The thickness of water

by orphan_account

Summary

"Ok, guys, you’re not gonna believe this but I really, really need you to. Campbell came back. I think he’s taking me back to the camp. He’s shouting about somebody, he’s saying we have to go back to Jasper- I don’t know who the hell that is. Call the police. Call the CIA and the FBI and the ATF and MIA and Gwen! I hear him coming…tell my cat I love her - no! NO YOU STAY AWAY I WILL BITE OFF EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOUR FINGERS."

In which Max and David are attacked by a vengeful Cameron Campbell, forcing Nikki, Neil and the rest of their friends to reach out to an unlikely source of help: Daniel. No prizes for guessing who's responsible for the 'murder mystery' aspect of the story.

Notes

"It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us fathers and sons."

-Friedrich Schiller

"Fuck you, David."

-Max
“Which one of you unlucky fuckers is schlepping me to the bus station?”

“Well, it’s not like any of us can say we didn’t see this coming.” says Neil.

He is, of course, referring to the swarm of black-clad figures of multiple SWAT teams buzzing over the camp. The little group that forms the modest population of Camp Camp are gathered on the front porch of the main hall with two jugs of sweating lemonade between them, which they sip from plastic cups as the place is torn to shreds in front of them. A pile of suitcases and backpacks takes up the far side of the porch. The campers were explicitly told everything not safely removed from the tents and buildings aside from the main hall would be subject to search, which was apparently a polite way of saying tasered, ripped in half and burned.

Exactly why it was SWAT teams that showed up instead of regular police officers, no one knows, but Nikki has repeatedly postulated it might be because of a huge store of illegal substances the campers somehow failed to discover. The idea that she has been cavorting about enormous caches of white gold has really captured her imagination, so she found a trilby to wear and calls everyone ‘doll-face’, swigging from her lemonade like it’s cheap hooch.

Over the rim of his cup, Max watches a pair of SWAT members slam a battering-ram through the wall of the mess hall “Neil, we all prayed for it. Nobody thought this was actually going to happen.”

“I did.” volunteers Space Kid. He then grins at Neil and winks conspicuously.

Further into the campsite, the walls of Quartermaster’s shed shiver and bulge outwards. The report of gunfire makes everyone jump. A long wavering scream wails out over the cacophony.

“I really wish Quartermaster had stayed behind to walk them through his shed,” says David, topping up Nerris’s cup “I’m sure there’s nothing in there to really be afraid of.”

Max glowers “I’m gonna just chalk up your inability to recognise Quartermaster for the living urban legend he really is to another layer of the delusion you live in.”

An explosion suddenly shakes the porch. Flame smears the lake and bathes the island in a hellish orange glow as it erupts from somewhere around Cameron Campbell’s summer house. Considering what the kids found the last time they were out there, Max does not blame SWAT for wanting to burn the summer house down. Were he among them he definitely would not hesitate to grab a flamethrower.

It has been an eventful few months. While Max did not expect a restful summer, he couldn’t have possibly predicted that his summer would go so far above and beyond his basic expectations. It really scared him when they came back just in time to catch the tail-lights of the prison bus taking Cameron to super-Guantanamo. He was sure the camp would close on the spot. The parents were assembled. What was to stop them from taking their kids and running from what any sane person could clearly see was a sub-par hell-hole run by a money-hungry maniac with the morals of a dictator?

David was, apparently. He sprang out of the car and just started talking. It was hard for the parents to ignore him, or resist that frustratingly earnest way he speaks. He promised camp would resume functioning as normal by tomorrow. Activities would resume, the campers would be put back on their routine and make the most of the rest of the summer. It would only be another four weeks. Why pull their children out early? Clearly these kids were getting a valuable, unique experience, and enjoying themselves immensely. They would still be under the supervision of two qualified and experienced counsellors. Arguably Camp Camp would be safer without Cameron Campbell dropping in and out to stash his dirty money and very probably his drugs (which Max and David had agreed on in the car, but which David left out of his speech), so why not take advantage of that?
If Max had been twenty-five years older and visiting his own child at Camp Camp, he would have slapped David across the face with a crucifix and told him he needed Jesus. But then, Max is cynical, and actively seeks out situations where he can do exactly that- the parents were not so quick to dismiss what David said. When Gwen joined in with promises of her own they went from warming to the idea to agreeing aloud. Somehow, by the time David had paused for breath, he had saved his campers.

Camp Camp would stay open for another four weeks. Ered’s fathers warned them that the camp would have to be shut down after that point.

“Sirs, I think that might be for the best,” said David, by this point leaning on Max’s head for support because he had talked himself into light-headedness “I won’t try to stop that when the end of the summer comes. But until then I don’t see why the kids can’t finish their summer on a high-note.”

“Hell yeah!” Nikki punched the sky “I’m a go get me some more of that nature right now!”

She immediately ran head-long into the woods and had to be fished out and secured in the mess hall before the parents could go on their way.

So, four weeks later, the campers are squeezed onto the porch together to watch the place that has been their home for almost three months be razed to the ground. Nerris is crying a little bit. She wanted to break down her cardboard castle and transport it home, but the logistics proved too difficult: there simply would not be enough room in her parents’ minivan to fit all that cardboard. She stifles her tears into a string of handkerchiefs Harrison produced for her from his hat. Space Kid is also mourning the loss of his cardboard shuttle. In a rare moment of grief, he has removed his helmet for the only time anyone can remember (he always locked himself in the bathroom to brush his teeth), clutching it with the grim resolution of a boy who has just kissed his dreams goodbye.

Save for Nikki, whose appetite for destruction outweighs her emotional attachment to the camp, everyone is upset. Harrison has the other end of the hanky-train pressed to his nose and honks into it every now and again. Ered keeps turning her face to the wall and wiping her sleeve over her eyes, unwilling to let the others see her cry. Dolph lets out tiny cries of ‘ach!’ each time another tent is uprooted from the ground or another wall is knocked down. Neil looks at his shoes and takes tiny sips from his cup. He lets out little, miserable burps. Nurf has taken it upon himself to spread comfort. One last demonstration of his improved inter-personal skills.

He dishes out one-armed side-hugs and says things like “This is the perfect metaphor for the eventual atrophy of our childish innocence.” and “The pain you’re feeling is good. It’s a healthy pain. You’re grieving for a place that has been good to you. Feel the pain, nerd, love what the pain means.”

The platypus has meanwhile decided to ride out the destruction of its habitat by draping herself across Gwen’s shoulders. She could not be less interested in the drama.

Preston, on the other hand, is in his element. The melodrama he has been longing for all summer has come at last.

With every report of wood cracking or fabric tearing, Preston strikes a fresh pose. “Oh! The agony! The tragedy! Such emotion!”

“Shut up Preston.” says Ered.

“My God, I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much grief in one place!”

Ered punches his shoulder “I mean it, Preston, shut up.”

Preston lays a wrist across his face as if in a swoon “But the passion! The passion that went into
loving this place- oh, it’s thick in the air, like a good cologne! I think I feel a performance coming on!”

Ered is getting ready to punch him in earnest when Nurf catches her arm.

He pats her hand in the earnest manner of a grandmother “This is just how he copes. Don’t let his volume interfere with your mourning process.”

Max is doing his best to pretend he is somewhere else. He cannot focus on what’s going on around him- not with the thought of going home looming in his mind. Back to his parents. Back to the room in the far corner of the house, where he can’t be seen or heard, and sometimes, he thinks, where he ceases to exist completely. Right now it seems impossible he could ever return to that unreal place. Here, sandwiched between Nikki’s bony shoulder and Neil’s bonier shoulder, with Nerris’s knees in his back and the smell of Gwen’s shampoo hanging in the air with the stink of scorched sap. How is he going to handle it, now that he knows?

Now that Max has had it confirmed for him over these last three months that he is, in fact, a valid specimen of humanity who deserves to feel safe and to have more than just his basic needs acknowledged, how is he going to go home where the situation is inverted?

Max jumps: a particularly huge explosion has just launched a cloud of wood chips into the air. Everyone covers their faces with free hands and screech as they are sprayed- except for Nikki, throws her arms back and cackles, embracing the shrapnel. Preston lets out a theatrical scream and dives behind Gwen for cover, who is also contending with the platypus scrambling down her top, presumably for the same reason Preston cowers behind her.

Loud noises don’t usually bother Max. Why has he gotten so jumpy all of a sudden? Is it the thought of going home that’s done it to him? Didn’t used to bother him. In fact, the noise has disorientated him so much he does not realise David as stooped to protect him until Nerris mumbles a protest into the back of Max’s neck. The moment the chips started coming down David folded his skinny self over Max, Nerris and Neil, who are the ones within his immediate reach.

“Get off.” snaps Max.

Nerris chokes on his hair, but comes away laughing “Good save!”

“David, next time let me get hit by flaming shrapnel. I’d rather lose an eye than be squished into your armpit again.” Neil rubs the cheek that was crushed into Max’s shoulder “What kind of deodorant was that? It smelled nice.”

“Dove Clinical Protection. Gotta use some strong stuff when you’re out under the hot sun all day.”

Max tucks his knees up to his chest. He has never known anything but a turbulent home. Or at least, he hadn’t, until he came to this place. He finds himself wishing it would drag on a little longer. No matter how irritating Preston is, no matter how crazy Nikki acts. Max catches himself swivelling to look at David, but averts his eyes before they can make eye-contact. Instead he watches Gwen disentangling the platypus from her shirt. She’s wearing one of those super sports-bras that always freak Max out when he sees a commercial for them, the kind that look like armour. God help her- the platypus has a webbed foot caught under a strap. She may need a can-opener to get him free.

By the time the parents start to arrive, about half of the camp has been torn down. They come in drips and drabs. If they are perturbed by the scene going on just in front of the mess hall then they do not show it.

Ered’s fathers turn up in a station wagon with tinted windows and what looks like a bullet hole punched through the trunk. They each shake David’s hand and thank him for giving their daughter what she insists was the greatest summer of her life so far, and left him with a business card in case
anyone tries to sue him. Moved by a moment of comraderie, Ered whips out a felt marker and
writes her number on everyone’s shirts. She leaves the felt marker behind so they can all do the
same. Max hesitates for a moment, but then offers her his sleeve, remembering that he has a spare
and identical hoodie in his suitcase.

Ered gets up into the back and waves until her car turns off the long drive. Next to go is Dolph. A
prim woman in a starched military uniform ushers him into the passenger seat. Again, Max lets
Dolph at his arm. When he sits back down Neil puts an arm around his shoulder.

“What?” Max cranes away from him.

“Dude, let me hug you. I’m not gonna see you for a while.” Neil glances back at the burning remains
of the Quartermaster’s shed “Or maybe ever.”

“Yeah, ok.”

“Gay!” says Nikki, then she ducks under Neil’s other arm “I’ll be gay too!”

“That’s not how that works—”

“Look at us, three guys, just shooting the shit and being gay together.”

Then Space Kid goes. After he has finished writing his number down he delivers a stiff salute, one
for all of them, then one for Gwen and David each, and says “It’s been an honour exploring with
you guys!”

David returns the salute “Keep reaching for the stars!”

Max makes sure David can hear him gag and whisper “Could he be any cheesier?”

He likes that David just rolls his eyes instead of reprimanding him.

Harrison, Nerris and Nurf go in similar manners. Harrison’s father trembles slightly when he helps
his son load his bags up, but seems happy to see him all the same. Nerris and her father greet each
other with a lengthy handshake, and the teenager in the passenger seat, groaning in disgust, gives her
side-hug when she crawls in behind them. Nurf’s aunt picks him up. Max was expecting an elephant
of a woman with a Bible in one hand and a kid-whacking purse in the other from the way Nurf
talked about her, and he was right about her being round, but she has a nice smile and even gives
David a hug and thanks him for putting up with her ‘wily’ nephew.

When Preston’s time comes up, he strikes the most dramatic of all his poses so far and recites the
majority of Juliette’s final monologue. At the ‘happy dagger’ part, he takes a small stick and pokes it
into his chest, falling slowly onto his back at David and Gwen’s feet. Gwen gives him a gentle
nudge to get him going. To everyone’s relief it is not his grandmother driving. There’s a man in the
front seat Preston identifies as his big brother then, behind his hand in a booming stage-whisper, as a
classless fool who thinks W.O.W. is the height of culture.

That leaves just the three of them. Max, the first one in and likely last one out. Nikki and Neil, whose
parents’ long delay means nothing at all sinister, the last two in. There’s probably some deeper
meaning to this. Max doesn’t know what but he’ll probably lose sleep over it later.
At last Neil lets go of him and Nikki. Nikki is starting to get antsy. She puts her trilby on Gwen and
paces up and down, occasionally shouting at the SWAT men, who are by now just rooting through
burned-out shells of cabins.

“What’s gonna happen to this place?” asks Neil. He went and dug a wooden beaker out of his
luggage (earlier, Max saw him stuff the whole of the hated science kit in his bag and hastily conceal
it under a couple of lumpy sweaters).

“Don’t worry about it.” says David.

“Will you guys be open next summer? ‘Cos I’m sure as hell not going back to the Flowerscouts. I’d totally do a Mulan, like, cut my hair and pretend I’m a dude- I don’t even need to be under-cover to do that, you know? But I’m not gonna join up with the Woodscouts either.”

David and Gwen exchange one of those inscrutable adult looks.

“Let’s not worry about that right now.” says Gwen.

Something is off. Max doesn’t know what, but it manages to be more uncomfortable than watching the camp get torn to shreds has been.

“What about Mascot?” he blurts.

“Mascot?” Gwen glances down at the platypus, which is savaging her shoelaces “Um…I think we’ll just release Mascot back into the wild.”

“No! You can’t! You domesticated her, now she’ll be useless in the wild!” exclaims Neil.

“Kid, I think she domesticated us.”

“I’ll take her!”

And he does. When Neil’s father draws up at last, apologising, explaining that he has been lost on the back-roads for over an hour, he is so harassed and scattered by his long trip he does not make so much as a peep of protest when Neil gets into the car with an improvised pet-carrier (a cardboard with airholes and a leafy inner-lining). Neil hugs them both, hard, and impulsively even gives David a squeeze around the legs. He shakes Gwen’s hand and thanks them with moist eyes for a good summer.

“I mean, it was fucking weird,” he wipes his eyes on the back of his sleeve “It was terrifying and weird and I almost died, but it was fun.”

Only ten minutes after Neil’s car has disappeared around the bend, Nikki’s father shows up. At first Max thinks it is a bear in the driver’s seat. The guy has to be at least six and a half feet tall. He’s thick as a tree trunk. Nikki runs to him and tosses her arms around him; she cannot begin to get her skinny little arms around his waist.

Again, he is not at all bothered by the relative disaster he has just driven his pick-up into. As long as Nikki is satisfied he is satisfied. Nikki will not get into the car until she has extracted a promise from Max to write to her. Literally, with pen and paper, because neither of them have laptops or email addresses. And when she is gone, Max is suddenly exhausted.

He looks up and Gwen and David. They are both dark-eyed and deflated.

“Which one of you unlucky fuckers is schlepping me to the bus station?”

(Six years later)

“Are you getting war flashbacks to camp, or what?”

Nikki and Max are lined up at the windows of the topmost hall of the school with what must be
three-fourths of their grade. The sheer heat and body weight, the smell of those couple of jackasses who forgot to put on deodorant, is over-whelming and puts a twist of nausea in Max’s stomach. Over that is the stink of smoke even thicker in the air. The majority of the windows are open. During the initial screams when the body was discovered, two or three teachers ran out of their classrooms and threw windows open to call down.

Amongst all of the flashing lights and high-vis vests, the tape securing the whole of the quad and the throng of policemen, Max and Nikki can just about see the body that has caused the hubbub. It’s an older man. He lays on his back, spread-eagled. The theory being whispered over their head- Max’s head, because he is the shortest- is that someone broke into the school to commit suicide. Or that the janitor murdered him. Which janitor and why, no one can say. Or that a Canadian drug lord zipped over the border in a stealth plane and flung the body out, and it just happened to land perfectly in the squad of their school.

Max stares at a pale wrist. The watch-face on it is shattered. The wrist too, he thinks, given the angle the rest of his body is at. He is splayed in so many different directions.

“Yeah, kinda.” Nikki turns a pale shade of green “Less SWAT dudes, though.”

Max toys with the idea of calling David. It is not that likely David will even hear his phone go. He works at a different school, and given the age of the kids he works with, there is never a moment of silence. To top that off he always forgets to put his phone on vibrate. Besides, he can’t exactly up and leave in the middle of his work day; Max will spare him the news (and a possible panic attack) until he gets home, and catch a ride from Nikki.

The idea of walking home occurs to him briefly, but he dismisses it. David hasn’t let him out of the house without Dog since the bodies started turning up, if he plans to walk wherever he’s going. And the necessity of putting a harness on their semi-feral bobcat escort seriously limits the amount of places he can go in town without running into inconveniences. The question “Does she bite?” has become the soundtrack to his nightmares.

“It’s the flashing lights, really.” Max cranes his neck back to look over his shoulder “Is Simon Islam around? Someone should let him know this’ll mess with his epilepsy.”

No sooner are the words out of his mouth than Nikki is screaming at the top of her very loud voice “SIMON ISLAM, THIS IS YOUR EPILEPSY WARNING!”

The cops below them jump as one. Heads turn up towards them, like a rash of flowers blooming at the same time. One of the larger cops makes a gesture suggesting they disperse. Of course, no one pays any attention.

Then, from the back of the crowd, Simon peeps “Thanks Nikki!”

“Why does this shit always happen to us?” says someone at Max’s elbow “My friend Marinette never has to deal with this crazy kind of stuff.”

“Marinette lives in fucking Paris. And she goes to a private school. If you didn’t want to deal with this shit, then you shouldn’t’a been a middle-class kid in Washington.” says someone else.

“Preach!” says Max.

The cry is taken up: a deafening “PREACH!” scares the living daylights out of the cops for the second time. One of them is so startled they overbalance and fall into the corpse’s lap. Unfortunately the fall from whatever immense height the dead guy endured has essentially turned the body into a skin-bag of liquid organs and bone splinters. With a squelch that can be heard from three stories up the body disintegrates underneath the police man’s butt. He screams. An honest to God
horror-movie, spider-in-the-bathtub scream. Max is both horrified by the spreading puddle of human jelly and delighted by the screech.

The nausea in his stomach gets worse by tenfold, all at once, and he finds himself parting the crowd with clawing hands, bellowing “Move, mouth-breathers, move!”

Nikki is hot on his heels. By the time he makes it into the bathroom it is almost too late. He has just enough time to crouch and assume the correct position when his breakfast says a heart-felt goodbye. Nikki, the wonderful friend that she is, holds his hair and hood well out of the way, and still has a hand free to pat his back.

“Get it all out.”

“Jazakallahu khair.”* he wheezes.

“Dude, did you have waffles?”

He reaches for the handle “You’re so gross.”

Max gets up and dusts off his knees, but the way is blocked by the increasingly tall and imposing figure of Erin. She must have grown a foot since the last time he saw her- which was yesterday. Either that, or she’s wearing heels again.”

“Uh, gross! Were you guys gonna trade oral or something?”

Max glowers “Wow, Erin, I would think you of all people know what puking over a toilet looks like. Maybe you didn’t recognise it because I actually have people who like me enough to hold my hair up when I do it.”

He reaches back for a high-five which Nikki gives him gladly.

Erin bites her bottom lip. That was a good one. He can see her scrambling. She settles on “This is the girl’s room.”

“Really? You can tell? The signs are gone.”

About two weeks ago, an anonymous student armed with a screw-driver took the gendered signs off the bathroom doors, replacing them with bright stickers that said ‘my pee is not policy’. Three attempts were made to replace the signs. The same thing happened each time. Somehow, what the school now refers to as ‘The Gender Avenger’ completed each mission without showing up on the security cameras once. There was even an on the spot locker-raid to catch any student who might have a stash of male/female signs. Max got a whole can of Pringles pilfered by some asshole security guard, whom he fully intends to murder if he ever discovers the culprit, and the awful smell in Hallway 5 was at last identified as an egg sandwich some disgusting kid had let fester in their locker for a month, but nothing else was turned up.

“Um, because it doesn’t smell like piss and bad aim in here?”

“It smells like waffles.” counters Nikki.

Before Erin can really get into it with them, three more people run in, quickly followed by a fourth in a wheelchair, Shannon Pearson from Chem, who seizes Erin by the collar and flings her bodily out of the way of the disabled stall. The sound of puking happens in almost perfect unison.

The three of them pile out of there. Erin seems to have lost her desire to duke it out; she straightens her skirt, sticks her nose up in the air and minces away in what are indeed very tall heels.
Nikki eyes the massive spike of her heels “Is it bad I kind of want her to step on me in those heels?”

“Yes Nik. It’s very bad.”

At that point the fire alarm goes off, and the entire school is required to spill out onto the field. Max clings to Nikki’s sturdy forearm to keep from being washed away from her. Today started out alright and ended horribly. Mainly for the dude that sat in the corpse, though, Max still feels fine.

“You think it’s a serial killer?” asks Nikki over the general hubbub.

“Probably. Either that or all the mono-killers suddenly got super active in the same two months.”

“That’s not a term, Max. You made that up and it sounds like and STD.”

Nikki is right. It has to be a serial killer. Max just does not want to allow that possibility to take root in his mind, because if it does, he will start seeing Daniel around every corner, pick him out of every shadow and probably cause David to do the same thing. There are certain things in their pasts, shared and individual, that they need to move past. Daniel is one of those things.
Catbird

Chapter Notes

This one took a while to get out, since I've just moved apartments. It went well so hopefully I'll have a quicker upload schedule now.

(Six years earlier)

David raises his hand “We should get going soon. Your bus is at three and it’s already noon.”

Gwen yawns and stoops for her bag “I’ll go as far as Sleepy Peak with you guys. My sister’s picking me up at two-thirty.”

“Sister?”

“Yeah, Max, I have a family. I have a sister and some parents. I’m a human being. You spent a whole summer tormenting an actual, living, breathing, weeping human being.”

Max rolls his eyes “Really? I had no idea. Truly, I will be haunted by my horrible conduct for the rest of my living days.”

She squints at him “Got Mr Honey Nuts?”

After a brief and intense round of rock-paper-scissors Gwen wins the passenger seat. The moment David gets into the car, a blanket of silence falls on them. Max is acutely aware of it as he gets up on his knees and peers out the back window. He leans against the stack of luggage, his and the counsellors’ together, and watches the ashy smear of Camp Camp until they have turned off the road. As soon as they are around the corner, it lifts. Gwen paws noisily through her back-pack and pops a couple of anti-nausea pills out of a blister-pack. She offers Max one. When he refuses, she takes all three and conks out so quickly Max actually reaches up to check her pulse. While she dozes underneath an eye-mask and a sweater-blanket, Max and David talk freely, without worrying they will stir her.

“What’s going to happen to the camp?” is the first thing out of his mouth.

David stares at the highway for a long moment “With Mr Campbell in prison, Gwen and I technically own the place. He wrote us into the deed as the owners should something happen to him. Like faking his own death, I think. I guess he wanted to pass the blame onto someone else if his assets were ever investigated. But him getting arrested works just as well.”

“The- the blame for what?”

“For whatever those SWAT guys were looking for.”

“So?” Max prompts “What did you do?”

“We sold the land to the Woodscouts.”

Max tries to spring to his feet in indignation, forgetting he has a seatbelt on. Instead he ends up
making an odd bucking movement like an angry salmon breaching “You what? What the fuck, man! We spent the whole summer keeping their greasy paws off the camp and you just gave it to them?”

