manifestation of others' perceptions of me, and on me, change my significance in time and space. My life will be lived and maybe even remembered, but one life can change another's. Not in just a way that may make you read different books, but fundamentally. A shift in existence. My purpose can be to transform your existence. This changes everything, this changes your decisions, this changes the outcome of your life, your life has become mine, and mine yours. My meaning transcends time and space through your decisions, your thoughts, your beings, your existence. I exist in you, as you in me.

And when you are gone, we are still alive in me. I can't stop searching for my meaning, I feel pathetic. Ok so maybe there is no meaning, and that's the point, or life is what you make of it or some crap like that. It just feels trivial to always ask about the meaning of things when it really doesn't matter. I think of my life as if I'm driving a car. As I look out the windows I can see life passing by in transient moments. Just the good ones, the happy ones. Quick reminders. But when I approach the painful memories, I slow down, almost to a crawl. These moments are lucid. Time feels different in these moments. Three dimensional. I can relive them with ease. Walk through the moments in slow motion. Once those memories are passed I set off back on cruise control, speeding off through other moments. It seems as if the painful memories are the ones that last. It is almost as if these moments last longer. Suffering makes me live longer. Maybe we are meant to suffer through life. Maybe that's its meaning. Pretty fucking depressing if that's true.

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I don't understand. Why does it feel like nobody gets it? The tragedy of life. As if it's a surprise that the world can be a terrible place and the people in it can be just as cruel. To expect anything else is a profound tragedy on its own. To be disappointed time and time again by your fellow man must be devastating. All the great beauty we witness has its equal ugliness. Even on the brightest of days there are shadows. We cast our own shadows in the world and it is no more our fault as it is the sun's.

There is always a place in the world to observe. Like parks on a lake across from the city, where the view of the skyline is breathtaking and still. Far enough away as so we cannot smell the filth and hear the screams. These are the distances that dictate our perception of reality. More and more we have found ourselves on the outside looking in, detached from the ones looking back at us. We build more of these observation areas from which to watch and judge, to parade the others in front of our children to provide example. The lies we tell are told for us. Right after the skyscraper was built and the park was planted. Like a sacrificial pawn on a chess board, struck down for a higher cause. The pawn has a sense of nobility because it doesn't know it was used as a diversion for the knight to make its move. These lies we live have turned us into master of our own deception. We are all lying about the truth.