Gwen snorts in her sleep and turns on her side.

David shrugs “They were actually aiming to collect you campers, if I remember rightly. And the camp is absolutely gutted by now. The Woodscouts basically paid Gwen and I a mint for some thoroughly scorched and ruined log cabins and a couple of acres of pristine woods. After this summer, do you really think opening the camp for another season was viable? We wouldn’t be able to do it. Frankly it was a miracle we got to keep you guys for another four weeks. I wouldn’t have blamed Mr and Mr Miller for arresting Gwen and I as well, since we were technically complicit.”

“You didn’t know what he was doing! I mean, we still don’t know what the fuck Campbell was doing! It’s not your guys’ fault that Gwen needed a job in this shitty economy and Campbell had you under his spell!”

For lack of anything else to hit, Max pounds a fist against his own thigh. Horrifyingly, he feels the hot prick of tears in his eyes. The image of Pikeman striding into the smoking remains of the lodges and tents, putting his boots all over the soil, getting his oily hair wet in the lake- their part of the lake- it’s just too much at the end of what has already been a long and traumatising day.

Max puts his forehead to the cold window. One tear gets down to his chin before he can catch it on his sleeve. No, no, absolutely not. He is not going to cry twice in front of David in just one summer.

He swallows thickly “I wanted to come back next summer. Now the place is gonna be overrun with Woodscouts. The only way I’ll ever get to see the camp again is if I become a fucking Woodscout. I’d rather drown myself in sewage than join those misogynistic, militant, self-loathing assholes.”

A beat of silence between them.

Then David says, tentatively “I know how you feel, Max.”

“No you don’t.”

He could elaborate. He could tell David about the thick, thick silence at the home, and how it sends him scuttling under his bed like a goddamn toddler when the silence is suddenly broken by screams and the sound of flesh hitting flesh, and how he prays that his mother will not start up the stairs for him after she is finished with his father.

But he does not. He can feel the wall going up around him like a shell calcifying on his skin, filling up the space between him and David.

Then David says “Did you ever notice that Snake kid sounds exactly like Prince Zuko?”

Max sniffs “What the fuck! I thought I was the only one who noticed!”

“Right? Every time he opened his mouth I thought he was going to start screaming about his honour.”

“It was a subconscious thing for me. The time I tried to escape from Camp Camp in the boat, I think the only reason I trusted him was because he sounded like Zuko, so I thought, hey, he’ll totally betray the Woodscouts the same way Zuko betrayed his mission!”

“Maybe the reason Snake was after you in particular is because you’re the Avatar. Is there something you’re not telling me, Max? Can you secretly bend the elements?”

“I can bend wind, I’ll show you if you want!”
David rapidly rolls down his window “I believe you! Don’t do it!”

(Now)

First time Max saw this town, he thought David was just pulling over for a piss. He pulled the car off the back-road they had been winding around on the top of the lip of the valley where the town sprawled and hopped out without a word, but seemed surprised when Max did not follow him. Max had been watching the outermost fringes of the town’s suburbs drifting in and out of view for the better part of fifteen minutes. He liked it immediately, though it was grey and shadowed by the mountain which the town sat at the bottom of. He liked the sharp rooves, designed so that the rain would roll off, and he liked the way the roads wove in and out of the great wood spread over the mountains in a way that was at the same time sly and inviting.

It was entirely too nice for David, he decided. The abundance of brick buildings. The mountain views and wet green mantle of the national park laid over its sloped shoulders. He assumed a place like this would be given over to the rich, with high rents, expensive stores and general gentrification crowding the rest of them out into cheaper, smaller towns.

David stood at the top of a steep cliff with his hands on his hips. A damp wind stirred his hair and jacket. Max watched him with a cheek pressed to the glass and wondered what was going on in his inscrutable mind. Regrets? Was he thinking about leaving Max here and proceeding to his home-town alone?

But then David turned around with a smile “You getting out?”

“What for? You need help taking a piss?”

“We’re here, Max. This is where I live.”

Tentatively, Max got out of the car. He hunched his shoulders against the cold “This place? Are you punking me?”

David put an arm on his shoulder. For once, Max didn’t shake him off.

“I’m not. This,” he gestured to the town in the valley “This is all for you.”

Unfortunately Catbird is far less mysterious and promising from the backseat of Nikki’s dad’s car. Max is stuffed in the back with his knees up to his chin to avoid the chainsaw at his feet. Given that Nikki’s dad, Emmanuel, is not a lumberjack, he does not know why the hell Emmanuel might need a chainsaw so urgently he goes as far to keep one wrapped in an oilcloth in the back seat of his car. He has learned it is better not to question Emmanuel. The more answers the man gives, the more questions are raised. He let Neil have the seat with the leg-room because Allah knows that boy needs it.

There is also the smell of burnt hair. Emmanuel claims there was a coyote in his car the other weekend which he had to chase out with a firework.

Behind the wheel, he’s still telling the story “…didn’t point it right at ‘em, you understand. Aimed it through one window so’s it’d shoot out the other, and it just sorta skimmed between his ears. I don’t hold to that kind of cruelty to animals. Then again, I don’t hold to any kinda cruelty done to my poor innocent truck, so I shot a bottle-rocket over that bugger’s head an’ out he went. Course I pock-marked the upholstery a little, an’ it stinks like fur in here, but I’m taking care of that.”

He gestures to the rear-view mirror, on which several different kinds of air freshener are hung.

“So do you always have a supply of fireworks on hand?” asks Neil.
“Course! Can’t be too careful up in the mountains! If it ain’t the coyotes trying to wire your car it’s the damn skinwa-”

“Are you sure it wasn’t a wolf?” says Nikki “Do we even have coyotes this far up North? We’re almost in Canada.”

Emmanuel shrugs his massive shoulders. This simple gesture alone causes the car to rock slightly on its wheels “If it’s furry and dog-looking, then it’s a coyote. If it’s furry and cat-looking, then it’s a mountain lion. I don’t see the point in learning all them types apart.”

“See, this, Dad, this attitude is one of the reasons you don’t have a degree.”

“I went back and got that darn G.E.D., didn’t I? There’s only so much formal educating I can put up with, girl.”

“I’m just saying you should look into night classes a little harder than just skimming the brochures I make you take from the library.”

Ya Allah, they would have to get into this old argument right now, even with him and Neil in the car, wouldn’t they? Max doesn’t quite get it. In all other areas they have assumed the appropriate aspects of the father-daughter relationship: Emmanuel gets on Nikki for wearing too-short shorts, Nikki gets on Emmanuel for his bad jokes, he enforces a strict 9 o’clock curfew, she pretends to keep it then sneaks out of her bedroom window at 9:02 p.m. to dash down to the corner-store and pester Neil on his late-shift, he complains she doesn’t clean her room, she complains he hides all of her things when he eventually caves and cleans the room for her…

The ritual of the father-daughter relationship is pretty much the same as what Max is used to, from what he can tell. Emmanuel worries about his girl, but trusts her enough to make her own decisions most of the time, though he draws the line at letting her wrestle (on the grounds of brain damage) or driving the pick-up on the mountain passes at night (on the grounds that she will die) or dating anybody whose parents own a pool (Max has no idea about that rule).

Sensing the argument could turn into one of those patented Wallender screechers where everybody on the street knows what they’re fighting about because Wallenders apparently don’t know how to lower their voices, Neil breaks in “So! So, Max, how’s, uh, how’s things? How’s David?”

A dumb question considering Neil was in his kitchen this morning, complaining through some filched waffles about how his dad didn’t understand wearing eye-liner wasn’t a ‘phase’, but Max jumps on the chance to distract the Wallenders “He’s still mad about the helix.”

“Helix?” Emmanuel glances at him in the rear-view mirror “Did you get another damn piercing? Boy, you’re running out of ear to pierce.”

Max shrugs “I’ll start piercing other things. Eyebrows, Nikki, I was talking about eyebrows.”

Currently he has fourteen piercings. All of them are done by hand- Ered’s hand. She plans to be a tattoo artist and piercer as soon as she is of legal age, and, of course, can convince her fathers that she would be better off in this career than following them into the family business. Until then her friends’ flesh is basically a dart-board for her piercing practice. They agreed as one to draw the line at stick-pokes. Nobody trusts Ered that much.

“What does David think of all them earrings?”

David winces whenever Max comes in with a new one. He imagines Max getting some kind of hideous infection that rots his ears right off his head, or that a stud will get caught in his mane of curls
and tear the whole lobe right off. In one of his many anxiety dreams he described watching Max get attacked by an orca while they swam in the ocean, because his earrings had glittered in a way reminiscent of a school of fish. Max had gotten his helix done the day before and decided to swear off gathering anymore piercings to spare David the worrying. Fourteen is probably enough.

“He told me the whole swiss-cheese earlobes thing looks good, but it’s probably gonna kill me.”

Nikki grunts in agreement “You kinda jingle when you walk now. Like an angry reindeer.”

“Listen, Max, is David gonna be home at this hour? I’m not sure how I feel about leaving you alone in that lonely house with a murderer running around.”

“But I’ll be fine. I live with a bobcat.”

Max hears a faint but unmistakeable mumble of “Mountain lion.”

Neil and Nikki wave to him all the way down his long drive. Their heads are stuck out the window and they shout to him until the car takes them out of earshot, reminding him eerily of the day Camp Camp closed. Except the subject material is quite different.

“Remember, if the murderer comes for you, don’t run up the stairs!”

“Go for the throat!”

“Write a will! I want your shrubs! Put it down in the will so I don’t need to fight Nikki for them!”

“We’ll play MCR at your funeral!”

Max waits until they are at the end of the drive to give them the finger. He doesn’t want Emmanuel thinking that is for him, especially after he took the trouble to drive him home.

The commotion is sure to have roused the bobcat. Max turns towards the house and sure enough, there’s Dog, lounging on the loveseat at the second story window. She stares down at him imperiously and flicks her ears, as if the sight of him disturbs her the way a fly buzzing about her ear would. Max waves to her.

The house is far too nice for a thirty-year-old and his teenaged side-kick to live in, let alone own. But a fat-pursed great-something of David’s bought up some land when real-estate was still cheap and thumped a beautiful house which has aged into a sturdy and elegant middle age, just teeming with rustic charm. Sometimes Max wonders if the house wasn’t meant to be the first little bit of a grand old hotel. The kind that drew high society from all around America, Canada and maybe even Mexico, where the young ladies debuted and the Hellfire club convened in a secret sub-basement and old married couples committed infidelities against each other, possibly with the same with youthful bell-boys and maids.

He unlocks the door with an comically massive key. When David finally gave him his own key at thirteen they had a bit of a project finding a keychain it could fit onto. David ended up having to mangle an antique lion door-knocker for the brass ring in its jaws and fashioned a cumbersome keyring for Max out of that. Max keeps all his keys on this ring now. Carrying it about makes him feel like the butler to an estate, conveying the guests to the strange master of the house in his sick-bed. It has also proved itself a mighty weapon in the past. One time he put his keys in his fist to punch a would-be mugger and actually broke the guy’s jaw, not to mention a couple of his own knuckles.

Dog trots down the stairs to meet him. Pausing on the bottom step to wash a paw so that Max will
understand his return is of no urgent importance to her, she grows interested when he flings his shoes in the general direction of the shoe-rack. Dog pounces and tussles with the muddy left shoe. Only when the shoelaces have been subdued does she thrust her head under Max’s arm and invite him to adore her.

Max obliges. He touches his nose to hers and rubs her under the chin “Guess what? ’nother dude murdered today. At school! How gross is that? I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep tonight. I mean, they’re saying it could totally be a suicide, but I don’t buy that. The guy was, like, liquid, and this officer fell ass-first onto him and I swear to god it was like dropping a rotten tomato on the floor-just- fucking ew.”

Dog purrs. Because she is an enormous kitty her purr is more like a lawnmower starting up than it is a domestic animal noise. Max loves her all the more for it. She is his favourite living entity on the planet. David would be but David is not a cat.

She herds him to the back door and out onto the back-porch. This place was alive with fireflies at the beginning of summer. They often ate their dinner in the wicker chairs in front of the expanse of mountains. With the creep of autumn colours into the forest the cold has also come and it hits the porch hard. During storms the kitchen windows facing the porch rattle so hard Max expects them to pop out of the pane, and the snow piles up against the back of the house in a huge drift that has to be cleaned away with both a shovel and a broom beat on the walls and windows.

The snow is not here yet, so Dog can bound out onto the porch without fear of chilling her paws. Snatching up her favourite toy, she drops it at Max’s feet and cocks an ear expectantly. Max scoops up her rag doll and feints a toss into the backyard. Dog is not fooled. She never takes her eyes off him. Max relents and lobes the doll as hard as he can, aiming for the tree-line about a third of a mile away and Dog is after the doll like a shot. She has caught it before it hits the ground and deposits her soggy prisoner at his feet. They end up playing on the back-porch for the entire hour it takes David to come back.

David bangs through the front door. He realises Max has beaten him home when he stumbles over a wayward shoe. Tired and a little sick with fear, David quickly checks the downstairs rooms for Max, going as far to glance into the linen closet, under the couch and the broom cupboard. Just as David mounts the steps, Max whoops on the back porch. A monumentous thing has occurred: Dog has discovered the source of the mysterious red dot was Max all along and has fallen upon him with sheathed paws to punish his indiscretion.

David lets go of a deep breath. He sits on the lower step and listens to Max laugh and cuss out their cat. He resolves to keep Max innocent of the hell-storm that may well be coming for them- at least until after dinner.
The afternoon is hot and hazy by the time they pull into Sleepy Peak. Normally the heat does not bother him very much, but today seems especially airless. He ties his hoodie around his waist and cuffs his jeans up to the knees. Max’s breaths come short, tasting of dust. At two-twenty, he and David help Gwen unpack her stuff from the trunk and load it up into the trunk of a much sleeker, cleaner car with a shiny vanity plate that reads ‘TARDIS’. Gwen’s sister is a curvy woman with a moon-shaped face. The arms that clasp Gwen into a hug are hugely muscular from either an intense physical job or a passion for the gym. She introduces herself as Hen, short for Henrietta, and Max has to bite his fist to keep from laughing in her face. Gwen and Hen. Had he known Gwen’s sister’s name, he would have been a lot crueler this summer to her than he already was.

Hen takes his choked silence as a mark of surprise that she is Korean, which Gwen is not, and supplies “We’re adopted. Our parents couldn’t have kids the natural way.”

“Are they gay?”

David flashes him a dirty look behind Hen.

“Nah, but Dad worked in a nuclear plant.”

Gwen and David talk at length about her plans for employment. She talks excitedly and makes a lot of grand gestures. Max hangs back to allow them some privacy. He also doesn’t really want to hear what Gwen has planned for herself after she leaves Sleepy Peak. It’s a miserable thought, to imagine Gwen striking out into Seattle again with confidence refreshed from her especially tortuous camp experience. If she could survive the combined terror of controlling Nurf’s outbursts, Harrison’s terrifying magic, Max’s nihilism and Space Kid’s obnoxious enthusiasm on a daily basis, she can survive anything else the world has to throw at her.

Max wonders how quickly she will forget about him. What he has done to her will probably stay with her for a long time- especially the episode with the Woodscouts. But Max himself will fade slowly from her mind until she has only a vague impression of a blue hoodie and angry eyes to pair with the nausea of old pain. The same for David. Maybe guilt. He’s spent the whole summer trying to help Max, as far as Max can understand, and most likely isn’t satisfied with the result. All that work he put in and he’s still sending a sour, cynical little bastard back to a largely disinterested set of parents. Wasted energy.

While Max muses bitterly, Gwen takes him by surprise, putting her hand on his shoulder.

“What?” he snaps.

“Sorry about bonking you with your bear.”

Before Max can process the surprise of hearing Gwen apologise she has swept him up into a hug. Max stiffens up. She lets go just as quickly and steps back with a wan smile.

“Hang in there, alright?”

“Alright.” he mumbles.
Gwen doesn’t look back as her sister’s car chugs down the road. She waves to them once out the window, then turns around and stares staunchly ahead of her. Max’s throat tightens. He digs the toe of his shoe into the pock-marked road until a piece of the tarmac dislodges under his foot.

After that only fifteen minutes are left to them. David hustles him to the bus station and hands off his luggage to a grumpy conductor.

“Got your ticket?” he says to Max.

It is in his pocket. Max has seriously considered tearing the thing up several times. He could pretend he lost it then miraculously find it again after the bus has gone, perhaps stuck between the cushions of the back-seat. That would give him at least another hour. He could pretend David never gave it to him. Going by the look of the driver, the man would not appreciate it if David tried to negotiate Max onto the bus anyway.

At the same time Max does not think he could stand another minute in David’s company. He keeps thinking back to the couple of tears he shed on Parents’ Day. Utter humiliation. He never wants to feel that raw and open to someone again, even after what David said to him in the pizza parlour. It was just too much. All the time Max has spent perfecting his defences, but it only took David three months and a raised voice to tear straight through to him, to draw blood. It makes him nauseous to think of what David could do if he had more time to work on him.

Even as he thinks this, his stomach twists harder, to the point he is actually afraid he might vomit, because in just under ten minutes he will be far removed from David’s reach. No matter how bad David wants to help him- no matter if Max has begun to consider accepting his help- Max is about to be miles away. David can’t do a thing over that distance except for forget about him. Maybe it will be a quick thing. He must have some kind of life outside of Camp Camp, in spite of what he does in his free-time indicates. If he didn’t before he will have to build up a life now with the camp reduced to ankle-deep ashes.

There are plenty of things to worry about in the outside world. Max is no longer his responsibility and therefore no longer a part of David’s concerns.

Max takes a seat on a nearby bench and stares at the scratched flank of the bus. He wants to zone out in peace, but David sits beside him and lets out one of those sighs that means he’s to launch into a pep-talk.

“Well-” he starts, but Max cuts across him quickly.

“Can you not? I don’t want a pep-talk. I don’t want you barfing sunshine all over me right now. You did it for three months straight. I’m pretty much steeped in sunshine.”

“You sure don’t look like it.”

“Stuff it up your ass.”

David snorts “What, stuff my sunshine up my ass? That’s specifically called the ‘place where the sun don’t shine’, Max, what would be the point of that?”

It makes Max grin, even though he feels like he’s started to rot inside “Dude, gross. You’re not supposed to play along with me. You’re supposed to tell me cussing makes me sound stupid and I should respect my elders.”

“Because that’s worked so well in the past.”

The first couple of passengers have begun to shuffle onto the bus. Max wonders how long the driver will wait for him.
“I had a good summer,” says Max impulsively.

The look on David’s face—more like Max slapped him with a fish than admitted he enjoyed the summer.

“I’m glad,” David reaches into his pocket. “I’m surprised that—well—I mean, it doesn’t matter that I’m surprised. Look, just take this.”

He presses a little box into Max’s hand.

“It’s a burner phone. I put thirty minutes on it and I entered my phone number. I know I’m overstepping my boundaries and it’s kind of weird that I’m doing this at all, but…” he trails off helplessly

“If you need to talk to somebody. It doesn’t have to be me. Or if you just want to call me to make farting noises in my ear at three in the morning. Whatever you need, there’s a phone for you to use.”

Max nods. He stuffs the phone to the very bottom of his pocket, running through a mental list of all the hiding places he has at home. This might merit finding an entirely new one.

“Thanks.”

This time David guesses what’s coming. He stoops so that Max can hug him about the chest this time, instead of clawing at his legs. He hugs Max back. Distantly, in the part of Max’s mind that is not entirely concentrated on keeping him from bursting into tears, he guesses this might be the first time an adult has ever hugged him.

The bus horn blares out. Max lets go reluctantly.

“I’ll see you around.”

David nods “You will. I promise.”

Max doesn’t look back once, but more because he is anxious to hide the fact that he’s crying than because he does not want to.

(Now)

David was going to make spaghetti for dinner, but after Max has finished recounting what happened at the school, he decides they are better off eating something less meaty and red. He piles the counter high with crisp vegetables from the farmers’ market and arranges them into a salad, tossing in some pine-nuts and quinoa for the all-important protein and fibre he is obsessed with Max receiving. Max has resigned himself to being a dainty five-five for the rest of his life, but David is convinced he can beat out the combination of early malnutrition and genetics if he just plies Max’s teenaged body with enough protein.

They sit down at opposite ends of the kitchen table and share the bowl. David was exhausted when he came through the door, but the shock of what Max told him had the same effect as if he was dunked in an ice-bath.

It frightens David that he finished out the school day and released the elementary school kids without an inkling of what had happened. Sure, parents have been more careful about getting their kids to and from school since Catbird got a little more dangerous, but the danger itself is still so unpredictable. There is no rhyme or reason to the way people are dying. So far it has only been middle-aged people to be outright murdered or suffer unfortunate accidents, which, frankly, are still obviously murders. That could change any day. This fresh murder on top of what David learned this morning? It’s almost too much.
“I hate that you were exposed to that.” he spears a piece of bell-pepper with his fork “The school should have known better. Where were the teachers?”

“Trying to figure out what was going on.” Max watches Dog pass by the window, her eyes trained on a fire-fly “It’s not their fault. It was just kind of a mess. Like, an actual mess-”

“We’re eating, Max.”

He shrugs “Sorry.”

“Anyway, I’m glad Emmanuel took care of you and Neil.”

“I had to sit on a chainsaw.”

David winces “What does he need a chainsaw for?”

“I don’t know. Emmanuel stuff. It might be for his continuing quest to find Sasquatch.”

If there’s one thing Nikki will never be able to take in her stride, it is her father’s conviction that he will someday find a Sasquatch if he just holds the faith. In Catbird, it is generally accepted that if your house shares a boundary with the woods, Emmanuel Wallender will knock over your trash cans or cause strange noises outside at night at least once every year. Newcomers and holiday people inundate the police station with phone calls to complain of blood-curdling howls and grunts chasing them off their front porch, and have to be mollified with stories of wolf-packs and coyotes making mischief. No one would be comforted to learn it is simply the town’s resident Sasquatch lover practicing his baby-squatch calls.

Only two weeks ago he woke Max and David up in the middle of the night by hooting at the top of his lungs at the bottom of the property. David went out armed with his fluffy bathrobe and a shovel, fully prepared to fight a cougar, and instead found Emmanuel crouched next to a pile of fruit he explained as an offering to the Sasquatches to show he meant no harm. It was a full moon. ‘Squatches were more active on full moons, he said.

“I wonder if we should get out of town for a little while.”

Max has to speak around a mouthful of iceberg lettuce “What? Why? The school year just started! I’ve gotta haul ass these next two years, you know, if I wanna go to college without killing us both. They don’t just hand out scholarships to everyone.”

“I think it’s great you’re so committed to getting to college, Max, but there are people being murdered in town. I don’t know if I…” he trails off, his eyes straying from Max to the window, where Dog is crouched and has something cupped in her paws. Going by the faint stuttering glow underneath her paws she has caught one of the fireflies.

Max waits for David to finish his thought. He budges David’s fork off a particularly juicy cherry tomato and pops it in his mouth.

“I’m just worried.” says David at last.

“Me too. There’s dead people around. But it doesn’t have anything to do with us.” Max leans back into his chair with crossed arms.

“We live here. If something happens in a community, it involves everyone in that community. Even just by proximity.”

“So what do you want to do? Leave until the killing stops? It just seems worse because we’re in a
tiny city-

“And because a person was murdered on your school grounds, during school hours.” David cuts in with a snort. “I’m just not thrilled by a school that has security so bad that a murderer not only sneaked onto the grounds, but managed to bring his victim and murdered him on said grounds, and the first thing anyone knew of it was when the body fell.”

“The school’s closed for the rest of the week if that makes you feel better. They gotta do an investigation and stuff.”

David is still agitated “Well I don’t want you staying home tomorrow. Go to Nikki’s or Neil’s or something. Just don’t sit around here all day.”

“Why? I wanted to hang with Dog.”

“Then get them to come over here. Keep your phone on me, text me every hour to let me know you’re alright, and keep Dog close-”

Max clears his throat. David stops, realising he had begun to raise his voice. David slumps back into his seat and puts his face in his hands. He sighs through his fingers.

“We could go to Seattle for the weekend.” says Max quietly.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have shouted.”

“It was more like a stage-whisper.”

“Still.”

Max shrugs. He never quite knows what to do when David is worrying harder than usual. Passing the better part of his life being trained that it is an inconvenience to others to have concerns of his own, that because he was a child what he worried about was far less important than what the adults had to contend with.

Issues of rent, bills and health insurance would have to take priority and Max should know better than to distract them. If he came in with a scraped knee, he knew where the band-aids were kept. If he needed to get somewhere outside of the commute to school and back, he knew how to use the buses, and was always supplied with change for such an eventuality. He could take care of himself and, by all rights, should be taking care of himself to free his parents up for more important things, like keeping a roof over his head and putting food on the table.

Even some six years later, it is still difficult for Max to grasp it is alright to tell David when he needs something. Especially when it comes to situations like these. What would it mean, if he told David he was scared, but it would only scare him worse to leave Catbird in case something terrible happened in their absence? Probably a heart-to-heart. Max would rather toss himself off the roof after the murdered man than do that.

“I could come to work with you tomorrow.”

David looks up at him in surprise “You would hate that.”

“If it’d make you feel better.”

“No, no, there’s no need for that. I mean, there might very well be- but I don’t want to trap you in my staff room all day.”
“I’ll text you every hour.” promises Max. That was close. Even if it does mean bringing David some small measure of comfort, he’d rather toss himself off the roof a second time than spend the whole day lurking in his staff-room, with the other teachers staring at him as they come in and out, the smell of finger-paints thick in the air and the screeching of children always in his ears.

With that problem settled, the night passes quickly. Dinner is finished, the dishes are washed, Dog is enticed inside with the promise of warm cuddles and a tummy-rub. Max retreats upstairs to attack his homework with Dog in tow, who likes to sleep on his bed all stretched out on her back, so it is about the same as having to share his covers with a pre-teen. David slumps on the couch and turns on a competitive cooking show. He waits for an hour before he is sure Max must either be too focused on his homework, or in a group-call with some of his friends to discuss the day’s events. Somehow disinclined to eavesdrop. As an extra precaution David turns up the volume on the TV to drown himself out, and only then does he call Gwen.

She answers after two rings “Hey.”

“I couldn’t tell him.”

“Oh Jesus, David, the kid isn’t made of glass.”

“Something happened at his school today. A man was tossed off the roof of the building he was in. During school hours. I didn't want to pile more stress on top of that.”

Gwen takes a moment to digest this. She starts to speak a couple of times, but cannot think of a proper rebuttal or comfort. Of course Gwen knows about what’s been going on in Catbird. Gwen knows most of the details of David’s life because she constitutes the majority of his support network. If Max does something more troubling than usual, she will be the first to hear about it. If David has doubts about his capability as a parent, Gwen is the one reassuring him over the phone, telling him he is doing his best and will continue to do his best because that’s the kind of person he is. She is quite practiced at comforting him as a consequence of being the only person he is comfortable openly discussing his family problems with. If his colleagues or friends in Catbird knew half of the terrible things that lead Max to live with him, David is not sure they could remain in Catbird any longer. That would suck pretty hard for Max, what, with all of his friends living here.

At last, she manages “You don’t think it was him?”

David sinks into the couch and stares blankly at the TV screen “God, I hope not. No. No, I don’t think so. This started two months ago. He’s only been out for a day as far as we know. He couldn’t even get up here in that amount of time.”

“Do you guys wanna come up for the weekend? I have to work a little bit on Saturday, but we can hang out for the rest.”

The note of exhaustion in her voice makes David smile. The last thing Gwen wants is a small invasion force taking up all the space in her little Seattle apartment. She holds a firm conviction that boys of Max’s age are generally unfit to be in public because they are loud, rude, sex-obsessed and smell like cattle. While Max is different for his better-than-average attention to hygiene and startling lack of interest in sex, Gwen would still rather not spend her down-time with a teen boy cluttering up her private space. Last time they were up in Seattle Gwen tripped head-long over Max’s prayer rug and he ate two pints of her emergency Ben and Jerry’s.

“I think we’ll be fine.” says David. He cannot quite muster the energy to sound convincing, but Gwen accepts it.
And really, would it not be better to stay in Catbird? Super-Guatanamo is all the way down in the South. Catbird is a moderately sized mountain town in the North, and because of its size and the relative ease with which the outside world can be reached, David would not class it as the most sneaky of hiding places. It’s not big enough to get utterly lost within sheer layers of humanity. If David were looking for himself, he would start in the major cities of Canada. He gave some serious consideration to hiding out in Canada and probably would have had Max not had some friends in Catbird already.

After all he had been through, Max needed some friendly faces around him. It was far too convenient that David’s home-town was also Nikki and Neil’s. So here they are. In the most obvious place in the world. And, hopefully, in the last place Cameron Campbell will think to look.
Daniel

Chapter Notes

Sorry this one took so long to get out! School hates me, as does my job, as does life in general, so it was hard to scrounge up the time to do this. Also, a quick note. This fanfic is representing a cult survivor in a super unrealistic light. Real-life cult survivors, people who have left cults of their own volition or somehow otherwise found themselves outside of the cult they formerly belonged to, have done something incredibly difficult and personally dangerous, and deserve all the support and validation of their pain that we can give.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daniel Gregory arrives at his lodgings sometime after midnight. It was a messy and complicated escape this time. He didn’t expect to be disposing of his target so soon. The Millers had wanted Daniel to question him before killing him, but the man had ideas of his own, and tossed himself off a roof while Daniel was transporting him out of the school. As far as messes go this one was a doozy. Daniel has seen some terrible things before. A mass suicide, public beatings, once even a bit of flaying for a cult member who had infringed upon some solemn rule he can no longer remember. But the mess the man made of himself takes the cake. Daniel kind of wanted to take a picture for posterity’s sake. But he can’t afford to leave any evidence behind, anything that would bring the authorities even within sniffing distance of his capture. There is a lot riding on the line. There always is. As usual, the lives and hopes of other people whom Daniel has little interest or care for are all tied up in his business. If it were up to him, he would be doing this on his own, and would have run as far from the Miller’s control as he could in the early days. However, they do have access to a shit ton of resources. The fact that neither of the men are willing to give Daniel their job titles is probably a sign that they function so highly in whichever of the intelligence agencies it is they work for that they are technically not supposed to exist. Who knows? Maybe the Millers are part of the group of lizard-people that secretly run the US government?

Daniel has learned not to look a gift-horse in the mouth. The gift-horse tends to bite people who stick their heads inside to analyse what’s going on. All he knows is this: the Millers want some people dead. Coincidentally, these are people Daniel himself planned on attacking anyway. With the current arrangements he can find, torment and dispose of his targets in a neat and timely fashion. In theory, anyway, as one or two of his latest victims have managed to get away in mid-murder and get their corpses discovered quite publicly and dramatically before Daniel had a chance to step in. They’re building a case against him in Catbird’s little police station. A useless one, he is sure, which will do little but take up space as he finishes his work here.

Daniel steps into the dark of the hallway and fumbles for the light switch for a few moments. Dropping his keys on the little dish by the shoe-rack, Daniel kicks off his shoes and carries them to the sink, where he deposits them to be scrubbed later on. He’ll have to go over every inch of the sole twice with a toothbrush. The toothbrush he’ll burn. Hopefully, if he ever is investigated, they won’t go so far as tearing up his drains to check for fragments of DNA from the crime-scenes. Daniel changes out of the fog-damp clothes he was in during the murder and packs them into the washing machine. No blood on him today. It’s been a good day when he hasn’t got any blood on
him, though usually not a productive one. He intended to murder the man in the woods. Back to the classics. Just a murdered, their victim and a knife to pass the dull hours away. But the dead man was not content to be taken away to be interrogated. He pitched himself off a roof and left Daniel in a bit of a bind with his mysterious employers.

Daniel takes longer than is necessary to brush his teeth and get ready for bed. He would be glad of something even more time-consuming like preparing a meal, but as a rule, Daniel does not eat on the days he kills. It’s good to go in with an empty stomach. Daniel has always found that a touch of physical hunger helps him with the blood-lust. Desperate for sleep but honour-bound to stay awake until one, Daniel switches on the little TV in front of his bedroom and shuffles through the channels, looking for something engaging enough to keep him awake for the next half hour. On one channel he finds the black-and-white version of ‘Night of the Living Dead’. Funny how that movie is always playing late at night.

He lays down on the lumpy mattress, straightens the bed-spread around him, and zones out in the general direction of the TV. It’s been a rough couple of years. Six of them, each one just a little more difficult than the last, starting when the Eternal Children’s compound fell. Of course the years before that were infinitely more awful and violent, but he was so out of touch with his capacity to think for himself, it is honestly difficult to discern the violent from the mundane. It’s a kind of smear across his memories, like he went into a darkened tunnel. He went into the tunnel sometime after his fifteenth birthday, disillusioned with his parents, with the American Dream and its requirements, and came out twenty years old, disorientated, with poison curdling in his gut, and the vague notion that he had just tried to poison a camp full of pre-teens. Those five years are mostly missing. He remembers always being hungry and sore. He remembers never sleeping enough and never being comfortable in the weather. If it was hot, he was too hot. If it was cold, he never had enough bedding or clothing to sleep through the night. And then there is an undercurrent of faith- the idea that a mighty being named Zeemug loved him and wanted to raise him above the pettiness of his human nature. Doctrines and practices which seem ridiculous in retrospect.

The first of his clearest memories is waking up in a hospital bed. For about two weeks, the trauma of the situation had reversed him in age and had him genuinely convinced he was a fifteen-year-old student with a family who did not know where he was and a paper on the Latin American conquest he needed to turn in by next Friday. He had to be persuaded of the truth: he was twenty, he was from a cult and had tried to murder children while posing as a camp counsellor. When he gave his name, the nurses were able to come back with some more information, having researched him with medical and police records.

His parents were dead. Two years after he was absorbed into the Eternal Children, they had died in a pile-up on a Californian high-way while going up and down the coast in search of him. He had sent them a hand-written letter each month, no return address, telling them essentially the same thing each time: he was fine, he being spiritually nurtured, and they would not look for him if they loved him.

This was the shock that convinced Daniel of his reality. Twenty, homeless, orphaned and half-dead from rat poison.

“Helluva teenage experience, huh?” he joked to his nurses. They had liked him and were upset by what he had experienced- the attempted murder of children aside, of course, written off as a consequence of the programming he was now aware of and actively wrestling.

He languished for weeks in that hospital bed before the Millers came to him and explained what they wanted.

The burner phone goes off on the nightstand, surprising Daniel. He turns the volume of the TV down to a dull roar and answers, apprehensive, because the news cannot be good if the Millers are calling him ahead of schedule.
“Hello?”

“What do you call a depressed strawberry?”

Daniel relaxes “I couldn’t tell you.”

“A blueberry!” Hen laughs hard at her own joke “I told that one at work today and they nearly rioted. Ten minutes later, Fatima comes by my desk with this petition signed by everyone that says I’m not allowed to tell jokes anymore.”

“Can I sign it?”

“No, you can’t. Fatima gave it to the boss and she had it framed and hung over my desk. I mean, I guess you can add your signature to the frame when you get back.”

“I’ll do that,” he promises “I can’t wait.”

“Great! Me either! I miss the hell outta you, man, when are you coming back?”

“It’s gonna be soon.”

Hen sighs “Well your definition of ‘soon’ is very different from mine. Sometimes I think you learned to tell time from aliens who, like, operated beyond the laws of our dimension.”

“Why are you up this late, by the way? I feel like I have the right to know why you’re being a night-owl if you’re gonna quiz me about time.”

“Oh, I just couldn’t sleep. This damn quilt Grandma sent us last Christmas is so fucking itchy it woke me up. I don’t know why I got it out of the closet. You can try it on your bed if you want. Maybe I’m allergic to something in it, I don’t know.”

A sudden scream peals from the TV. Daniel jumps, nearly dropping his phone.

“Hen, I’ve gotta go now. I’m waiting on a call from the folks who I work for.”

“Oh,” she says flatly “I guess I’ll free up the line for you then.”

“Sorry Hen. I’ll call you tomorrow. Later.”

“No, it’s alright. Gotta handle the business business as well as the family business. Just know that Fat Cat’s keeping your bed warm while you’re away.”

“Thanks Hen. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Night man.”

Once Hen is gone, Daniel tosses the phone to the other end of the mattress. It always makes him feel worse to talk to Hen when he’s travelling for the unique kind of work the Millers use him for. The last thing he wants when he’s out on a murder-jaunt is a reminder of the life he has in Oregon. Worse than that, he hates that Hen is crossing a line she does not even know exists. It makes him resent her for a reason out of her control. Hen does not know that Daniel has tried to divide himself into two people.

The person who works and lives in Oregon is a sweet, simple person attempting to work through a serious trauma that took away five years of his life. The person who travels out of Oregon at the behest of strange government agents is a separate entity - a man who can cast off his principals so quickly it is as if he never had them at all, who reverts to the savagery of his cult-training because he
had never abandoned it. A man who can watch another man throw himself off of a roof and feel not so much as an ounce of sympathy or pity for the mess of insides that is left at the end of it all. Just a bit of regret that he was not able to do it himself.

He honestly has no idea which of the two Hen just spoke to.

Fortunately, the phone buzzes and saves him from having to ponder it “Hello?”

“Daniel.”

“Yes sir.”

It’s Khalil who has called him today. He thought it might be. When things have come off without a hitch, it’s Winston who checks in on him, preferring to do a bit of light information-gathering that seems almost like the polite small talk exchanged between strangers at a bus station, though Daniel knows it is really a quick, DIY method of gauging his psychological state. Khalil, on the other hand, calls when something has gone wrong. He wants to know the ins and outs of every single mistake Daniel made and what he will do to rectify them in the future. He probes Daniel’s psychological state with all the subtlety of a dog sniffing another dog’s butt, and does it on purpose, to remind Daniel he is always under intense scrutiny.

“So. Do you want to explain to me what happened with Mr Preston today?”

“He got away.” says Daniel flatly. He isn’t even going to try to cover his ass this time.

“I know that. Everybody in Catbird knows that. I want to know what happened.”

Daniel walks him through it. As planned, Daniel entered the school wearing the visitor’s badge of a teaching assistant doing his work experience from a Seattle university. He came in at lunch time and attracted little attention. It’s a technique from his days in the cult, the way he shirks the walls and puts his head down so as not to meet anybody’s eyes. He shrunk his presence to something about as interesting as a gnat’s on a wall and was able to move freely through the school during the free period, and waited in Mr Preston’s private office while the school day ground on. Mr Preston only worked for three periods of a four-period day. He would always come back to his office to gather together some homework or papers that needed marking before he left the school, and today, or rather yesterday given the hour, he found Daniel waiting for him behind the door. Daniel closed the door and put his body weight against it.

To ensure Preston did not scream, he had a gun trained on him. In truth he only intended to use the gun as a club if Preston tried to get away from him. The only weapon that has ever held any charm for Daniel is a knife.

To Preston’s credit, he knew Daniel immediately “Dannie. From the compound.”

“You remember me?”

“Of course I remember you.” Preston spoke gently, though he eyed the gun “I remember everyone from the Eternal Children. I remember what you did for us. For me. I’m so glad to see you, Dannie. Are you thinking of coming home?”

Daniel scoffed “If I was, why do you think I’d be standing in your office with a gun? I’m not here to go back to that fucking cult.”

“That word really isn’t accurate to describe what the Eternal Children represent-”

“Don’t start with me. I’ve been out of the bosom of the cult for long enough to know how sick you
all were. How sick everything was.”

Preston raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, but with a chagrined smile “We really wanted the best for all of you. What happened was what was best for the most people.”
“Except the people you killed. All thirty-five of ’em.”

He paled “We were doing what was best.”

“You were doing eugenics, like every other group of sick fucks that preceded you and every other group that’ll come after you. That’s all it was. A bunch of you old fucks got into a room together and checked off the people who made you feel uncomfortable, or guilty, or who you just didn’t want to make life in the cult accessible for. The best for the cult, huh? Killing off some people on the spectrum? Killing off some people with disabilities? And the people too old to work? Now how does that help anyone but your lazy asses?”

Preston sat down heavily in his office chair. The creak of complaint that came from the wheels was like nails raking down Daniel’s spine. He gritted his teeth against the sensation, the furious fire of anger beneath his skin. He made himself keep talking.

“You know what happened next? I went to a camp full of children and I tried to kill them the same way you killed us in the compound. I was stopped. But I came so close, Senior Preston, I came so close. And now? When I look back on what I almost did, and what I did for the cult? I’m almost the disgusting piece of filth you guys had me pose as anyway.”

Khalil and Winston know the story well, of course, since the case was theirs. Daniel still has no idea what incited the purge. All he knows is that the upper echelons of Eternal Children authority decided they wanted to get rid of certain kinds of their members. A group of people with the qualities that were deemed ‘undesirable’ were gathered together. Mostly it was the oldest members, who were too old to keep up with the demanding lifestyle of the Eternal Children, and the kids of long-term members who had been born into the cult.

Either they were teenagers who’d made rumbles about challenging doctrines or wanting to leave, or they were deemed useless because of some other reason, like being on the spectrum, having a physical disability, having a persistent case of the colds that always swept through the compounds in the winter months... These people were sent from various compounds across the country, and even from over a couple of international borders, and handed over to the senior of Daniel’s compound, who quickly arranged to have them all poisoned. Daniel was told the atrocity as his own work.

Again, why they picked him, Daniel cannot fathom. He was not a lieutenant or even a particularly fervent member of the cult, but he was picked all the same and entrusted with the task of posing as the leader of the cult while the real authorities sneaked out to resume their lives and worship in other compounds.

And that is exactly how it went. Daniel went on the lam while his Seniors crept away. The authorities were so distracted with finding him before he could strike again that the others were able to get away and return to their normal lives. Like Preston, who went on to another compound and continued to work outside of the cult, bringing back his teacher’s pay-check without fail, and generally enjoying his life and his privilege as if he had never ordered the deaths of thirty-five people.

“What are you gonna do, Dannie?”

“Come with me.” said Daniel.

He had Preston walk closely beside him. The muzzle of the gun pressed into Preston’s ribs, concealed in Daniel’s sleeve so that it looked like he was merely helping Preston to carry his papers.
Daniel had plotted out the easiest route by which to leave without attracting attention. When it took them up on the roof, Preston got bold. Perhaps it was the sight of the sky stretching all around him. Perhaps it was the open windows that were letting out the voices of the raucous classes beneath their feet.

There was something crazy in Preston’s eyes when he suddenly made a break for the ledge of the room. Now that Daniel thinks about it, the man was probably gunning for the fire-escape and planned to scramble into one of the classrooms. He didn’t get far enough. Daniel shot him in the back with the gun. Silenced, so the bullet passed between them as a secret. Preston threw his arms out at the edge of the roof. He hung in space for a long moment, his arms wide, as if gesturing that someone on the ground should be ready to catch him.

And he fell.

The noise summoned students to every window. Daniel slipped into the crowd of teachers and students that was quickly clogging up the halls. He surveyed his work from a window. When he was satisfied, he went to find a bathroom with the idea that he should wash his hands, just in case, and was nearly bowled over by a kid making tracks for the girl’s bathroom. Even with just that glimpse of the back of the kid’s head and the six years that had passed since he last saw him, Daniel knew he was looking at Max, and he knew it was Nikki who went charging after him.

“I had to hide.” he finishes “I kind of just had to leave the whole situation behind, or I would have been caught.”

Khalil is quiet for a moment. In the background, he can hear the TV going. It sounds like Khalil might also be watching ‘Night of the Living Dead’.

“If this happens again, there will be consequences.” he says at last.

“No consequences this time?” ventures Daniel.

“Don’t tempt me, Daniel. You fucked up in the most spectacular way I’ve ever seen. Do something like this again and we’re pulling you off the case. Someone else will work through the Eternal Children’s authorities, and you’ll fester in your mouldy little city knowing you missed out on your revenge for the rest of your life. Does that sound fair?”

“Solomon himself couldn’t have made it fairer.”

The line goes dead a second later. Daniel tosses his across the mattress and is pleased when it bounces to the ground. By the time the zombies finally tear through the careful barricades and attack the people cowering inside, Daniel is asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Preston, huh? Now I wonder why that horrible asshole as a name the same as our beloved theater kid? Maybe it's a Junior, Senior situation?
Illicit teenage gathering

Chapter Notes

Me: Well now that university is over, I'm sure I'll have time to write more. So long as nothing goes weirdly and cruelly wrong with my life
Life: Here, hold my beer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Max’s promise not to stay in the house goes out the window about ten minutes after David's car pulls out of the driveway. In fairness to him, it is not entirely his fault- it’s the kind of peer pressure that a Disney reality show would make an episode about, if you replace the potential consequence of a messy death by serial killer with something like an embarrassing viral video. The irony of it is not lost on him. What do his friends want to do the day after the police finally officially announced they were looking at the murders and recent ‘suicides’ as the work of a serial killer? They want to amass a huge group of teenagers, of course, in a semi-isolated house that backs onto some dense woods. Great. No way that can go wrong.

Being that Max’s house is the most far-flung from parents and any other sort of interfering adult presence, they can all breathe easier with the knowledge that their debauchery can go unobserved.

“Uno, bitches!” Nikki slams her final card on the porch with a hoot of triumph.

There are about seven of them gathered up on the porch. Most of them are deeply invested in surely what must be one of the most loud and passionate games of Uno ever played. Max squats on the extreme edge of the porch and blows smoke into the wind while Neil fills his ear with idle, nervous chatter.

Nikki’s victory has sent the rest of the players into a small riot. Ered has picked up the card shuffler and shakes it in the manner of a 60s Bond shaking a hysterical Bond Girl. Nurf (Gaylord, these days) is collecting up the rest of the cards with a sulky expression, muttering something under his breath that his therapist probably would not approve of. Nerris takes the resounding defeat in stride; she was only half paying attention, having brought her DM notebook with her so she can finish off the finer details of what she’s promised will be a rollicking campaign. No one here belongs to her D’n’D campaign, though, so the challenges and puzzles she is promising make about as much sense as a laminated paper-towel.

Preston is checking Nikki’s long sleeves for hidden cards. He takes it as a personal insult that Nikki has defeated him- he’s been taking any sort of defeat, no matter how little, as a personal attack ever since he came in second at the young playwright’s competition in Seattle last month. He will probably remain bristly and raw until he gets another chance to prove himself to the dramatic world. Who knows when that will be? Max has suggested that they drug him and lock him in a linen closet until such an opportunity arises again, but he’s been shot down on the grounds of a human rights violation. That, and nobody wanted to volunteer their linen closet.

“…so I told Arms I didn’t wanna relocate to Texas. I want to stay on this coast, you know? Near California. This is where my family is.”

Neil is referring to the other Neil, who started to go by his surname when he outgrew ‘Space Kid’. Over the years that has been shortened to ‘Arms’ or ‘Armsie’ by everybody in town. Most of the people who know Arms aren’t aware that Armstrong isn’t his first name.
“And MIT?” suggests Max around his cigarette.

“And MIT, yeah.” Neil concedes “I’m just thinking about our future. We’ll be graduating in two years. Both of us are gonna be up to our eyeballs in AP classes and that shit. Not to mention volunteering and stuff so we don’t look like socially stunted morons.”

“You’re one of those things.”

Neil rolls his eyes “Nice to know I can always count on you to say the right thing.”

“And to be the voice of reason.” Max finishes the cigarette and crushes the butt under his shoe. He quickly brushes the little deposit of ash away between the slats of the porch, and stashes the cold butt in his pocket to be disposed of later on. David would absolutely lose his shit if he found out Max was still smoking “You’re talking like you guys are already married. Not everybody marries their high-school boyfriend. A lot of people who do aren’t happy either.”

This is an old argument. In principal, Max has nothing against the idea that Neil and Arms will someday get married, but in practice, the idea of dating only one person for the majority of your life seems impractical and strange to him. How are you going to know what you like if you stick with just that one person? Sure, maybe you like them, but maybe you would enjoy what someone else can offer even more, and you will just never know because you’ve been holding the same schmuck’s hand since you were twelve years old?

“Well it worked for Sonia Sotomayor.”

Max rolls his eyes “You know what doesn’t work? You using Sonia Sotomayor as the basis of all your arguments.”

“What? She’s a good role model!”

“Yeah but that doesn’t mean what works for her will work for you-”

“Excuse me for knowing what I want out of life.”

“Romeo and Juliet thought they knew what they wanted out of life. Look where that got them.”

Distantly, he hears Nikki say “Max is trying to break up Neil and Armsie again.”

“No!” says Harrison in mock horror “I’ve already bought a suit for the wedding!”

Max ignores them “Dead.” he finishes “I’m just saying, Neil, it’s not good to plan your whole life around one person.”

“If you’d been listening to me you would know that’s exactly what I’m trying not to do. I don’t wanna move to Texas even if it’s years and years into the future. You know it can take up to two years for an astronaut to be trained in the US? What if we have to spend all that time at the JSC? I don’t wanna spend two years in Texas- I don’t care if it’s Houston. It’s too hot, too dry, and when it does rain the rain smells like dust.” Neil stops suddenly, frustrated “I’m made for alpine forests, you know? I don’t think I could survive in Texas. I mean, I don’t even want to try. But I don’t wanna break up with him.”

“You know what? Maybe worry about the possibility of having to move to Texas after Arms gets a PhD. I’m pretty sure they won’t let him into space unless he has a PhD. And before that? Fucking graduate. Go to fucking college. Get fucking married. Only then do you worry about dusty rain in Texas.”
Neil opens his mouth, but either thinks the better of it or has run out of retorts. Then Nikki comes over and takes a sniff of the air.
“Cigarettes? Max I thought you were cutting down.”

“I am,” says Max, thinking ruefully of the spent butt in his pocket “That was my cigarette for the day.”

“And you smoked it here? Man, David’s gonna kill you.”

“He won’t be able to tell.”

“You want me to take the butt home? I’ll throw it away there. Dad won’t care if he finds it. He says people my age should take up smoking now while we’re young and malleable, so our bodies can bounce back and stuff from all the tar, and so we can recognise what a shit decision it is early on.”

“Yeah, but your dad also thinks Mothman is responsible for the market crashing.”

There is the familiar sound of glass clinking against glass. Max and Neil turn to see Ered has produced a cooler that neither of them remember her bringing before, and pulled a couple of lite beers out of it, along with a fizzy lemonade for Max. Odds are Max will be the only one to finish his drink. None of them are particularly good at drinking, what, being sixteen and seventeen year-olds who have only ever snaffled beers from barbecues to be furtively sampled later on in their rooms, or had a glass of wine at a family dinner to play at sophistication. For the sake of economy Ered has brought only three beers to be shared out among the six who are going to drink.

“Got a bottle opener anywhere?” she asks.

Max shrugs “Just whack the lids off with a rock or something.”

“And break the bottles?”

“I got it!” Nikki grabs the lemonade from Ered and snaps the cap off the bottle between her front teeth. Neil groans and covers his eyes as she does the same for the three beers.

With a flourish, Nikki places the lemonade in Max’s hand “Your beverage, my good sir.”

“I don’t understand why you had to put your mouth on it.”

Max makes a point of steering clear of alcohol as much as he can. Not just because his holy text recommends it. His experience with alcohol is strictly second-hand, of course. He has only ever absorbed the consequences of other people’s consumption of it. And that was more than enough for him. There hasn’t even been any alcohol at the house since Max moved in. Without being asked, David moved his miniscule stash out of the house after Max made his feelings on the stuff clear- Max trusted David implicitly not to inflict anything physical upon him, though the possibility of emotional damage was still up in the air at that point. The same goes for his friends. He’s more concerned that they will damage themselves or David’s property.

Uno is abandoned. They gather around on the two steps of the porch and pitch little rocks and sticks towards the tree-line in hopes of drawing Dog out. She makes herself scarce during the early and latter parts of the day, but will let herself in through the doggy door to ride out the colder parts of the night when she is not hunting. Large crowds of people are also not her favourite thing. To her kitty mind, any group constituting of more than Max, David and one of either Nikki or Neil is entirely too many people, and she will take her leave. But sometimes she can be coaxed out of the trees if she thinks a game of fetch is on the cards. Sticks and stones to draw her out, then one of her chew toys when she appears to persuade her that they
only mean to play with her. Max doubts she will emerge today. He says nothing, though, to spare his friends’ feelings.

As Max worried it would conversation quickly turns to the dead man.

“What kind of sicko do you think jumps from a school building? I don’t care what kind of tragedy you’re living in. There’s no excuse to subject children to such trauma.” asks Preston. He is particularly interested because he does not attend the same school and has faked an illness to join the gathering today. His grandmother has no idea he is not at school either. This is easily the riskiest thing Preston has done since leaving the camp, and Max can tell he is relishing it.

“I think maybe it was the killer himself.” says Ered “He just couldn’t live with what he did, you know?”

“No, but it makes sense. This guy couldn’t handle what- they- had done, so they toss themselves off a school building. How does that not make sense? It’s a dramatic apology. But it’s, like, also damaging the future generations further because now a lot of us have had to see that nasty shit and it’s traumatised us. Even their death had to be a thing that hurt as many people as possible.”

Max scoffs “Ered, you watch too much ‘Hannibal’.”

She shakes her head at him, taking a sip of her beer like a sage might sip their tea “Maybe you don’t watch enough, Max.”

Ered is just as excited as Preston by the murder or suicide. Largely because she did not have to see it. While she does go to the same school where the accident happened, she was conveniently out for the day due to the lingering, druggy fog of a dental surgery she had the day earlier. While Max and Nikki took turns heaving on the upper floor’s bathroom Ered was wrapped up in a blanket on the couch and watching reruns of ‘Naked and Afraid’ with one of her fathers. She and Preston are childishly bitter at having missed out on what was such an outlandish bonding experience. They are jealous that they did not get the chance to weep on their teacher’s arm, like Neil did, or faint dead on the spot as Nurf did, or just start running the way Armie did, a dead-sprint until he rounded the block next to the school and broke down crying on the curb. He’d been walking out of the quad when the man fell. The back of his shirt went from blue to purple, and he had to wash some stuff out of his hair that people who live out a war-zone will never even see, let alone have to clean off of themselves. Even Nerris got sucked into the hell and she doesn’t even go to their school-she patronises (and passionately loathes) a tiny Catholic school at the edge of town and was only at the other school to borrow their library for a free period. When the anonymous dead person pancaked into the quad Nerris was peacefully drafting up a literary criticism of a HP Lovecraft story.

“It was gross, Ered. You shouldn’t be acting all excited. It’s just kind of…kind of tasteless.” says Neil as if reading Max’s mind.

“I don’t think it’s cool, obviously.” the furtive look in her eye says otherwise “I think it’s weird. Weird that you guys aren’t a little more freaked out by it. I mean, you can be jaded to fake violence all you want but when something like that happens to you, like, where you are, in your life, it becomes scary. I don’t get why you guys aren’t freaking out.”

“We are freaking out.” says Nikki cheerfully.

Max, who considers himself the least jaded person to violence of any kind, nods along “I didn’t sleep well last night.”
“Jesus, who did? It was the most fucking disgusting thing I’ve ever seen. Arms calls me like ten minutes after the dead guy dropped and tells me he’s about to get arrested because he ran away from the crime scene. It turned out the cop was just chasing him down to make sure he wasn’t hurt too because he was covered in—” Neil breaks off with a significant cough and mimes an explosion from his own temple.

“They still haven’t said who it is. I bet it’s somebody from outta town.” says Nerris.

“Why out of town?”

She shrugs, flipping the page of her notebook “Just seems like an out of town thing to do to me. Fall off a school building.”

“Why? I’d’ve called it super fucking personal to drop yourself to your death off a building where your kids and all their friends are memorising the presidents and stuff. Obviously he hates this town. He might as well have taken a shit in the town hall.” insists Ered.

She is still devoted to her theory that the as of yet ungendered jelly splat in the quad is the same serial killer who has been faking suicides all over towns. Why she thinks this, though, Max has no idea. Ered can make some truly strange leaps of logic.

“If you want my opinion? I think it was a murder. But let’s pretend for a moment that the dead person is the murderer. It would be impersonal to throw yourself off a school in the middle of the day. All you’d gather then is an audience. What kind of message does it send to drop yourself to death in the middle of a school where all the kids can see you? It’s not a ‘fuck you’ to the system or the town or even us, the people, it’s an invitation. The dead person wanted us to celebrate their death. They wanted to be commemorated and gazed upon in death. Not as an object of beauty, but as an object of abject, gross interest. All you can do with a body that fucking dead is stare at it and wonder at the sheer improbability of what’s inside of humans.”

Preston finishes his monologue with a gasp for breath and plucks a beer out of Nerris’s hand, taking a deep swig.

Max claps his first two fingers together like a spectator at a golf tournament “And when can we expect the play that monologue definitely came from? A spring box-office?”

“Oh, I wanna book advance tickets!” grins Nikki.

“I’ll have a stab at auditioning for lead man, if you haven’t got one yet,” offers Neil with a frosty note in his voice. He cannot resist joining in with the jibing and the taunting, even though his boyfriend is laid up in bed with a case of trauma that could very well turn into fully-blown PTSD if he doesn’t get into some counselling fast.

Preston laughs indulgently. He reaches for Neil as if to give him a punch, but his phone goes off in his pocket. He digs it out and immediately adjusts his voice by several decibels “Gram-gram! I’m at school- no, I am, I am, I promise!”

His face pales. Nikki and Nerris exchange sympathetic glances. Neither of them have ever been able to get away with playing hooky either. Emmanuel is absolutely determined his girl should get a solid education under her and move on out of Catbird some day- anything that will keep her from ending up like him, he says, a tired backwoods lumberjack-type whose greatest joy in life, apart from his daughter of course, is the idea that he might one day see a Bigfoot with his own eyes. Nerris’s parents are just pissy if she doesn’t make use of the expensive school they managed to get her into.

Flustered, Preston continues “Ok, so I’m not at school! What’s the problem? My friends are traumatised. I need to be here for them in their hour of tragedy. It’s not like I missed anything
Then his face warps. He is trying to pull several different expressions at the same time, and the jumble of emotions ripple and melt together, like a couple kinds of wax mixing into the same puddle. He asks his grandmother to repeat herself twice.

When he is satisfied he has heard her correctly, he rises from the porch with a clenched fist.

“And they’re sure it’s him?”

Max looks at Neil in askance. Neil shrugs, his face contorted with worry.

“Ok. I’ll be home in a couple minutes. Are the police there? Alright. Tell ‘em I’m on my way. I have some friends here if they need an...an alibi or whatever.”

Nerris jumps to her feet “Are they accusing you of something?”

Preston gestures for her to be quiet.

“Tell the police to watch out for calls from the EC. They might want to talk to us. We still have a couple of his things, right? Alright. I’ll be home in twenty.”

When Preston returns the phone to his pocket, all eyes are on him. Nobody even notices that Dog has appeared at the edge of the woods to watch for one of her chew toys.

“Well.” Preston shrugs helplessly “The dead guy at the school is my dad.”

Chapter End Notes

Ignore Max. Sonia Sotomayor is a good role model for most things in life.
Should have stayed in the morgue, buddy

Chapter Notes

This chapter describes an extended panic attack: brought to you by the extended panic attack that is my life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Whatever the police department is expecting of Preston, it certainly wasn’t an entourage of his closest friends cramming into the police station behind him. The veterans of Camp Camp have really come out in full force and stuff the police department’s tiny waiting room to the gills with anxious mutterings and the cynical, disillusioned scowls of young people who do not quite trust the people in charge of the situation.

Arms beats them to the police station. Not difficult, considering how slowly the one car they had at their disposal moved with seven people crammed into a five-seater. To avoid incurring the police’s wrath at exceeding the number of seatbelts with the number of passengers, the two smallest of the gathering agreed to curl up in the trunk and pretend to be spare tyres.

Max didn’t think he was going to end up spooning Nerris today, but it wasn’t the worst part about being stuffed in the trunk—what really got up his nose was how the multitudinous collection of No Fear Shakespeare books stacked up in the trunk would find a way to whack him in the face no matter how hard he protected himself. He came up sweaty and irritable, but put on a calm face for Preston.

As soon as Arms sees Preston through the glass-front of the station, he runs out into the parking lot and gives him a hug. His eyes are already wet.

“I’m alright.” says Preston in a tone that Max recognises as one he himself employed when a teacher was asking after his bruises, back when he still lived with his mother and father “I’m alright, really. Is my grandmother in there yet?”

She is not. It takes a long time for the Dowager Goodplay to rock up to the station. By that time, Preston has already gone into the morgue where the majority of his father’s body had been scooped onto a metal slab. He could tell the police had tried to pad out the shape underneath the blankets with something like jackets or seat cushions to create the illusion it was still a human-like body under there. The mortician was very careful about drawing the blanket down only a little bit. Preston saw his father only from the chin upwards. It was the first time in a year that Preston had looked his father in the face with the acknowledgement that it was him.

Max came in for moral support. It was silently and unanimously decided that Max would be the best candidate to provide Preston with the appropriate kind of reassurance because Max had gone through something like this before. Alright, so he had never been into a morgue before, and he had never been forced to identify the bodies relevant to his own situation. It was pretty clear to whom the dead bodies belonged to in Max’s situation.

In fact, Preston’s father’s dead body is the first one Max has ever seen. Not the first one he has ever been close to. But David wouldn’t let him look.

“We’re estranged,” Max explains to the mortician and attending cop “I mean, he worked at my school for the last…I wanna say seven months. But it was kind of a coincidence. He didn’t do it to be closer to me or anything. I don’t actually know why he did it.”
“So you’re not on speaking terms?” asks the cop.

Max has his arms crossed and lurks at the back of the frosty room. Even though he is staring at his feet, he can feel the mortician’s eyes on him. Max knows her vaguely. He sometimes serves her at the grocery store. She always smells of antiseptic and a heavy perfume she must use to cover up the strange stink in the morgue- the stink of death, Max supposes, though if he didn’t know any better he would take it to be congealed meat or freshly turned loam. The mortician looks at him strangely whenever they have an occasion to interact. She must be able to smell it on Max. The death. The perfume of time has not done enough to scrub the smell from people who know what to look for.

“Yes, like I said, we’re estranged.”

“How is it that you’re estranged from your father while he works in the school you go to?” pushes the cop “Didn’t you take a class from him?”

“I didn’t take any of the classes he taught.”

“What about substitute classes? Surely he subbed for a couple of your classes.”

Preston shakes his head “Listen, ask my friend. This is the first he’s ever hearing that I even had a parent at school. Right Max?”

Max looks up. He knows to look the cop right in the eye “Right. I had no idea.”

Maybe the guy’s messy, splattery death robbed Mr Whitman of any resemblance to his son, but he really does not look like Preston. There’s a trace of pinched cruelty in the slackening features that suggests this man spent a lot of time gritting and gnashing his teeth, swallowing the filthy things he wanted to spew at the people around him. Max tries to remember what Mr Whitman looked like in life, and cannot. Mr Whitman was mainly a teacher for the grade two below Max and his friends’. They had little occasion to interact or cross each other’s’ paths. Even if Max had gotten a good look at him, had really committed Mr Whitman’s face to memory, he never would have guessed he was the man for which Preston was named. Preston only mentioned his father in passing, and never to say anything good about him.

“Let’s just say I could write a really hard-hitting, gritty play about my childhood with that man.” he once told Max.

Max bit back a retort that he could write a grittier play with his own childhood. It was better that he not compare his own experiences to others, as David said, because sharing childhood trauma (when he was ready, of course) should not be done in the spirit of competition.

“You’re asking a lot of questions about my relationship to my father. I’ve told you about all there is to tell you. I don’t know what else there is to tell you. I barely knew him. We barely spoke.”

The cop stashes a little notebook in his pocket. Max was so transfixed by the corpse’s face that he didn’t really notice what was going on in the room.

“You have to understand. When someone dies, we’re naturally going to question their family members whether or not that family is close to them.”

“If you want information, you’re better off asking my dad’s…” Preston glances at Max. He seems to steel himself, then says “My dad’s religious organisation. The reason my father and I are estranged is because we left the cult he belonged to.”

Max chokes back a cry of shock, managing to make it sound like an odd honk of approval, as if he
has heard this story many times before.

The cop’s interest is piqued “Which one?”

“They’re called the Eternal Children. I’d rather not talk about it in here.”

Preston whirls on his heel, grabbing Max by the wrist, and fairly sprints out of the morgue. When the warmer air of the rest of the station washes over them, Max realises he has been shivering the entire time they were in the morgue. He is not sure if it is from the cold necessary to keep the corpses fresh or if it was the corpse on the table that has him shivering. Max twists himself out of Preston’s grasp, and hangs onto the back of Preston’s jacket to keep up instead.

The cop scrambles to keep up. His expression is irritable. A name pops into his head: Officer Jensen. A foggy memory comes to Max then, of a long-ago night in the first few months of his time in Catbird. He and David had made a late-night trip to the grocery store. Max lagged a bit behind David as he searched for something in his pocket. A piece of gum maybe. Then suddenly this man’s face was hanging over him, and he has being held roughly by the arm, and asked what business he had following David.

Max remembers that as the first time he really saw David lose his temper. His voice went low and angry. His arms stayed flat as his side. His eyes were narrowed and livid. Officer Jensen thought he was saving a hapless David from a would-be assailant and cited the fact that Max’s hand was in his hoodie pocket as reason enough to stop him. Had Officer Jensen been anyone but a police officer Max genuinely believes David would have knocked him into the gutter with the kilogram bag of rice they had just gone out for.

“Ya Allah.” says Max under his breath. He hopes Officer Jensen doesn’t recognise him. The kind of guy that stops brown pre-teens trailing behind their legal guardians probably couldn’t tell Max apart from the next person of colour, Hispanic, Native American or otherwise. Much less recognise him later on.

Even so Max scoots ahead of Preston and buries himself in the crowd milling about in the waiting room. He finds Neil and, as his throat constricts, tugs on his sleeve “I don’t know how much longer I can stay here.”

Neil turns to him “Do you need to leave?”

“Probably. I don’t know. It’s just- I just stared at a dead body. I shouldn’t’a gone back there. I thought I could do this because I’ve done this shit before but- it’s just, it’s digging some shit back up, I think. I might need to leave. Now.”

To Max’s horror, the others have begun to notice there is something wrong with him. Nerris asks him if he needs a paper bag to breathe into. Nurf offers him an aspirin. Max refuses their offers, and shrugs away from Ered when she tries to give him a side-hug. He has resigned himself to having an ugly panic attack in the middle of the damn police station when Nikki swoops down, resplendent and fierce as an avenging angel as she brandishes Arms’ car keys, and steers him out of the station.

“Take care of Preston for us!” she shouts.

Nikki practically flings Max into Arms’ car. It is only thanks to his quick reflexes that he ducks in time to not crack his head on the car as she shovels him inside, then crawls over him to get to the driver’s seat.

“Where do you want to go?”
Max fumbles with the latch to the glovebox “Away.”

“Away we go!” Nikki peels out of the parking lot and narrowly misses side-swiping a police cruiser. She pokes her head out the window and shouts “Sorry! Friend’s having a panic attack!”

The glovebox bangs open onto Max’s bunched-up knees. He sorts through the stack of CDs and thin napkins from fast-food places until he finds a mangled blister-pack of drugstore painkillers lurking at the very back of the mess. Max downs two in a mouthful of warm and flat soda- who knows how long that has been sitting in the cupholder.

Painkillers, of course, have no actual medical or scientific effect on panic attacks, but popping one or two suggests to Max that he is doing something productive against the panic instead of being swept away by it. Never mind that he has only taken what is about 50% sugar pill and 50% effective medicine. It just makes him feel calmer. David gets this look on his face every time he watches Max do it, like Max has just busted out an opium pipe or stuck a dirty needle into his inner arm. But he keeps the cabinet stocked with one box of the finest painkillers the budget pharmacy can offer and does not say anything when he sees Max take one, except to ask him if he is alright.

“So is this a ‘shut up Nikki’ panic attack or the other kind?” says Nikki, cheerfully running a red-light.

“I want my goddamn cat.” he mumbles.

“Did I ever tell you about the time David moved here? Like, ten hundred thousand years ago, back when man rode astride the back of the mighty dinosaur and Cthulhu and his foul host of buddies had a regime of cosmic evil butt-fucking all things good and holy? He came here about two years before we all went to Camp Camp. And people were so excited, like, oh the old Luna place is finally gonna have somebody in it after all this time!”

Max has heard this story a thousand times. It is all the more comforting for it- like the white noise of a surf, or the whisper of static at the edge of a radio station.

“All the older people loved to talk about what the Lunas were like. They were millionaire-eccentric types on a middle-class budget. I mean, fuck, you still are! You have this wild cat that just kind of comes in and out of your house like a friendly burglar. I never knew what stories to believe about the Lunas ‘cos they all sounded so damned fantastic. I mean, I can believe that people are weird. My dad likes to go through the trash at the rangers’ station to look for Bigfoot evidence he thinks they’re trashing.” a wedge of tongue pops out of the corner of Nikki’s mouth as she makes another wild turn, and returns the one-fingered salute of another driver “But the way people talked about the Lunas you’d think they were the Mansons and the Addams in one. And then David left when he was a teen, and his weird-ass folks just kind of languished for a couple of years- suddenly David comes back, and he’s all grown up and adult and has a teaching degree. And it’s just weird. And it gets weirder, cos not two years later he gets this kid from out of goddamn nowhere.”

“This horrible kid.” adds Max.

Nikki grins at him “This kid with crazy eyes and a mouthful of cusswords he ain’t afraid to break out on even the cuddliest of grandmas if they rub him the wrong way.”

“Maybe if they asked before they started touching my hair. I’m not an animal at a petting zoo.”

“David won’t say where he came from. So this rumour starts that the whole reason David left all those years ago is because he got some poor Seattle girl knocked up and now he has to go be with the baby. Then that theory goes out the window because this little psycho David brought home is ten, not eight. So the next idea is that the old Mr Luna got somebody pregnant instead. David came
back to Catbird alone the first time to get the place ready for the kid, but there was trouble with the
mom- there was a court battle. David won the custody battle because of course he did, he’s an angel
among men.”

They are rumbling up Max’s driveway now. Nikki clips the mailbox as she negotiates the steep
driveway.

“And then it turns out David just adopted him. That’s all. Boring old adoption, no drama to speak
of.”

“No drama that’s any of their business.” corrects Max. The metallic taste of panic has begun to fade
from his throat at last. The fire in his blood cools and congeals in aching spots all over his body.
Having a panic attack is hard work.

“The real drama is how bad everybody wants to know what’s going on with the Lunas. Especially
the new Luna.”

“The new Luna wants his cat.” says Max.

Dog is lounging on the porch. She opens her eyes to slits when she hears Max crunching across the
gravel, but remains unaffected and disinterested when he lays down beside her and puts his face in
her fur.
The relief is instant.

A tear leaks out of the corner of his eye. Max wipes it off on Dog’s flank. She begins to purr
reluctantly.

“Max.”

He does not raise his head “Now it’s a ‘shut up Nikki’ moment.”

“Max!” she says more urgently. He hears her step forwards “Get up!”

Max pushes himself up onto his elbows. Only now does he realise the front door is open. A shadow
falls across him.

“You heard the man.” says Cameron Campbell “Shut up, Nikki.”

Chapter End Notes

Note about surnames: I gave all the characters except for Preston the surnames of their
voice actors. Max’s is Luna as well, though, because he has some pretty good reasons
for wanting to abandon associations with his birth family. Also I know his name is
'Maxwell' in the series cannon, but according to the notepad with some short notes for
this story (which I generally update in the middle of the night when I get such a hot-shit
idea I just have to get it down) his name is 'Manajith' in this story. But you know also
'Max' because teachers will die if they don't have access to some Anglicized names in
the classroom.
Wounds, old and new

Chapter Notes

Violence warning for this chapter. Expect a little more violence from here on out because, you know, things are actually happening now.

By the time classes have finished for the day, snow has begun to fall. It’s the light sugar-spun stuff that piles up into drifts and makes roads a nightmare and turns life into hell for as long as it lasts on the ground. David stretches in the hallway and zips his coat up to his chin with a fortifying yawn. The coat he brought against the chill of this morning won’t quite be enough for the snow, but he should be fine as long as he turns up the car’s heater. It will be time to get the spare blankets down from the closet. The snow’s going to chase Dog inside during the day, so she will expect her basket to be set up again at the window. While Dog is very much still a wild animal that hunts for herself and maintains a territory in the woods, she still expects that for the wicker laundry basket to be piled with blankets and placed in the love-seat on the second floor for her snoozing pleasure.

Max gets better at weathering the cold every year. His first winter in Catbird, he wore enough in the way of winter gear that he looked like he was on his way to Antarctica. His friends teased him even as they donated spare coats and jackets to keep him from freezing.

Though Max claimed he was sure he would freeze to death before March rolled around, he still found the strength to build a giant snow phallus on the front doorstep so David couldn’t get out of the house. He did it about seven times over the course of the winter. Each time the phallus grew more anatomically correct and more embarrassing for it. David had to put his foot down when Max started adding veins.

“I don’t want to get in the way of you and your creative expression,” David remembers saying as he took a shovel to the seventh snow penis “But can you find a shape that’s a little less confronting? And don’t put it somewhere that keeps me from coming and going.”

The next day Max built a snowman designed to look like Freddy Krueger and set it peering through the kitchen window. He still relishes in telling the story of how he knew his plan had worked when David’s high-pitched scream woke him up that morning.

With a folder of third-graders’ essays under his arm, David trudges out into the snow.

Cameron Campbell wants to talk. It has been a long time, according to him, since he has had a captive audience and he wants to make the most of the one he has now. He makes Nikki and Max sit down at the kitchen table while he leans up against the counter like he’s owned it for years. Their phones he took from their pockets and put into a linen closet where they would not be disturbed by them, should either ring. Dog understands that something is off in the room, but cannot quite figure out whom she should take offense to. For the moment she is content to get up on the table (where she is definitely banned from sitting) and doze in front of Max, taking advantage of the fact that this newcomer does not seem to know the house rule of no-cats-on-table.

Campbell has Nikki and Max fold their hands in front of them and makes them sit on opposite sides of the table so that they are just out of the reach of each other. Campbell lets Max play with Dog’s fur so long as he can see where Max’s hands are- he seems to think it will keep Dog calm if Max is
acting calm.

When Campbell starts to talk, it becomes apparent he has been rehearsing a speech of this sort for a long time. This was not the audience he expected, however, so Nikki and Max are essentially observing another rehearsal.

“Hard work is one of the best things a person can claim to have accomplished in their life-time. I’m very proud to say I have worked very hard for everything I used to have. There was a lot of it, you know, not just the camp and the minor league baseball teams. I had properties all over North America and Canada. I was all set to start expanding south of the border, but things got a little hairy with a Russian friend of mine. How old do you think I am?”

Max is surprised by the question. He glances at Nikki. Six years ago Campbell was a well-preserved, handsome man who could have been in his late fifties or early sixties, but Max wouldn’t have been able to guess that looking at him now. Whatever he has been going through in the last six years shows dramatically on his face. Marked with the sort of deep lines and wrinkles which come from years of constant stress, and an angry gloss over his eyes that suggests he is not entirely present in the room. His eyes are trained on some distant figure of his past. Somebody who wronged him. Somebody whom he wants very badly to hurt.

“Sixty.” blurs Nikki.

She is flattering him. Campbell is clearly an older man now, an effect exacerbated by the sour leather look of his skin.

Campbell shakes his head “Not for a long time.” he turns his unnerving eyes on Max “What do you think?”

Max plays with the tip of Dog’s ear “Sixty-five.”

“Close enough. I’ll tell you, I’m much, much older than I thought I would ever be. And not physically. I mean in here.” he taps the side of his head with a finger missing its first joint “Hard work does that to you, especially when what you worked for gets taken away from you. I sweated and bled and wept for decades before either of you were born for what I lost. Do you know how that felt? To have it all taken away by children, who barely understood the meaning of work?”

“Pretty bad.” suggests Nikki.

“Pretty bad,” he repeats “Tell me, what is the worst you can ever remember feeling? What is the lowest moment of your life to date? Don’t lie to me. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

Max doubts it. His own father used to say the same thing with that same urgent, semi-crazed tone, and Max could lie figure-eights around him.

“My first day of Camp Camp.” says Max softly.

Campbell nods sagely “That makes sense.”

Max bites the inside of his mouth to keep himself from laughing in Campbell’s face.

David’s regular way home requires him to drive past the police station pretty early in the drive. He is in the habit of staring absently into the glass-front of the station lobby, on the off-chance that Max might have ended up there. Of course proper protocol demands that the station contact David should they arrest his son, but David cannot get rid of the itch to look every time he passes by, just in case.
This is why he sees his former campers all amassed in the parking lot of the station.

“Dangit,” he mutters, turning into the station parking lot “Manajith Luna, you better not be getting arrested right now.”

Neil recognises the car and peels away from Arms, opening David’s door before David has put the car into park “Thank fuck! An adult! We were about to call Arms’ uncle, and you know what he’s like.”

“What’s going on Neil?”

A shrill shriek from the knot of kids. Nerris charges David and flings herself into his arms, almost knocking him over the hood of the car “It’s awful! Poor Preston’s been in there for an hour and a half! They said they were gonna let him out a half hour ago- Ered just went in to see what was going on, ‘cos they have Grandma Goodplay in there too and I think they might think Preston did it!”

Preston? Now there’s a surprise. David is ashamed by the slight relief he feels at the knowledge that it is Preston in there rather than his son. God knows Max has enough problems without getting arrested- though, considering what Max has proved himself capable of in past years, David would not be all that surprised if the law enforcement were obliged to do so.

“What’s going on?”

Nerris looks up at him with wet eyes “The guy that fell off the rooftop. It was Preston’s dad and the police might think Preston did it.”

A feeling not unlike being doused with ice water comes over David. Someone is dead. Someone else, an innocent person, David knows in his heart, is accused, and even if he is absolved that guilt is going to mould itself to him…

But he takes a deep breath and pushes the thoughts back. Now is not the time for a breakdown. “I think you had better take me inside.”

“Now imagine that feeling multiplied a thousand times and you’ll understand what it was like for me to be taken to SG. I had no business being there!” suddenly Campbell strikes the countertop. Dog’s ears twitch. She lifts her head and trains her narrowed eyes on Campbell. He takes no notice.

“I was in there with domestic terrorists! The kinds of criminals they don’t let the news report about. The heads of human trafficking rings. The worst sort of pornographers. The distributors of snuff films. The sort of people this government doesn’t want to admit they allow to exist in this country- the kind with too many friends in high places to be tried successfully. It was an absolute hellhole. I had no business being there! Nothing I have done- not one of the things I have done was bad enough that I should be anywhere near that place. But I was. And somebody is gonna damn well answer for that.”

Max has spent too much of his life dealing with loud, angry men with violence in their eyes to challenge him. These sort of men (people, actually, because in Max’s experience, women can hit just as hard) panic if they think their victim, or audience, is getting something like the upper hand. They want utter subjugation. They want to feel in total control of their situation and everyone else. So Max lowers his head and lets himself tremble. He is not particularly afraid of Campbell. In fact, he finds him slightly ridiculous to be posturing and proselyting in the kitchen of an ex-employee, and would have made an escape attempt a long time ago were it not for the gun holstered on Campbell’s hip.

“Now,” Campbell takes a step closer, causing Dog to tense under Max’s fingers. Nikki makes a
choked noise at the back of her throat. A whimper or a growl “How do you think I want to be repaid?”

“I don’t know.” says Max. Nikki echoes him a second later through gritted teeth.

“I worked hard for what I have. It wasn’t always honest work. But you think anybody ever got successful by working honest? No, they didn’t, because it’s impossible to get through your life without screwing people over. I’m not ashamed to admit that I’ve fucked plenty of people over. But you know what?” his hand seems to twitch uncomfortably near his gun “It was worth it. And it’ll be worth it to fuck over the people that did this to me to get it all back again. Which one of you actually lives here?”

Max raises his head just a little bit and nods.

“Exactly what are you to Davey? A pity project? A live-in maid? I mean, I know Davey loves kids, but I hope he doesn’t love them like that—”

“He adopted me. I’m his son.”

Nikki looks at Max out of the corner of her eye. Max cannot remember if this is the first time he has referred to himself as David’s son out loud. He introduces himself by his adopted surname and has David listed as ‘Pater’ in his contacts. But that is it.

Campbell leans on the counter again to digest this information “So what time does your old man come home?”

There is already a significant amount of confusion in the police station and David’s arrival only compounds it. He swoops in like an avenging angel, still smudged from the herd of finger-painting toddlers he wrangled for most of the day, his no-nonsense teacher voice at full volume. Even on police officers the effect is stunning. They part like water in front of him and allow him as far as Grandma Goodplay, who promptly enlists him to rescue Preston from questioning. At this point Preston has already been in questioning for an hour and forty-five minutes, including the time it took for him to identify the body.

David doesn’t have much time to think about the fact that Max followed Preston into the morgue, for some reason, and what the consequences of that might be. Much as he is proud of Max for supporting his friend David is also a bit frustrated because he spent so much energy in the past shielding Max from dead bodies.

David gets as far as the door behind which Preston is being questioned. Instead of a two-way mirror they have a live security feed in the room adjacent. Every now and then David leans back and glances into the room for a glimpse of Preston, sweaty from the over-zealous heater the station uses, and tired from the monotony of being asked the same questions over and over again.

“But do you consider him a suspect?” David asks the officer stationed in front of the door, presumably to keep David from barging in and carrying Preston out over his head like King Kong with a blonde.

“Not yet,” says the officer, whom David vaguely recognises as the woman who hands out random breathalyser tests on Friday nights in front of the pass to the bigger city “But he is a person of interest.”

“This happened during class-time, didn’t it? My son very vividly described leaving his classroom to
go out and look at what had happened. Preston would have been in the classroom the same time this happened. If you check with his teacher I’m sure you’ll find that’s true.”

Grandma Goodplay nods firmly. Since upgrading her hearing aids, she has been able to hear with increasing accuracy “And anyway, unless you charge him with something then you can’t hold him. And even if you did charge him, in this state you can’t hold him for more than 24 hours. Now are you gonna charge him with something?”

“Word of mouth alibi aren’t always airtight-” begins the officer.

Grandma Goodplay rocks up on the tips of her toes, leaning heavily on her cane to facilitate the move “Now you listen to me. Before you do anything to Preston you go and investigate his fucking alibi. You go investigate who my son had for enemies and friends- and believe me, it’s gonna be more enemies than friends. You go investigate my son. I can put you in touch with a couple other survivors of the Eternal Children. Ask them what my son was like. Then you’ll get an idea of why somebody would want to kill him. But until you can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it was my Preston, you get the fuck out of my way.”

The officer steps to the side.

Grandma Goodplay turns to David “Be and dear and get that door for me? It looks a little heavy.”

Dog is sitting at Max’s feet now. He wants to sink his fingers into her fur again, but Campbell will definitely not allow him to put his hands beneath the table. Her eyes are bright and trained on Campbell in the way she’ll look at a dog when she and Max are out walking together.

“I did a lot for that kid, you know. I never once made him talk about what happened with Jasper McElroy.”

The name sends a shiver up Max’s spine. He has learned not to bring Jasper up in front of David. Arms wants to talk about him every now and then, for some reason convinced that the kid they met once on Campbell’s private island is somehow removed from the same plane of existence as them. But Max has strictly forbidden discussion of the mysterious Jasper under his roof.

Nikki is just as surprised as Max to hear the name. Her hands curl to fists on the table. Of course Campbell wouldn’t know about the no-Jasper rule, but it is blasphemy all the same to utter the name in Max’s house.

The opportunity proves too tempting for her to resist “Why wouldn’t you talk about saving a child? You like to brag, right?”

Campbell lets out a short, harsh bark of laughter that startles them both. Dog’s fur stands on end. She lets out a low growl Campbell does not seem to hear.

“I don’t know what he told you. But he obviously lied.”

“He told us that you didn’t want to find Jasper.” says Nikki staunchly “You wanted to go back to- to your creepy business, or whatever, and David was the one who made you keep going.”

“Of course I didn’t want to keep going. Nobody should have to look at what happens to a person when bears get to them. Bears go for the softest part of the body first, you know, and that tends to be the ass.”

“Jasper didn’t die.” says Max. Even as the words leave his mouth, he realises he is just repeating a lie...
David has told him many times over the years.

“He did.”

“He didn’t.”

“He did. I’ve seen plenty of people die, but that kid died in the most pain I think I’ve ever seen someone go. You have Davey to thank for that.”

Max stands up so fast he knocks his chair over. Nikki grabs his arm, but he shakes her off “Shut your fucking mouth!”

The smile on Campbell’s face is the cruellest thing Max has ever seen “He stuck around, too. Normal person would want to put as much distance between themselves and a dead kid they helped to kill as possible, but Davey couldn’t help but hang around. I think it made him happy to know he had power like that. He came back every summer. When he was too old to camp, he got a job as an assistant counsellor. When he was too old for that, he became a full counsellor and stuck around until the whole place got torn down. How do you explain that?”

“I-I don’t- he’s not a fucking murderer!”

Dog’s growl is louder this time. She has crouched, her tail flicking back and forth anxiously.

“Are you sure?”

Max falters “He’s never hurt anybody.”

“Max,” Nikki tugs him towards her and wraps an arm around his waist “Come on. Calm down.”

“You better listen to your friend, Max.” Campbell takes the gun from its holster.

Preston is bundled out of the station and into his grandmother’s car before he can even figure out how they convinced the police to let him go. While Grandma Goodplay revs the engine of her incongruous Jeep and puts the heater on at full blast, Preston leans out the window to side-hug his friends. Nerris is still crying- once she started she couldn’t persuade herself to stop, which has set Harrison off so they are both crying at each other. Nurf (Gaylord, these days) makes Preston promise to call him if he needs to talk about it. Ered looks broody and protective, more like she is shielding Preston from a bullet than giving him a hug when she leans in for one. David thinks it is heart-warming, but he cannot focus on it as much as he would like to because Arms and Neil are desperate for his attention.

And for good reason.

“So he hasn’t answered any of your calls.”

“Neither him or Nikki.” confirms Neil. He has passed an arm through his boyfriend’s and is practically taking Arms off the ground with some nervous bobbing up and down “I wanted to go and see if they were ok, but we didn’t have a car-”

He is interrupted by the report of Grandma Goodplay’s horn. She pops her grey head out of the other window “Get in, boys! I’ll drop you off!”

“You boys go ahead. I’m sure Nikki and Max are fine. I’ll go on ahead and see what’s got them so distracted.”
Arms nods uncertainly “They’re probably playing with Dog.”

In the snow, David adds mentally, thinking of how Dog is most definitely lurking in the window seat at this moment. What the hell could have shut Max and Nikki up? Normally he can’t peel Max off of his phone for more than fifteen minutes at a time, and they go quiet for almost two hours? David’s stomach is twisted up with fear but he doesn’t let it show on his face. He is calm as he gets into his own car and pulls out of the parking lot, waving goodbye to the kids and Grandma Goodplay. It is only when he has gone around the corner from the police station that his foot gets heavy on the gas pedal.

Max can feel the edge of panic coming back to him. If he loses it now, the plus side is Dog will most definitely attack Campbell. Self-centred wild thing that she is Dog considers this house and its occupants a part of her territory (hence the reason she sprays the furniture) and will defend it from aggressors of any species. On the downside, Nikki might take the cue from Dog and lunge for Campbell’s jugular. The last thing Max wants is both of his girls going against Campbell’s gun with only their teeth and claws.

So he forces it down. He puts his palms flat on the table and lowers his head. He closes his mouth. “You don’t want to know the things Davey’s done. There are things he’s done for me. There are things he did for himself that are just as bad. You’re living with a very bad man, Max.”

Max trains his eyes on the grain of the table “I know what bad men are like. Women too. David is nothing like them.”

“You’re too young to know what you’re talking about.”

“Shut up.” says Nikki suddenly. She stays in her seat, though she looks ready to spring “You don’t know anything about Max so don’t start talking like you do. Just because you’ve seen some shit you think that makes you better and stronger than everybody else. You know what? Trauma doesn’t give a shit about your age! Trauma doesn’t give a shit about your money or your house- it can hit anybody, not just creepy old fucks with porn mansions and minor league baseball teams. You think you’re big shit? You’re pointing a fucking gun at a pair of kids. Super-Gitmo must have been real fucking rough to teach you to treat children like this. I bet you were the scranniest fucker in there. I bet the other guys had some real fun with you in the showers. I bet you were Shawshanked until you couldn’t sit down so don’t come in here like you’re invincible-”

Campbell moves far faster than Max thought he would be able to. The gun flashes silver across Nikki’s face. Max can hear something in her crunch as her eye-socket gives way. She is laid out flat on her back before Max can scream in protest.

Then Campbell turns on him. It has been a long time since Max has had to fight back against someone with such a size advantage on him. But the instincts are there, an indelible muscle memory, and cause him to ragdoll as Campbell strikes him across the face with his knuckles. The second Max hits the ground he is crawling in the direction he thinks Nikki is. At last Dog lunges. Max looks up through his hair and sees her teeth sink into the forearm raised to protect Campbell’s face.

The gun again. It hits Dog on the top of the head. She lets go and immediately reattaches herself to Campbell’s leg. The blood from the first wound spatters down on Max’s back.

“Nikki!”

She doesn’t answer. Campbell roars. Max seizes his crumpled friend by the calf and drags her over
to him. More blood splashes onto his back. Max pulls himself over Nikki like a coffin lid, folding his hands over the back of his head. He watches Dog get kicked in the side. He watches Dog come back twice as hard. The adrenaline hits Campbell. He realises he is dealing with an actual fucking wild animal that he has just upset and fires the gun. Not into Dog, but into the ceiling. The report is deafening in the enclosed tile space. Dog flattens her ears against her head and scrambles from the room.

Ears ringing, Max comes up into a crouch and grabs Nikki, ready to dart out from under the table and run after his cat. Campbell seizes him by the hair and wrenches him upwards. Max is too surprised to scream. He beats at Campbell’s hands with his own until he feels the hot muzzle of the gun touch his bottom lip.

“Stop.”

Obediently, Max grows slack and silent.

“Hear that?”

Through the ringing in his ears, Max can just about make out the sound of tyres on the gravel. A fast-moving car is coming up the drive.

“No.” he says hoarsely.

The gun’s weight grows more urgent on his bottom lip “Shut up or I’ll shoot your tongue outta the back of your head.”

Somebody runs up the drive. The door bangs open.

“Max! Why aren’t you answering your phone?”

“Please.” whispers Max.

Campbell presses the muzzle down on the tip of his tongue.

“Max! Nikki!”

A weak stirring on the floor; Nikki’s bloodied head raises a little bit, and she croaks out David’s name. Somehow David hears her and runs into the kitchen. David sees Nikki on the floor before he sees Campbell and Max. He stoops, he takes Nikki by the arm to put her on her feet, then he senses the other two.

Cameron Campbell meets David’s eyes, smiles, and shoots him point blank.
A roadtrip

Chapter Notes

Description of the aftermath of child abuse here. Graphic injury.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For as long as Max lives, he will never be able to forgive himself for leaving David to bleed on the kitchen floor. Never mind there was a gun to his head, a man much, much bigger than him steering him out of the house by the muzzle of his gun. Campbell wouldn’t let him scream- threatening to shoot Nikki if he opened his mouth without permission, whom he had about the arm and hauled behind him. Perhaps Max could be kinder to himself if not for that last glimpse of David. Sprawled out on the ground. Unconscious or dead, it did not matter, because each option put him beyond capable of saving Max. Dog stood over him with her ears flattened to her head and snarled at Campbell as he skirted around her. But the entire time she stared at Max. Like he was the one who pulled the trigger. Or like he should have given her an order, a covert gesture- anything to indicate how she could salvage the situation.

But Max couldn’t give her anything. He couldn’t do anything for the crumpled David. And the blood. There was blood, for sure, but Max couldn’t tell where it was coming from. His eyes refused to register whatever wound David might have had.

And only now, as Campbell puts them in David’s car (the keys left in the ignition, in David’s hurry) and gets behind the steering wheel does Max begin to come to terms with what has just happened. Campbell crashed into his house. Shot David somewhere that would release a lot of blood. Pistol-whipped him and Nikki into the car, leaving David defenceless and possibly dead on the kitchen floor, and now he is driving them away to who knows where.

In the rear-view mirror, his eyes briefly find Nikki’s, and he wills her to know what he is about to do. Max neither turns in his seat nor looks as he lashes out at Campbell, trusting himself to strike true. He hears the satisfying whack of a fist against some delicate-sounding flesh and turns, raising his other fist. But before Max can even figure out where he has hit Campbell, his vision goes dark and an enormous pain forcibly ejects him from the world

When Max comes to, it is dark. A thick fug of pain lays over his brain. The metallic taste in his mouth tells him he has been hit in the head- hard. When he touches his forehead, his fingers come away sticky with blood that has not quite had the chance to dry yet. That means he can’t have been out for too long. Though his memory is not clear or coherent, Max seems to remember taking himself up the stairs under his own power. He has gotten very good at functioning after blows that should be debilitating. Max is not sure if it’s just that his parents are holding back on him, don’t know how to properly inflict bodily harm, or if he’s some sort of medical marvel and should submit himself to scientists for study.

Max reaches up slowly. His palm hits splintery wood just a couple of inches in front of his face. Seems like he crawled under his bed. One of the better spots in his house to go. On the rare occasion one of them chases him upstairs, Max can pack himself into the extreme corner on the far side of the bed and be out of reach. For whatever reason the bed in his room is bolted down and therefore
impossible to rip away dramatically. They can pull off the mattress and try to get at him through the slats, but the slats are welded to the frame and there is only so much damage one can do when reaching through an opening less than the width of one’s fist.

For a long moment, Max remains with his palm in place. His head throbs. But it’s not one of those deep, insistent pains that could land him in the hospital- he has only ever been injured that badly once. Two days after initially being hit, Max began to bleed from his nose and tipped over unconscious at school. He was at the top of some stairs when the vertigo and nosebleed hit him, and when they assumed at the hospital that his head trauma was from falling down them he didn’t bother with any sort of correction.

So long as he wasn’t going to die or end up with some sort of paralysis, Max figured the situation had a positive net outcome. This is the pain of a shallow cut. While the location is unfortunate it shouldn’t do him any lasting damage.

It takes a moment for the ringing in his ears to die and the throbbing in his head to ease enough so that he can hear far enough to gauge what is going on in the rest of the house. He can hear heavy footsteps in one of the rooms on the ground floor. Might be the kitchen. Sounds like his father, or his mother carrying something heavy. The whirr of the microwave and a fan turning in the same space. Carefully, Max edges out from under his bed. He moves in increments of inches so as not to jostle the headwound. When he has gotten out from under the bed, he stays on his back for about a minute. The energy required to move makes him dizzy and sick to his stomach. The situation is the same when he stands, so he sits on the edge of the bed and twists the crumpled sheets for a few moments.

When Max is surer of his balance he stands and creeps to the bathroom. He darts across the landing- the only place where someone downstairs might get a glimpse of him. Nearly doubled by nausea, Max staggers into the bathroom and seizes the door handle. Partly for support and partly so he can push it closed without making a sound. Once he’s jammed a chair underneath the handle Max feels the tension lift from him. Suddenly it is a hundred times easier to breathe and move. Grabbing a damp towel from the rack, Max steps onto the footstool so he can see clearly over the counter. The sight of blood on his face is no longer as shocking as it once was, but it will always be offensive. Max swallows the bitter taste at the back of his throat.

“Ok.” he presses a washcloth to the dripping faucet “Nothing warm water can’t fix.”

Probably. If the cut is really bad he’s got a couple of band-aids in the drawer for situations like this. When one of them goes too far.

Max dabs gently at the cut. The pain of touching his raw, exposed tissue makes his guts watery. He persists and reveals the full length of a shallow cut in meticulous centimetres. By the time he has uncovered the cut completely it is beaded with fresh blood, since he has swept away the half-dried stuff that gummed it shut. Max produces a handful of band-aids from the drawer and applies them at several haphazard angles until the ugly red grin is no longer visible. When he pushes his hair over it, the only clue he has something to hide at all is the corner of one of the band-aids. That should look fine.

Still, he might raise the idea of staying at home from school tomorrow. His parents tend to be more agreeable to him after they have drawn some blood. It’s guilt, he thinks, or a fear of what else they may end up doing to their son if they get het up again.

Max leans his palms on the counter and stares at himself. He looks like a piece of meat that should have been cooked a long time ago. Red. Over-tender. Something you would not want to touch, to comfort or sear or otherwise. Max keeps his face stoic as he begins to cry. Crumpling his face up and sobbing the way he wants to would only hurt him more.
Max comes to with the same notion that his body has been abused to the point of becoming little better than a bit of meat bound for the trash. It occurs to him that he should reach for David. But his arm hurts too much to move. As his doubling vision merges into one, Max meets his own eyes in the mirror. The reality of his dire situation crashes into him with such force it takes his breath away. David. David, bleeding on their kitchen floor. Max, trapped in a car with Nikki and Cameron Campbell with no real route for escape.

Max stares at himself hard. How many times has he had occasion to look at himself in this way? One time was more than enough, according to David, and in the last six years Max has become more and more inclined to agree with him. He should not have to spend his days cowering in anticipation of the next beating. He should not plan his days according to the whims and ever-changing temper of people larger and stronger than himself. But, with a side-long glance at Campbell who is bolt-upright and smiling in the driver’s seat, Max realises he might not have much in the way of a choice.

“Max.”

Nikki leans up from the backseat and pushes a water-bottle against his shoulder. The action of swivelling to grab it is painful, swallowing even more so. At least the water does something to clear the taste of blood in his mouth. He hopes to Allah that David has been picked up by now. Of course he has. Their nearest neighbours aren’t exactly within earshot, though they have complained about Max playing his music loudly before. And Dog will be making a royal fuss.

“Welcome back.” says Campbell “Have a good nap?”

Max says nothing. David has to have been rescued by now. In an ambulance, at least.

“Nikki and I have been talking about what we should do once we get back to the camp.”

A chill runs up Max’s spine. Camp Camp: these days he only thinks about it tangentially, remembering some escapade or how he and David met. The rest of the camp he wants to push from his mind. It was a dark place, he knows now, and they were all only just skirting on the surface of it. Like walking on the black ice of a frozen lake, pretending there were no sea monsters beneath that tracked their every step. It makes sense that Campbell would want to go back to the place that carries his namesake. Though he seems to know most everything he owned out there was destroyed or taken in as evidence by the FBI, it strikes Max as natural that Campbell should want to go back to kick around in the ashes. Scene of the crime and all that.

“I heard they only left the manor standing. I was all for checking out the manor first, but Nikki doesn’t seem to want to go back.”

“Don’t know if it’s still safe.” she mumbles, accepting the bottle back from Max.

“Oh I had that place built to last. It’s one of the most structurally sound buildings in the state. Don’t worry about that. Even its smoking ruins should be safe enough to walk on.”

Belatedly, Max notices it has grown dark. He can see more of his own wan face reflected at him than he can see of the outside. It doesn’t look like there is much to see but empty high-way and ranks of endless trees. In’shallah, David hasn’t had to spend hours on the floor. His friends would have come up after Preston was rescued from questioning to check on him. They would have found David.
“I saw that scar on your forehead, there. Nasty one. What happened. Did you fall off the monkey bars?”

His hair is matted down with blood at the front so that most of it is visible. The ghostly shape of the edge of a bottle that struck him a long time ago. Neil once noticed it was slightly circular if you looked closely. He considers flipping his hood up to conceal the scar, but thinks the better of it.

Max grits his teeth as hard as he can without prompting an explosion of pain in his head. “Yeah.”

“Nikki was just telling me about how you all watched the camp be destroyed. She thinks there’s no point in going back to the campsites, to check out where the tents and cabins were and all that. Nikki doesn’t know what she wants to do. She doesn’t want to go to the manor. She doesn’t want to go to the cabins or the tents. In fact, I think Nikki doesn’t want to visit the camp at all. It’s disappointing. I like to think I built place children enjoyed when it was still standing. I want to know what you think. You and Davey hung back for a long time, didn’t you? Your parents were late?”

Max nods mutely.

“Well what do you think, Max? You were the one who saw the worst of the damage. Should we do the manor or the cabin first?”

“Depends on what you want to do.”

“Check it all out. I mean, I assume the destruction is pretty total. I still want to get a look at the old place, though. It holds a lot of nostalgia for me.”

Max remembers Nikki and her mysteriously sourced trilby, the movie-mobster accent, the stuff they were burning. Maybe Nikki was right. Of course she was right that there were all kinds of evil drugs and other substances were hidden all over the place, but just how much? And how much is it going to upset Campbell when he realises most of his nostalgia is well and truly gone? Or taken away by the FBI.

The thought makes Max feel terrible even as it comes into his head: hopefully Campbell took out a good portion of his aggression and pent-up anger on David, and on that one mighty beating in the kitchen. Shooting David should mean less anger is left over to be worked out on the two of them. For the moment, at least.

Max wants to cry.

“I don’t know.” says Max.

Campbell cocks an eyebrow “You don’t know?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lot to look at.”

He nods. Max stares ahead at the road without seeing it. Really, there is nothing to see. Just miles of endless road.

“What do you think I would be most interested in looking at?”

“The Quartermaster’s cabin.”

“I heard it was remotely detonated.”

“They didn’t warn us about it either.” Nikki is talking the way she talks when she is being made to
answer a question she does not know the answer to. Max recognises the blustery bravado with a cringe. Obviously Nikki doesn’t know better than to engage with an angry, stronger person more than required by the bare minimum of conversational politeness. He tries to give her a look of warning in the rear-view mirror, but her eyes are trained on the back of Campbell’s head.

“They just blew the whole place up around us. Quartermaster’s shit went flying.”

“Did you kids ever go into the cabin?”

Now Nikki looks at Max for a clue as to what she should say. Too obviously, though, and Campbell laughs at her.

“Did something in there scare you?”

“The hair.” she blurts. She must have picked the most harmless item she could off the top of her head “The samples of hair he took from us all was a little bit creepy.”

“You want to know about that?” Campbell raises a hand from the steering wheel to scratch the back of his neck. For a moment this lifts his hair from his nape. Max spots a scar more twisted and ugly than any he possesses. There is a professional quality to them that raises the hair on the back of his own neck, so it almost feels as if the same scar is being scored on him.

“None of our business.” says Max shortly.

At the same time Nikki says “Yes!” much louder than him.

If Max were not already dealing with a painful headwound, he would smack his forehead on the dashboard.

Campbell flashes Max a conspiratorial smile “Well, the Quartermaster and I ran a lucrative business. Now I’ll admit it was a bit of an unseemly use of children, but not in the way you think.”

Nikki is unable to stop herself from guessing “Porn?”

“No!” Campbell’s face contorts angrily, making him look decades older “Didn’t I just say it wasn’t in the way you think? God. Dirty-minds. No, it was nothing of a sexual nature. What Quartermaster and I did was provide a service for people who couldn’t have children, or didn’t have the kind of children they wanted to have. For example, a white woman who married a white man and ended up with a white baby, she might be a little sad because she’s always dreamed of having a mixed-race baby. Maybe she’ll adopt one in the future. But there’s an immediate need that should be satisfied in the mean time.”

Nikki scowls “Like a collector’s item?”

Max clears his throat. It makes him realise he’s got some kind of cut deeper in his mouth that is bleeding down the back of his throat. He has been swallowing blood for the entire time he was out and is only just now aware of it.

“No. None of that fetishization and cultural appropriation shit. God, did I get sick of that argument. One of my business partners is- was black, and she hated the service. Couldn’t separate her confidence problems from her goddamn business.”

There are plenty of filthy things Max wants to spit into Campbell’s face. He could go on for hours about the general creepiness of people who want specifically mixed-race or black or Asian babies just for the sake of having them, for wearing them about like a badge of their progressiveness, but he
swallows it back with another mouthful of blood. Snow has begun to hit the windshield. Max wonders if Campbell would slap his hand away if he tries to turn on the heater.

Recovering his composure, Campbell picks up his train of thought “So what did was send people like that a portfolio of some children. Some headshots. Some candids. Something to give the people an idea of what sort of kids they might obtain the service from.”

“What exactly did you do? Sell our fucking fingernail clippings?” says Nikki.

The flash in Campbell’s eyes tells Max that she has almost struck upon the right answer.

“Hair, actually.”

Nikki blinks “What?”

“Remember the hair samples he kept?” prompts Max.

“That- that big nasty box of our hair?”

“See, Max is on the ball. Max is observant. What we did was make up a doll for our customers. Most of the stuffing was just plain stuffing, but we’d put in enough strands of hair from the child of their choice to create a ‘presence’. We can’t be balding the kids we use. That would mean less for other clients. That service was all about fairness. Making it fair for the people who didn’t get the children they wanted. Aesthetically, or personality wise- I remember making a doll with your hair, Nikki, because some of our clients could tell you had a ‘spunky personality’.” Campbell actually takes a hand off the steering wheel to do air quotes.

The look on Nikki’s face couldn’t be more disgusted if she had just been forced to eat garbage that was freshly warmed on a summer sidewalk. She can’t think of anything to say. She puts her cheek against the back-window and watches the white fingers of snow streaking by.

Max takes advantage of the moment of quiet, of Campbell’s satisfaction at having shocked her into a revolted silence “Do you know where you shot David?”

“No. Where did I shoot him?”

“I didn’t see.” Max’s heart sinks “I just wanted to know.”

“Worried about him, huh?”

Max does not respond.

“I wouldn’t worry. Your old man can take a hit. Trust me.”

“So can I.” says Max louder than he intended. For a moment he is tempted to tell Campbell about crawling underneath his bed. How he could flatten himself to the ground to avoid his mother’s thick hands trying to come through the slats at him, stretching her trowel-shaped fingernails for his face.

Instead he lets Campbell laugh “You’re a tough guy, huh? Let me ask you, can you even see straight right now? I’ve never seen somebody try to act so tough through their first piece of head trauma.”

“Not my first.” Max gestures at his scar.
There is a sharp intake of breath in the backseat; Nikki must think he is about to divulge one of his intensely personal stories- the kinds of stories he will only tell Neil and Nikki after he has had a panic attack so bad the only way to assuage the bitter after-taste of it is to share his pain with somebody. But those memories are the sort Max can only really tell in a choked whisper, at the end of a phone so he cannot see the person listening to him.

“Monkey bars don’t count.”

Max falls silent again. He imagines David tucked up to his chin in a crisp hospital bed. Gwen has come down from Seattle, of course, and is having a blazing row with a cop in the hall. Either she is shouting about how the cops are not doing enough to find Max and Nikki, or she has found out about what happened to Preston and is giving them a piece of their mind about that. His friends will be hovering nervously outside of his house, which must be a crime-scene now. The flashing lights and activity would have scared Dog out of the house a long time ago, but she will be skirting the edge of the forest.

Allahu Ahkbar, sometimes Max wishes Dog would let him put a collar on her. Then the policemen and the coroners or whoever the fuck visits crime-scenes would know then not to shoot her.

“Did you kill him?” ventures Nikki. The edge of the bluff has come back to her voice. She must be trying to scrape some information out of Campbell- just scare it out of him with her boldness.

“Nikki-”

“No, I didn’t kill him. Maybe I didn’t see where I shot him, but I know I didn’t kill him.”

The snow is quite thick now. Have they driven into one of those surprise blizzards the mountains are so good at producing? It seems far too early in the season for this sort of weather.

“How do you know? Have you shot enough people that you, just, fucking, automatically know when you’ve killed somebody?”

“Do I look like a killer to you?”

“Um. Yes, yes I do.”

“Nikki.” says Max “Shut up.”

“No, no, I’m interested in what she has to say. Nikki, you have a lot of strong opinions, don’t you? You definitely know where you want to go and where you don’t want to go when we get back to Camp Campbell. Tell me if I’m wrong; whenever you form an opinion, it takes a whole lot of hell to make you change your mind. Especially if it’s an opinion about a person.”

Nikki remains silent.

“So you think I’m a murderer?”

After a long moment, Nikki nods.

A second later Campbell stamps on the brake. Max is thrown forward against his seatbelt. A burst of exquisite pain wipes his vision out, but he grasps for Nikki anyway, already knowing what Campbell is going to do.

“Please, leave her alone-”

“Get out.”
“Leave her alone.”

“What?” gasps Nikki. The hard stop has knocked the breath from her.

Max forces his eyes open. There are two Campbells in front of him “She didn’t mean it! She’s just a stupid fucking teenager. She’s just talking, she doesn’t understand anything-”

Campbell ignores him, addressing Nikki instead “Get out of the car or I’ll shoot you right now.”

He’s pointing a gun in her face.

“Please!” cries Max “I promise she won’t talk anymore!”

“Get out!” roars Campbell.

Nikki is frozen in fear and shock.

“She’s only wearing jeans and a parka! The weather out there is gonna kill her.”

“That’s no problem. I am a murderer, aren’t I?”

Campbell pulls the hammer back on the gun. Nikki comes to life. She fumbles with the handle and pushes the door open, struggling against a sudden Arctic wind, and flings herself out the door.

“Nikki!”

“Max-”

“Close the door.” orders Campbell.

With one last helpless look at Max, Nikki does.

Forgetting about his injury entirely, Max scrambles into the backseat and seizes the door handle. Campbell puts on a huge burst of speed. Before Max can open the door they have moved at least 10 metres. He catches a glimpse of a pale-faced Nikki bathed red in the taillights before they have whipped away from her and left her marooned in the snowy blackness.

And then Max and Campbell are alone.

Chapter End Notes

Bye Nikki. Hope you’ve brushed up on your wilderness survival skills.
David

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna be in an area with no wifi for about 10 days, so it's gonna take a moment for the next chapter to come up. I'll try to post the successive chapters more quickly to make up for lost time! This chapter is a little bit shorter because it's a busy thing, to pack up for a trans-Pacific flight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being shot is only the second most painful thing that has ever happened to David. The time when his appendix burst was by far more painful and prolonged, because he at first wrote the pain off as a bad bout of gas and attempted to ease it with a couple of enthusiastic farts. It wasn’t until he pulled up his shirt and saw a distinct lump pressing out against his skinny pre-teen stomach that the true nature of the emergency dawned upon him. This happened while he was home alone and with his parents each a 30-minute drive out, David had no choice but to hop in his beat-up pick-up and drive himself to the ER 10 minutes away while weathering the most concentrated pain he had ever experienced in his life.

Compared to that hellish experience, the pain of being shot is marginally less. Had he not already been put through an unspeakable agony then he might still be on the floor while his arm drools blood and life onto the floor. Part of his alertness is probably to do with the sheer amount of adrenaline in his veins when David realises he has passed out.

The time between the gunshot, the terror in Max’s eyes, and the time when David comes to on his cold kitchen floor seems instantaneous. But he knows from looking at his watch just as he was coming through the door that it was 6:50 when he came home- he’d been trying to figure out how long Max and Nikki had been gone. Now it’s 7:25. Over half an hour he’s been here, useless and bloodied, while Campbell has had that time alone with Max and Nikki to do whatever he pleases.

The first thing David does is reach for his pocket and look for his phone. This he does with his right arm, ignoring the horrible, wet mess of the left. He has left it in the car.

Taking a ragged breath, David grabs the corner of the table and pulls himself up. His arm throbs steadily. He grits his teeth against the awful sensation- like having saw pushed in and out of him- and risks a glance at his arm. There’s a hole in him. The bullet has punched straight through, which might be a good thing because it means he won’t have to dig it out later, but the path it took is brutal. Given that David is still alive the bullet must have missed whatever vital piping he’s got in his arm. But he wouldn’t know that from the pain.

It takes a supreme amount of effort but David manages to reach the landline. It slides out of his slippery hand the moment he lifts it. Bending to catch it on the end of the cord is an exercise in extreme agony; David makes a mental note not to make any unnecessary movements from now on. Somehow he manages to punch in the number.

“911. What is your-”

“My son was just taken out of our home at gunpoint. My home address is 421, Hallowed Ground Street. He took him just a half hour ago-”
“Who, sir?”

“Just- somebody violent. Someone from our past who wants to hurt us. Please, can you set up a roadblock or something?”

The operator lets out a staticky sigh “Can you describe the vehicle for me, sir?”

David drags himself over to the hallway and looks out the door, which is still hanging open “He took my car.” he gives her the plate numbers.

“Sir, are you alright?”

“I’ve been shot.” David glances at his left arm “I was out for a while. Bleeding a lot.”

“Do you know how long you were unconscious?”

“Just over half an hour.” David squeezes his eyes shut against a wave of dizziness “I feel fine. I’m not going to bleed out or anything. My son, his name is Max, or Manajith. He needs help.”

The operator does not respond. There is a strange click, a rustle, then a familiar voice responds to David “Was it Campbell?”

David struggles to process what has just happened “Winston?”

“Yes, it’s me. Was it Campbell that took the children?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s an ambulance coming for you. Stay on the phone with me.”

“Did you- you cut me off from 911?”

“This is a delicate situation, David.”

“Delicate situation?” he raises his voice “I’ll fucking say! My son’s been fucking stolen! Nikki’s been fucking stolen! I’ve been fucking shot and you just fucking cut me off from 911! What the fuck, Winston?”

“David, calm down-”

“Don’t you fucking tell me to calm down! I was laying on the floor bleeding for over half an hour while Campbell was alone with those kids! Can you even imagine what kind of heinous shit he could be doing? He could have shot them! He could have left them out in the cold! He could be taking them anywhere- to anyone!”

“David please calm down-”

“I will not fucking calm down! I want a goddamn explanation! It’s only 48 hours after hearing Campbell is loose- 48 hours after his fucking escape, and he’s somehow already found us and abducted Max! What in the shit have you and Khalil and all your shady friends been doing for the past two days? Playing fucking parcheesi?”

“David, there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation! I promise!”

But the reasonable explanation is totally lost on David. The effort of screaming at Winston has overwhelmed him, and he’s fainted at the edge of the first pool of blood.
When David awakes again, he is sure he has lost his legs. He can’t feel a thing beneath his knees. Campbell has come back and gone at him with a hatchet. The book that gave him nightmares as a young teen, ‘Misery’, that whole horrible thing is about to be inflicted upon him by one of the mothers of his students who are more interested in flirting with him than ascertaining the progress of their children’s education.

A purr. A wet snot shoved into his face. The weight comes off of his legs, and they fill up with the sensation of water and needles.

“Dog?” David shrinks into a crisp pillow away from her tongue “You came back.”

Dog swipes her tongue across David’s forehead. She touches the tip of her nose to his. David’s head swims. He takes a deep breath and shakes his head, hoping to clear the fog, but it feels as if he is attempting to move through toothpaste.

“Where are we?” David peers over Dog’s muscular shoulder.

Seems to be a hospital room. A private one, which alarms David, because he definitely cannot afford a private room with his health insurance. With a wheeze, David pushes himself upright in the bed. Now that the sensation in his legs have come back he notices he cannot feel his right arm anymore. Thankfully, it’s been put into a cast rather than chopped off. Dog lays down at his side and puts her head on her chest. The fog in his head knocks David back into sleep before he can call out.

By the time David comes around again, surfacing from some evil dreams, someone else has come into the room. It takes him a moment to place the face hovering at the edge of his bed.

Suddenly, all of the pain leaves his body. It is replaced by cold anger.

“You?”

Daniel gives him a thin smile “Yeah, me. I know I’m not the person you want to see, but I’m here to help-

David’s fist catches Daniel full in the mouth. The other man flies back as if pulled by strings, falling on his ass. His hands go to cover his mouth. A muffled cry, and he goes onto his side, pressing his forehead to the ground.

Seizing a loose IV stand, David raises it above his head one-handed and prepares to bring it down on Daniel’s spine.

A hand catches his wrist and twists until David is forced to let go.

“A hand catches his wrist and twists until David is forced to let go.

“David!”

David drives his elbow into Khalil’s stomach and goes for Daniel again, ready to just use his fingernails and teeth, but he gets dragged backwards, quickly immobilised by Winston’s bear-hug.

“Let me go!” he snarls.

Khalil sits down on the edge of the hospital bed, his face greying from the blow “Holy shit. That was one helluva hit.”

“You ok, honey?” asks Winston. His voice is smooth and level, as if he’s not restraining a half-rabid friend from attacking the criminal that nearly killed their children.

Khalil nods, addressing David in a wheezy voice “He’s here to help.”
By now, Daniel has begun to collect himself. He gets to his knees with an effort. Blood drips between his fingers. His face is contorted with pain, but David senses a smile under there—smug, wry, triumphant, he doesn’t care, he just wants to swipe it off Daniel’s goddamn face.

“IT’S TRUE!” gurgles Daniel.

“The fuck- the fuck is going on?!” David strains uselessly against Winston.

“He helps us.” says Khalil.

“With difficult errands.” adds Winston.

Even with the anaesthetic fogging up his head David makes the connection “You threw Preston Sr off the roof! You bastard- you fucking-”

“I didn’t hurt Max! Or Nikki!” Daniel swallows a mouthful of blood and stands up with some difficulty “I’m here to help, you fuck! God! Think before you hit!”

“I told you to stay away from the kids.” he growls.

“I wasn’t there for them! I’m only here now to help you. I swear. I want to kill Campbell as much as you do.”

“No you don’t.”

“I want to help.” Daniel is almost pleading “You actually don’t have a choice. Winston and Khalil are the way this situation is gonna get fixed. They’re gonna use me to do it. Sorry, but that’s the way this is gonna go.”

Dog has woken up at last and observes at the situation with a detached interest. Apparently, it doesn’t bother her that David is hanging from Winston’s arms, panting, angry, the knuckles of his good hand freshly bloodied. David screws his eyes up shut.

“Goddamit.”

Daniel takes this as acceptance “I’ll help you get him back. I promise.”

“Fuck you.” David pulls away from Winston and retreats into a corner of the room, glaring at the three of them “I don’t know what you’re planning to do, but it better work.”

Chapter End Notes

Get wrecked, Daniel.
I'm back, bitches. Let the tears flow afresh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(199-something. Two year after Jasper McElroy’s disappearance)

David just stops himself from vomiting all over the back-half of the bus about sixteen times in the first hour of the drive to Camp Camp.

The drive is long and bumpy, thanks to ill-treated roads, and the bus is stiflingly hot because Quartermaster won’t let them open any windows. He mumbled something about bears by way of explanation, but people are too afraid of that hook at the end of his wrist to engage him in a serious debate. An asthmatic air conditioning unit farts an occasional burst of cool air that does more to shock people with its noisy expulsion more than cool down the bus. David’s mind is distinctly elsewhere, at the moment. He is only half aware of the heat and the swaying bus.

His mother mentioned it at the table that morning during breakfast. She has just recently embarked on a new set of tactics whereby she treats David nicely, though still keeping him at arm’s length, presumably so he will feel the stirrings of forgiveness in his heart, now that he’s larger and not so easy to slap around. The growth spurt took them both completely by surprise. He supposes she took it for granted that David would always be small- that he would always be shorter than her, that the little arms he raised to protect his face from her blows would always crumple. Now, caught with a rapidly growing son, she has elected to take an interest in his problems.

“You don’t have to go back if you don’t want to.”

David had looked up from his breakfast of bacon and eggs (which he made; his mother swanned in after the dishes were washed and helped herself), thinking she was referring to his father’s house. In keeping with the charade that his mother cared about him David had just been telling her how little he thought of his father’s girlfriend moving in with him- them, on the weekends that David spent there.

“I don’t dislike her that much. I don’t wanna cut Dad out of my life.”

She shook her head impatiently “I meant the camp. Look, you can stay here, find a summer job trimming the lawns or something. Plenty of other kids do it. We only send you to camp because Grandpa pays for it every year. That character building shit of his never did much good for me,” a statement which David couldn’t agree with enough “And if it were gonna work on you, we would know by now.”

By that point the subtext was unmistakable.

David looked back down at his plate “I like camp.”

He did. Not just because it got him out of the house for two and a half months. Sure, being removed
from his parents’ reach was nice, but he genuinely enjoyed the hikes and crafts and other activities he knew in his heart of hearts to be cheesy, which made him love them all the more. Missing camp last year was bad enough. David wasn’t about to spend another summer shuttling between his mother and father if he can help it.

Difficult as it would be to carry on with the events of the summer two years ago hanging over his head, David was confident he could do it.

“You don’t have to go to camp. You can go see Grandpa in Catbird if you want to.”

“There’s no point. I’m ready to go to camp. The bus is coming to the school in an hour. I’ll just go. It’ll be fine.”

She did not argue with him. Really, she wanted him out of the house as well, and was glad that she did not have to put herself to the trouble of actually making alternate arrangements for him because of a spur-of-the-moment burst of pseudo generosity. No doubt, he thinks, something she will want him to remember as a moment of quiet understanding between mother and son.

On the other hand, she might think of it as something of a bonus if she did end up losing her son to some accident of idiocy and fate the way that other kid went out two years ago.

Instead the conversation at the table has curdled and settled at the bottom of David’s stomach. No matter what happens to him in the next two and a half months- no matter what changes, David is bound to that house, and that fate of pretending that nothing has ever been wrong under that roof. The other half of what makes David feel so ill is, of course, the fact that he will have to pretend nothing is wrong or has ever been wrong when he gets to Camp Campbell. But it’s a small price to be away from his parents for almost three months.

David puts his head on his folded knees and tries to fall asleep. The swaying motion of the bus should help this along, but it just makes him feel sicker. Heat and nausea are a potent combination, though, and chase him into a strange state of semi-consciousness not unlike day-dreaming with his eyes open. On one hand he can still hear the voices of his fellow campers, and the occasional gruff outburst from Quartermaster either swearing at the air-conditioning unit or demanding the kids keep it down. On the other hand, David can also hear Jasper singing at the top of his lungs, and even see the other boy right in front of him as if he was just a seat ahead on the bus.

And the air is fresh. Summer-scented lake air. Twelve-year-old Jasper up to his knees in the water. David tries to remember if he ever saw Jasper willingly stand on the lake-shore. Every time, he went off the end of the dock, hating the slimy sensation and not knowing what his feet were touching on the lake-bed. But this time the positions are reversed. This time, it is Jasper who has planted his feet in the murk and is trying to coax David from the grass to the water.

“Come on, Davey. The water’s great today.”

“Nobody calls me that anymore.” says David.

Jasper cocks his head to the side and gives him the sort of indulgent look one might give to a dog carrying an over-large stick “Why not? It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“It’s childish.”

“We’re twelve. We’re supposed to be kids. We can worry about taxes and stuff when we turn 18.”

David bites his lower lip, taking a step back “No, Jasper, you’re twelve. You’re always gonna be twelve. I turned fourteen.”
For the first time a shadow of doubt crosses Jasper’s face “No. We’re both twelve. You’re gonna
turn thirteen. You said your birthday was in February.”

“Two Februaries ago I was turning thirteen, yeah. But now I’m fourteen.”

Impatient now, Jasper beckons him with both hands “Come on, Davey. Let’s go for a swim. I don’t
want to swim on my own.”

“David.”

David comes to with a jolt to the unwelcome sight of Quartermaster’s hook a mere inch from the end
of his nose. He crushes himself back into the recesses of the stiff seat.

“Yeah?”

“We’re here. Bus’s empty.” Quartermaster gestures down the length of the bus and David sees he is
the only kid left onboard.

Outside, the lake-shore is already crawling with kids dousing themselves after the long bus-trip.
Socks and shoes litter the grass. Water glitters in the air as someone begins a splash war.

Quartermaster follows his eyes and lets out a grunt of what might be satisfaction “Already in the
water. Like none a y’all ever left.”

David grabs his back-pack “You know what? I don’t think I ever did.”

(Now)

Max is thinking about something stupid. It must be a survival reflex; his brain has picked a
nonsensical thing to focus on, rather than the obvious, glaring, fearful fact proclaimed by the
emptiness of the back seat.

He has never, to his knowledge, told David he loves him. Max has a troubled history with that word.
The connotations of the word are different for him in a way that must make David’s stomach churn.
For the majority of his life the only time he ever heard it was when his father started one of his
meandering, awkward apologies, in which the fact that he loved Max was an inevitable point in the
argument. He would return to it again and again. He was sorry that he had shouted at Max or hurt
him, but Max shouldn’t worry, because he didn’t mean it, because he loved Max, and because Max
loved him, and because love meant forgiveness and there was no better way to express this than to
put what had happened behind them.

His father always insisted on his love in Urdu. Max’s distaste for the word spread across the
spectrum of human languages. He learned to recognise the word in dozens of them. He can’t watch
K-dramas with Nerris because the main characters were always menacing each other with the word,
he can’t play cheesy dating simulators with Harrison because the idea of manipulating an interaction
with the specific intention of gaining trust that might lead to love (romantic, platonic or parental)
makes him sick. He can’t go to any of Preston’s performances that deal with romance in any
substantial way. He has tried, with little success, to make friends beyond the circle which was forged
in Camp Camp, and cannot bring himself to take the extra steps that would move the friendships
from a casual acquaintance to something that will last.

It just makes him sick, the thought of love. Growing to love someone he does not already know-
though even then, how well he knows and likes them doesn’t seem to matter. It is as if Max lost the
ability to form attachments or bonds of trust with other people from the moment David carried him
out of his parents’ house. Certainly, he has lost the ability to acknowledge those relationships in a traditional way. Every time he and David have ever been in a situation where it might be appropriate to exchange those words, they have opted for something different.

They just started shouting “Affection!” at each other.

When David drops Max off at school, when Max drops David off at work, when David was proud, when Max was hanging up the phone. It worked for any and all occasions. In retrospect, Max cannot believe he let it go on for so long. Obviously he never anticipated being separated from David the way he has been. He was working up towards using the actual words before he left for college. Another two years to prepare himself and absolve the words of their previous meaning.

Now it looks like he might die before ever having the chance to tell David that he loves him. With the real words, that is.

“What is Max short for?”

Max starts. He did not forget he is in a car with Campbell for one second, but he didn’t expect Campbell to speak before they got to Camp Camp. He has been happy sitting and driving in silence for the last few hours and Max was hoping this would continue until he could at least put a few more feet of distance between them.

Max considers lying. He fails to see the point, however, and anyway this might be Campbell’s way of testing him. Who knows how much information he could have collected on him and David? If Max lies to him about the smallest thing it might set Campbell off. Wiping his eyes on his sleeve, Max swallows, with an effort, and somehow manages to speak without a tremble in his voice to betray the fact that he has been crying silently for most of the last two and a half hours “Manajith.”

“That’s an unusual name.”

“It’s not if you’re Punjabi.”

“Oh, is that what you are?” Campbell shoots him a sidelong glance “I thought you might be Pakistani.”

“There’s a lot of Punjabi people in Pakistan. It’s a nationality. My nationality is American, but I’m a second generation Indian Punjabi if you really want to know.”

“I don’t. I’m just making conversation. You must do that, right? Search for meaningless things to talk about just to push the silence back a little while longer?” Campbell smiles as if he expects Max to be in awe of his words- like he’s quoting Tennessee Williams or something.

“The silence?” repeats Max. With any luck Campbell will start monologuing and Max can turn off his brain and stare at the snow.

“The silence of the world. That’s one thing I realised when I was in Super Gitmo. There’s an awful lot of silence in the world. If people aren’t talking in your ear. If all you have to listen to is your own voice, the world starts to become a very quiet, cruel place to look at.”

“I wouldn’t know.” says Max dully.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t.” the car turns off onto a smaller road. Immediately, the paving becomes
Max rubs his temples “You’re probably right.”

“I know I’m right. Even back in Davey’s day the kids had a problem with technology. I think the quality of people- of their thinking, I mean, really started to go down in the 90s. Ever since the Internet happened. People stopped thinking for themselves. They began to clump together into these groups that formed over common interests or goals. Then instead of thinking for themselves, people began to think as hiveminds. Memes are a perfect example of that. What the fuck is that green frog supposed to communicate? Nobody fucking knows. It’s just taken on this group meaning that no one ever articulates because nobody fucking understands what sort of words you would even use to describe what’s going on in the picture or what it means. I’m telling you, memes are the death-rattle of the English language and human communication. Years from now we’re not even going to be able to move our faces to make expressions. We’ll just use emojis. We’ll wear masks that display emojis and we won’t even take them off to kiss our kids goodnight.”

At the back of his mind Max is remembering a similar conversation he once had, except that was with a woman on the bus who sat way too close to him and kept trying to touch his hair.

Campbell sighs “Anyway. Anyway, anyway, the point I was getting at. There’s a silence in the world. Most of what we do as a society and a species is devoted to ignoring that. Think about how much money we pour into the entertainment industry every year? People wouldn’t spend so much time and energy invested in shitty TV shows and webseries and other shit like that unless they were terrified of being alone with their own thoughts. I feel sorry for you, kid, because I think that’s what David did. I think he must have adopted you to distract himself from how sad his life really is.”

Something clenches in Max’s gut. An image of himself lunging over the stick and biting Campbell right in the face comes to him, but he pushes it away. No. Campbell could over-power him in seconds. Then he might be out in the snow.

Campbell looks at Max properly this time. His eyes are off the road for a good four seconds. Max refuses to open his mouth.

“Does he talk much about his childhood?” Campbell waits a moment, taking Max’s silence as a confirmation that he does not, and continues “I didn’t think he would. He’s trying to make up for his own shitty childhood, and yours, by giving you a good one. How is that working for you guys? At all? Do you fight every night?”

“No.” says Max, more because he wants Campbell to stop asking questions that because he wants to educate Campbell about the way he and David live together.

“I bet you do. The Davey I knew, when he was a kid, he was a real fucking piece of shit. Pardon my language. Normally I don’t talk about children that way, but he was a shithead. He hated everything. He hated everyone. He thought he was above everything- it was all a bunch of ‘hooey’ as far as he was concerned. And I’m sure he still thinks that way. The world, to him, is still ‘hooey’ and you’re just there to make him forget that it’s all ‘hooey’ for a little while. In fact, you were about the same age as that kid. That what’s his face. There was this kid, a long time ago, who died. I really shouldn’t be telling you this. But what the hell? It’s not like things can get worse for me. I know you don’t think I’m rational, but I know I’ve kidnapped you. I shot David- killed him, maybe, and left the other one on the side of the road. She’ll probably die.”

Max straightens up in his seat “She’ll be fine. She goes on Bigfoot hunts with her dad all the time. He’s taught her stuff.”
Why didn’t he think of that before? Nikki has spent more nights out in the woods than inside, if he counts the woodpile on the bottom of her yard as a part of the ‘woods’. Most of that has been in the summer, sure, but she must know something about surviving winters? She should be fine. In fact, Max is sure she will be fine.

“You’re not surprised to hear about the dead kid. Has Davey really told you about the dead kid?”

Max doesn’t want to know. He hasn’t got much of a choice, though, but to play along with Campbell “What dead kid?”

“The kid David got killed. Jasper.”

Max’s insides grow cold “Jasper McElroy?”

“So you do know. Why play dumb?”

“I- I talked to Jasper McElroy. He was going to another camp. Pirate Camp or Bible Camp or something.”

“No, he’s dead.” Campbell laughs “I don’t know what drugs you were on, kid, but if you’ve got more on you maybe go back to where you saw him.”

The car comes to a slow stop. After a moment of fumbling, Campbell turns on the floodlights and illuminates the snow-strewn ruins of a very familiar place. A place Max never thought he would need to come back to.

“We’re here.” Campbell pops the door open, letting in a stiff, cold wind “Go and look for your ghost, if you want. Just don’t think about running away. There’s nowhere for you to go in this weather. It’s just you and me.”

He slams the door and traps Max inside the car, shivering against the arctic air that he let in.

Chapter End Notes

Like the rest of the characters, Jasper's surname comes from his voice actor's.

Next chapter we find out why the hell David was allowed to bring a literal wild cat into a hospital ward! (there's a reason, I promise, same as the one he was allowed to have a semi-convicted killer come and visit him)
David is no stranger to receiving odd looks. Even in the most progressive of places, a man with a son who does not look ethnically identical to him gets some questioning looks. Of course he has also spent plenty of his young adulthood shepherding gaggles of pre-teens, briefly freed from the confines of Camp Camp, and desperate to remember what modern life feels like by flooding internet cafes and other places with reliable air-conditioning. Then when he was a teenager, he wore that awful denim jacket with more patches than fabric, bright enough to distract from the traffic lights when he walked down the street.

But never has David been looked at like this before. Combine the looks he has gotten every time he and Max ever stepped out into public together, every time he ever played referee to a shouting match between sweaty eleven-year-olds, every time he ever wore that patch-spangled jacket in the middle of the goddamn summer, and it does not come close to the way the staff of the hospital watch David as he makes his exit.

Apparently Khalil and Winston have decided a subtle exit is unnecessary- which David initially agreed with, because fuck subtlety when Campbell is getting ever further away from Catbird with his son and Nikki in tow. But now he wonders if they shouldn’t have sneaked out of the window after all.

First and foremost, David has a wild animal with him. Not a therapy animal or an assistance animal, but an actual goddamn wild animal that eats mostly from the woods and has gotten into at least one fight with a bear. Dog would not suffer to have a leash put on her by anyone, and though she’s loping fairly close to his side, probably for comfort from the sensory overload the poor thing must be suffering, she still eyes up anybody she thinks is getting too close to her or David. But it is easy to tell this animal is neither tame nor supposed to be in here. Must be thanks to Khalil and Winston that she was allowed in at all- David imagines she must have climbed into the ambulance, like she sometimes climbs into the car when she senses they are going on a trip out of town and wants to communicate her disdain at being left behind.

Secondly, Daniel is a mess, which David feels slightly bad about in retrospect. These people are his neighbours; some of them have known him since before he moved to Catbird permanently. He is embarrassed that the evidence of his anger trails so publicly behind him. With any luck, the people will not know to associate Daniel’s bloodied nose with David. As far as people here are considered David has never struck anyone in his life, except, perhaps, in self-defence. They are almost right.

But if this is difficult for David then it is even more so for Khalil and Winston. Mostly, they have been lucky in that it is possible for them to separate their professional lives from the personal. Sure, there was that one time Khalil had to pick up a sick Ered from school while he appeared to have a wanted cyber-terrorist was zip-tied in the trunk of the family mover, and there was the time Winston had to be rushed to the emergency room because he was afraid the cyanide capsule in his tooth might be leaking. But apart from that the couple have basically been able to pretend they are just as normal as the rest of Catbird. Not very, but normal enough to fit in.

This will not go away for a long time. The image of Winston and Khalil, escorting a half-dressed, half-dead David from a private hospital room with a wildcat at his feet and a domestic terrorist at their backs, while their neighbours pour out of the way and avert their eyes- this will stay with them for the rest of their lives. David only hopes they get a chance to tell Ered what has happened face-to-face before she has to hear the gossip from the town’s teenagers, which they’ll get exaggerated and
second-hand from their parents.

It only makes David cringe more when Khalil has to scold one of the nurses. For some reason, she thought it would be ok to film what is clearly a highly sensitive situation involving two known government officials.

What is worse is that Khalil, clearly shaken up, uses her first name “Priya, put that away. You know better.”

Somehow he has admitted that, yes, he is Khalil, and this woman has permission to look upon him as the father of the girl her own daughter plays with in band, who occasionally babysits her infant son.
By extension that is his husband bringing up the rear with his arm on the bloody-nosed man is Winston, who participates in the carpool that transports a lot of the girls’ softball team to their games, who bit the bullet and climbed that creaky old oak in the park to get Mrs Zimmerman’s cat down so the fire department wouldn’t be disturbed.
That really is the Miller-Browns, conducting some seriously shady business in plain view of everyone.

After Priya lowers her phone, David lowers his head. He doesn’t want to know which of his colleagues or friends or neighbours might be watching him in his moment of shame. If he can call this shame. He doesn’t know what to call this. He just wants Max back.

Night has already fallen outside. How much time has passed since Campbell took Max? Too much, clearly, and try as he might he cannot make an estimate of the hours. Long enough that what promises to be a heavy snow has started and piles up steadily on the landscape.
The cold hits David as a physical wall, making him regret the way he is dressed. He wrestled himself into the first things Khalil and Winston gave to him; thin and not at all suited for the chill because they assumed he would wait long enough to put on a second winter layer. But David changed as fast as he could, fighting back nausea, refusing to accept the help of his friends even though he could have really used it. He doesn’t have full use of his left arm, having been fucking shot in the arm, but on the plus side it was a little less debilitating than he thought it might be.

According to Khalil he didn’t actually bleed that much. To David’s untrained eye it looked like every bit of fluid in his veins was trying to leave him at the same time. However, Khalil seems to think the wound is superficial at best. Again, David was naïve to think the bullet went all the way through him- otherwise the exit wound might have killed him long before he could have gathered the strength to get on the phone.

Crossing his good arm over his chest, David makes a beeline for the same family van the Miller-Browns use for day-to-day business. There’s a scrape of blue paint from the time Ered smacked the front of Nerris’s car pulling out of her driveway one day. Max claims Ered showed him an old blood spot in the trunk’s upholstery as proof of the cyber-terrorist story.
It’s like climbing into an alternate reality when David gets into the shotgun, unwilling to sit in near Daniel in the back. Climbing into normalcy. It feels wrong, somehow, as if he is betraying Max.

Then the domestic terrorist, wild cat and married government agents get into the car and David is reassured.

“Do you feel ok? You’re on some pretty strong painkillers.” Winston asks as he pulls the car out of the parking lot. They have actually parked in the ambulance zone, which strikes David as kind of a jerk move even if they are here on important business.

“My head’s a little foggy.” admits David, staring at Daniel in the rear-view mirror. He and Khalil are squashed into the far corner of the back-seat to give Dog room. More than she needs, of course, but
neither of them are about to challenge her for sprawling.
Daniel’s got a bundle of gauze pressed to his nose. His nose is no longer bleeding, but is obviously
causing him a huge amount of pain. David is slightly surprised that the Miller-Browns let him walk
out of the hospital without getting a nasal splint. Then again, if he’s going to trust anyone to eyeball
the severity of a wound and the necessary treatment, he’s best of putting his trust in the two who deal
with situations like these most often.

Besides, David would not have allowed the delay. Max and Nikki’s safety is more important than
whether Daniel’s nose heals straight.

“Here,” Winston drops an unmarked phial of white pills in his lap “I know it looks sketchy, but K
and I use them all the time. They’re more efficient than the stuff the hospital will have put you on.
And it won’t make you feel like your head is in a cloud.”

David picks up the phial suspiciously and turns it over in his good hand “What are they?”

“Painkillers. Good ones. They’re not on the market.”

David cocks an eyebrow “Too dangerous? Or there must really be a conspiracy to keep Americans
sick?”

Winston and Khalil laugh.

“Conspiracy? Nah, that’s just the rich dragging their feet. Realistically the government wants
America to be healthy so they can have the taxes. I forget the real story behind why this thing isn’t
on the markets.”

“A problem with the patent?” suggests Khalil “Oh, I remember! The guy who designed these was an
intelligence agent for another country. The powers that be felt a little nervous about releasing a super-
effective product like this, because people would investigate where it came from and they might have
ended up finding out the government was protecting people who could be considered mass-
murderers because they’re useful to us. Don’t worry about the pills. We give one to Ered when she’s
having the worst of her cramps.”

Daniel’s chalky face colours at the allusion to menstruation. Funny that a man who would have very
willingly murdered children and probably bathed in their blood is embarrassed by the mention of the
way Ered would normally lose blood. He files it away as a fun thing to tell Max later and ignores the
pang of panic at the idea there might not be a ‘later’ when they are together, with Max in a place to
appreciate irony.

Once he realises Winston is driving back to his own home, David considers protesting. So much time
has already been wasted. The clock in the dashboard reads as 12:34, which means something like six
hours have passed since Campbell drove away with Max and Nikki. Camp Camp is certainly within
a six hour drive. They shouldn’t have made a stop. A kidnapper doesn’t make stops for the bathroom
and snacks. David wonders if he thought as far to bring his own gas-can to avoid gas stations
entirely.

Max would have raised the world’s biggest scene if they went within 10 feet of a gas station. Max
knows plenty about putting distance between himself and an abuser- especially the domineering,
insecure presence Campbell seems to represent. During the earlier years when Max was willing to
submit himself to family therapy, David heard some hair-raising stories about the tricks Max would
use to keep his parents at arms’ length.

He’s a resourceful kid. Much as it pains David to acknowledge, Max has been through the likes of
this before, and has come out the other end in what roughly amounts to one piece. For now David’s
best bet is to go along with what the Miller-Browns think they should do. They are the experts for this kind of thing. The more David cooperates with the people who know what to do, the better his chances are of retrieving Max safely.

Still, it frustrates him to pull into the driveway of the Miller-Browns’ modest little townhouse. Why can’t they just peel out of Catbird? Why prolong the agony? Very possibly the physical agony for Max and Nikki- it doesn’t bear thinking what Campbell might be doing to them.

David winces as the cold strikes him for the second time. He waits on the doorstep, impatient, as Winston twists around to say something to Daniel and Khalil. Whatever he needs to say is interrupted by Dog’s eagerness to get out of the strange car. Once she starts clawing at the nearest door handle the men are quick to spill out of the car. Dog bounds off into a distant fringe of the woods that press in on Catbird from all sides. Maybe she will come back, maybe she won’t.

Before Winston can get his key in the door, it whips open, revealing a tired and dishevelled Ered. She is still wearing what David saw her in at the police station. The look of relief on her face is tempered with horror at David’s condition. The cast, the blood, the anger at all that has happened to him in the last six hours. Not the gentle, forgiving man Ered has come to expect, he is sure.

“Jesus.” she looks David up and down again, pushing the door open for him.

He brushes past her in silence. Ered quickly embraces Khalil and is calling Winston over when she freezes, having spotted the man that nearly killed her some six years ago leaning out of the back of the car she shares with her fathers.

She gestures to Daniel “He can’t come in here.”

Winston gives his daughter a hug and turns her head into his shoulder so she is not looking at Daniel anymore “He won’t. He’s going to wait in the car.”

Ered hastens her fathers into the hallway so she can slam the door on Daniel.

“How are you walking around?” Ered asks him “I thought you were shot.”

“It didn’t go all the way through.” says Winston, and Ered knows enough about gunshot wounds that this is a satisfactory answer for her.

Going from the harsh cold to the heated car to the cold to the heated house again does a number on David. The nausea curdled at the bottom of his stomach stirs up with a vengeance and sends him stumbling into the living room. Just last week, he sat in here with Winston and Khalil, discussing whether Max and Ered should be allowed to participate in the camping trip the kids had planned for the coming spring, while the kids thumped through the kitchen cabinets for snacks. As David sinks into the couch and lays his head back against the cushions, it comes to him that he was most worried that Dog might try to follow Max.

The kids wanted to try camping up in the park around Mt Rainer. He was worried Dog might lose her way up there, or get injured in some scrap over territory or prey that happens when you are a large wild animal. In retrospect, he wants to laugh at himself. To think he was worried about Dog, the clawed, fanged animal, on the camping trip, when his own useless, fleshy son also wanted to isolate himself in the forest where anything can and will go wrong.

Sensing someone has stood over him, David opens his eyes. He accepts a glass of water from Ered.

“It was really him?”

David nods, pained “From what I saw. I didn’t see much, but…I didn’t need to see much to know it
was him.”

Biting her bottom lip, Ered grabs her phone out and runs into the next room, texting at a speed that makes David dizzy to see.

After a brief conference in the hallway Khalil and Winston come into the room and drop into arm-chairs that face David on the couch in a manner that reminds him of a pair of principals, staring at him with consternation over their shared desk. Or perhaps he’s their son—disruptive, impossible to get a handle on, and at last they’re breaking down and handing his ultimatum.

In the gentle delirium induced by the painkillers and the dizziness from the temperature change, David finds himself saying “I won’t go to military school.”

Winston and Khalil exchange a look.

“What?”

“Nothing,” David sits up straighter “Just…you just need to tell me what you’re going to do about this. I’m not saying it’s your fault.”

“Oh, it’s alright.” Winston reaches for his husband’s hand and squeezes it. The regret on his features makes him look about ten years older “We know. We fucked up. We fucked up badly. It never should have gotten as far as it did.”

Khalil closes his hand over Winston’s “As soon as we know how he escaped, we’ll let you know. And it’s never going to happen again.”

“Because you’ll be killing him, I hope.”

Another weighty look passes between them.

“What? What could you possibly need him for?”

“We’re not at liberty to say.” Khalil has grown stiff. He looks at David as if meeting his eyes, but there’s a cool film over them, as if Khalil has put on a lens that blurs his friend so badly David has become no different from any one of the numberless victims he must have dealt with over the years.

Kudos to the man for being able to distance his private life and work life when his work life shoots a friend, comes blood-dripping up his driveway and scares the life out of his daughter.

“Just rest for a few minutes. We made most of the calls that we needed to make while you were out. All we need to do now is get ourselves ready.” Winston leans forwards “Can you give us fifteen minutes?”

Shrugging with his good shoulder, David leans back into the couch again “Sure. But if you can do it in fourteen, I’ll be grateful.

At this point the front door bangs open. The stamp of feet in the hallway and just as Winston is reaching for a concealed holster David cannot believe he completely missed spotting, two teenagers burst into the room. A guilty Ered cringes behind an impressively tall and angry figure.

There is Neil, red-eyed from crying and resplendent in a pair of heels that add about three inches to his height. He must have selected it specifically to make him look more imposing, and therefore, to
intimidate these two government officials and their domestic terrorist into agreeing with his demands. Before Neil even opens his mouth David knows exactly what he’s going to say.

“No!” blurs David.

Winston looks between them without comprehension “What?”

“He wants to come. Tell him he can’t come.”

“You can’t stop me.” Neil crosses his arms. He’s also worn that impressive black trench-coat that makes him look like a giant crow from a distance, and dammit, if the outfit isn’t scaring David just a little bit “I mean, you can, but will you ever forgive yourself? If you tell my father, or drug me and lock me away until this is all over, or shoot me to keep me from coming after you, or whatever, are you ever gonna be able to forgive yourself for stopping me from helping my two best friends when they’re in their time of need?”

“Yes!” David flaps his good hand at him “Consider this: will I ever forgive myself if you come along and die?”

“I won’t die.”

“Neil, this is serious. I was shot!”

Khalil finally finds his voice “Wait, wait, Neil, you don’t seriously think we’d let you come along?”

“Well why the hell not?”

David can tell from the twitch in Khalil’s jaw, the slight droop of his eyebrows, that Neil’s formidable clothing is doing its work on him too.

“Anyway, I’ll just drive myself there if you don’t take me with you. Try whatever you like. You can lock me up. You can drug me and shove me somewhere dark. You can throw my car keys into the lake or put up roadblocks or do whatever you think will work, but I promise you it won’t. It absolutely will not. Those are my two best friends out there. I’m not gonna sit on my ass while a maniac whose ego is only dwarfed by his inferiority complex if there’s something I can do about it, and you can take that to the fucking bank.”

For emphasis, or perhaps because it has only just now occurred to him, Neil reaches out and knocks over the standing fan in the corner. David watches it bounce off the ground listlessly and closes his eyes.

God, this has been a weird day.

Chapter End Notes

Wonder what Max and Neil have been up to all this time?
Hypothermia and cat pee

Chapter Notes

Me: Boy! I sure can't wait to get onto a regular writing schedule!
Real life: Ha ha. HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAA
(please imagine Ursula the sea witch's laugh for this)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Six years ago)

When the Quartermaster tells a story, there’s an uncomfortable dichotomy in the reaction it stirs within Max. On the one hand he remembers this foul man smearing himself all over his quarter-sister, keeping boxes of mysteriously obtained hair in the shed he seems to live in and spearing small animals on the end of a hook he for some reason wears instead of a normal-ass prosthetic like a sane person would. On the other hand, he cannot help but scoot closer to the Quartermaster’s boots and crane his neck for a better view of the crags of the man’s fire-lit face, which add so much more to the ambience of the story he’s telling.

Watching the Quartermaster do anything is like the part of a horror movie. But watching him tell a scary story? Better than any final girl being chased by a knife-wielding madman.

The rest of the campers are in a similar predicament. To his left, Neil leans forwards to hear even as he recoils from the Quartermaster with every cell of his body. To his right, the debate on whether she should punch the Quartermaster for being a goddamn weirdo or hug his leg for his skilful storytelling plays out on Nikki’s face as clearly as a movie on a projector screen.

Nurf has a rock in his hand and a similar expression. Harrison has pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes and alternates between shrinking back into the darkness, then squeezing forwards between Nerris and Ered to catch the Quartermaster’s voice better. Dolph has retreated behind a fallen tree-trunk that should probably be classed as a fire-hazard, given how uncomfortably close it is to the jumping sparks, and peers over the mossy top of it with fascination. Preston has produced a notebook from some unseen hiding place in his theatre costume and makes notes frantically about the Quartermaster’s performance. The projection of his voice, the elements of the natural world he uses to further the horror immersion experience- what Max occasionally reads over Preston’s shoulder sounds more like a review of an indie film director than it does observations on the bearing of this unhinged man telling a bunch of kids a story.

Max wouldn’t consider himself an expert in horror by any means, but he knows his way around campfire stories. They are essentially just urban legends with a couple of woodsy twists to endow the immediate surroundings with that much more menace. La Llorona becomes Bigfoot. The cultural narratives of First Nations are pilfered, their villains clothed as insane lumberjacks or hunters, their heroes changed to bunches of hapless teens. Max has heard enough to guess where a story is going when he hears it.

This one, however, has him boggled. It started out confusing and vague. It still is, but something about the Quartermaster and the muttering wind and the roaring dark all around has Max more on edge than anything else ever has. An achievement if one considers the sort of environment where Max has been obliged to spend his formative years.

Thusly, when Gwen lunges out of the dusk wielding a pair of bolt cutters and sets all of the kids off
into screaming hysterics, Max doesn’t attempt to stop himself from joining in. It feels good to be scared in this way. A good, clean scare. A chance to air his lungs out. A squirt of adrenaline that is purely reactive, that he doesn’t have to use to get himself to safety. The hands that grab at him are Neil’s seeking comfort or a flesh shield. The hands that raise over him are Nikki’s preparing to claw the face off her attacker.

It feels good to be scared, for once, without being truly scared for his life.

Gwen shouts down the general chaos. She keeps brandishing the bolt cutters as she tells the Quartermaster the kids should have been in their tents a half hour ago. The next morning, it will turn out she was on her way to lop open chained-up trunk Campbell kept in the back of her office and noticed the Quartermaster’s audience on en-route. Gwen is so tired and disconnected from reality she does not seem to link her wielding of the bolt cutters to the campers’ terror. Instead she takes it for the horrified awe she naturally inspires in the campers when she raises her voice.

The campers disperse quickly. Half of them break into a run, braving the dark by themselves, and the other half pick a partner to clutch and stumble to their tent with.

Max would be happy to use up the adrenalin fizzing in his blood by running, but Neil is terrified, clinging and has to be persuaded to move away from the fire with a deluge of pokes between the ribs, and a whisper of what the Quartermaster might do to him if they end up alone together. With the fell magic of the story gone, the Quartermaster now just looks like a crazy man. The kind of crazy person that would chase people through parking lots at night or throw dead animals on doorsteps.

Neil winds his arm through Max’s so tightly that he is cutting off the circulation past the elbow “Do you think that was true?”

“What? The story?”

“Yeah.” Neil glances backwards at the Quartermaster. The man has not moved yet. The lighting does his face no favours, making it appear as though his wrinkles is actually flesh sloughing off of his skull from the heat.

“Fuck off. Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts and shit like that? Bigfoot? If your boner for science got any bigger it would tear through your pants!”

“Magic is just science we can’t explain yet. There’s some sort of scientific explanation for- for whatever Harrison is. We’ll figure it out someday. If there can be a magic boy that disappears his little brother, why can’t there be Bigfoots and ghosts? It’s just arrogant to consider the mysteries of the world completely solved.” says Neil sharply.

It would have been more effective as a dressing-down if Neil were not trembling so hard that Max can hear the teeth rattling in his head.

“No. Absolutely not. If you start saying things like ghosts are real then soon you’re gonna be going along with the hollow earth theory.”

“It technically is hollow in the middle, except the hollow is full of molten lava. Anyway what’s so stupid about the idea of something leaving an imprint on the world? Like, somebody dying really bad? That’s not a stupid idea. Comets leave craters. Maybe violent death does too.”

Max rolls his eyes “Only if the jumper hits the ground hard enough.”

A whoop in the distance: Nikki hoots her triumph at being the first to reach her tent.

“I thought you believed in this stuff. Like, Rama and Sita.”
“That’s Hindu. I’m Muslim.”

Neil furrows his brow “Oh. I thought those stories were kind of universal in India, though, like everybody knows the Disney stories in America.”

He shrugs “Kinda. I never lived in India, though.” If he had he might be living with a lovely old auntie or a grandparent he never met. Then he might be able to tell Neil more about the stories he might have grown up on- Hanuman’s tricks, Krishna’s benevolence, the chalky taste of Holi powder from the clouds that got kicked up in the streets for days afterwards.

“Besides,” Max raises his voice over a wind tearing through the treetops “The Quartermaster probably just wanted to scare us so we’d stay inside all night. Last night he had to go out and stop Preston from monologuing at the moon, so, I’m with him, you know? Scare the shit out of us little shits so we’ll stay the shit in our shitty tents.”

“What got up your ass?” demands Neil, pulling back a bit. He then realises his mistake and clasps Max’s arm tightly again, causing Max to stumble over his own feet.

“It’s just stupid! There’s no such thing as ghosts? Do I believe some bad energy is hanging around here because some First Nations had a fight here? Yeah, but it doesn’t, fucking, hang around by making angry ghosts out of the people who die around here. And the specific deaths- you have to die outside, of exposure, or of a fucking papercut that got septic while you were on a hike or something. Like, you can be just fine, but then the land sneaks into your- what did he say? It sneaks into your bones? It makes you bleed harder?”

“It sounded a little bit like he was talking about a period.”

“Exactly!”

Another howl. This one sounds like Ered. The only other person who could produce a pitch like that would be David, screaming with shock at something and Max knows for a fact that David never misses his 9:30 p.m. bedtime so he can be ‘fresh as a daisy for the next day-zee’!

“But still! The guy who came up with the idea for washing your hands to prevent disease spreading? They through him in a mental asylum! And, like, there are so many people who say they’re possessed by demons or they’ve seen ghosts. I can’t believe all of them have badly treated mental illnesses or are just seeking attention.”

“So you believe in curses now?”

Impatient, Neil shakes his head “I believe that magic is just science we haven’t figured out yet. Like I said, if Harrison can disappear his little brother, then I believe an ancient shaman had some kind of weird, weird science that let him lay a bad curse on the land.”

“You do realise that story was told by a guy who looks like a crackhead they use to advertise rehabs.”

“So?”

“So there’s one of those badly treated mental illnesses you were talking about.”

Finally they reach the tent. The last to do so thanks to Neil creeping along at a snail’s pace. The boys fumble their way to individual bunks and lay down in the dark. Max turns his face to the wall, listening to the rustle of Neil changing into his pyjamas. Black fingers splay across the wall. Bared
tree branches, groping at the thin canvas.

“Max?”

Max stifles a sigh against the back of his hand “Yeah.”

“I need to sleep with the lantern on.”

“Jesus fuck, Neil.” Max paws at the floor until his knuckles bump the handle of the lantern, which he was using to look for a spider in his shoe that afternoon.

He rolls the lantern across the tiny aisle to Neil. The light is just strong enough to be irritating when it comes on. Not strong enough, as Max had hoped, to scrub out the fingers reaching for him across the canvas.

(Now)

In the end, Max has to go back to the car. His clothes are comically inadequate for the weather. The cold becomes only just bearable when he finds a shallow dirt hollow in the claw-scraped roots of a tree, squeezes himself inside and curls up as tightly as he can. Snow tears against his back, seeping into him through the vertebrae, the ribs, brushing against his internal organs. The shivers are so powerful, so violent, Max’s teeth begin to slip and opens his lower lip. He wishes he had listened more carefully to the survivalist rants Emmanuel would go on every time he got Max and Neil in the car. He was convinced it was his duty to impart his knowledge of roughing it in the great outdoors to all of Nikki’s friends should they ever end up in the kind of situation he spent all of Nikki’s childhood preparing her to weather.

Nikki is fine, thinks Max.

She is fine. She will be wearing the pelt of a wolf by now. The alpha of the pack.Demanding that her underlings convey her to Camp Camp where she will wage a blood-war the likes of which they have never seen before.

Max, on the other hand, cannot feel a single one of his extremities anymore. There was a movie he watched with David- something about men on a mountain. He can’t remember which. All he remembers is the horrific cases of frostbite the survivors came away with. Amputation-worthy injuries. Max imagines his fingers blueing. Darkening to unsalvageable black as they are cupped to his face and he is blinded by the night and the lack of moon. Or he might just die. Paradoxical undressing is a thing, right? Just before his body shuts down completely from the cold, Max will feel sweaty and over-dressed. He’ll pull off his jeans and sweater and stumble through the woods, barefoot and half-naked, but feeling as if he were baking on a tropical beach.

Max understands he doesn’t have much time out here. His only chance is to go back to the car. Maybe if he’d thought to explore the ruins for a good hiding place instead of just bolting for the woods- but he doesn’t have that option anymore. Now, his choices extend to either hiding or waiting here and wasting of the cold. So, with the sensation that needles are being pushed into every pore of his body, Max crawls out of the roots and runs. Luckily he did not stray too far into the woods before the cold compelled him to find shelter. Even with the snow and the near total-darkness, he can tell he is only a few dozen feet from the tree-line.
His bare feet come down hard on the frozen soil. It feels like summer loam, though, like he retraces the steps of a long-loved path to a childhood playground. He never had any of those. He never had a place he loved to play in- only favourite hiding spots. Places that were conveniently out of his parents’ line of sight and reach. His childhood was an exercise in survival right up until they booted him to Camp Camp. Stranded with his anger and a man who loved like Mother Theresa wandering haplessly into his sights.

Best thing his folks ever did for him, second to bringing him up in Islam. The Prophet (peace be upon him) and David saw him through. Now, it looks like only one of them is standing between Max and a fate so strange Max cannot believe it belongs to him in any capacity.

Tearing through the snow. Cutting the pads of his feet open on rocks and branches made into icy razors. Breathing his body warmth out in funnels of steam that disappear quickly against the nearly black sky. Impossible miles away from the home that this hellhole, a shitty camp named after a shittier person, lead him to in the first place.

When Munkar and Nakeer appear to him, the first thing Max will do is ask whose bright idea it was to script this sort of ending for him. Why couldn’t they have just killed him when he was still trapped under his parents’ roof? Before he had anyone to mourn him? Why would they give him love, safety, warmth and patience when his life was all along going to culminate in a rough wood on a snowy night where, just out of sight, a madman stalked and plotted?

The wind hits Max doubly as he comes out of the tree-line. For a horrifying moment, he does not know which way the car is. If he picks the wrong way he might end up stumbling into Lake Lilac. At this stage getting wet will definitely kill him.

But then he sees the soft, but insistent glow of a battery-powered light reaching through the shadow of the snow. Campbell must have left the light on. Max does not even care if Campbell is still in the car. Hunching his shoulders, Max crosses his numb arms over his chest in a last attempt to keep his core from freezing over completely, and summons the remains of his energy for a mad dash for the car.

When he is close enough to make out the body of the car he sees that Campbell is no longer there. Or, at least, not sitting in view of the windows. Max struggles with the door handle. Mercifully, it opens without much persuasion, and he crawls into the chilly car. The barrage of snow has already made the car icy. Swallowing back tears, Max digs down a little deeper and finds the energy to clamber into the backseat, where he peels away one of the seat cushions and exposes the trunk, where the air is even colder. His breath warm in his face, Max gropes into the trunk, praying that David didn’t get rid of Dog’s blankets yet.

Dog has a bad habit of marking her territory on cushions or blankets she thinks David and Max might try to reclaim, so David was going to do a run to the dump with the ones they deemed beyond rescue.

Max has never been so happy in his life to find blankets when his fingers graze a rough quilt, much less blankets that have been peed upon by an adult bob-cat. He squeezes into the opening between the backseat and trunk, thinking that at last his tiny size from years of malnutrition is coming in handy, and grabs every single thing back there.

A duvet Dog savaged with her claws wraps around his middle. A quilt so ugly Max actively encouraged her to destroy it by pretending he wanted it goes around that. A pillow she stole from David’s bed and sprayed on while making eye-contact with him is pushed behind his neck to warm him up, because he is afraid his spine might grow brittle and snap in these conditions. A fitted sheet she liked to roll herself up in when the heating was turned down low goes about his middle. An eviscerated chew-toy joins the pillow. A monstrously thick bedspread that David is getting rid of because it made him sweat even in the winter tops off the bundle, and Max lays himself down where
his feet would go if he were sitting in the back-seat.

He tries not to remember this was where Nikki sat only a few hours ago. How, if she were here, they would be sharing body warmth. She’s always wanted to spoon naked with someone- not for the sexual thrill that most teenage minds would leap to, but just because it seems like a fun, friendly bonding activity.

Knowing that Max is a resolutely sex-repulsed asexual, she has tried a couple of times to convince him it would be a funny thing to say they’d done. She’d be the big spoon so there were no awkward junk-bumps. Max cited a number of reasons why he would rather die of exposure in a situation that was at the time hypothetical, the foremost reason being that he had already seen Nikki’s boobs once when she failed to inform him that it was her, not Neil, borrowing his shower, and had no desire to repeat the experience, and the final being that it was against his innate sense of modesty as somebody who was brought up with Islamic conventions in mind.

Add to that, an unusual amount of naked flesh from anybody freaked him out. It freaked him out when David walked around the house in his boxers just because Max grew up in a household where exposed skin extended the offer for some bruising. Last year it was considered a huge milestone when Max finally stopped swathing himself in that hideous thrift-shop bathrobe as soon as he got out of the shower.

But now? If Nikki appeared right now wearing nothing but the grin that said ‘I toldja it would be funny!’, Max would have no qualms about throwing his sweater, jeans and everything else off and letting her be the big spoon she had always dreamed of being.

The hell with modesty. Max will make up for it by never looking at another naked human being for as long as he lives.

Max is aware that he has begun to warm up when the pain starts. Apparently some of Emmanuel’s lessons have stuck in his head, because he somehow knows that the re-entry of warm blood into body parts that have been exposed to deep cold is supposed to be intensely painful.

So, when the tips of his fingers are filled with fire and his toes begin to seize with cramps as the nerve endings ignite again, Max starts to cry. He’s going to be fine.

Wrapped in a blanket burrito that smells of cat-pee, laying in the bottom of his family’s car while the madman that bundled him into it stalks the cold, somewhere, planning his next move and perhaps preparing for whatever he means to do to Max and missing a friend who may well be dead in the snow already, Max weeps with relief as his limbs re-fill with bloody and agony.

Chapter End Notes

Quick note on modesty in Islamic culture. Female modesty, specifically, can be a pretty polarising subject. In the fic I kind of toss it out in Max's mind as a black-and-white situation: he thinks of it as 'nudity bad', which is in part to do with his being raised with Muslim conventions, and partly because that sort of thinking helped to protect him when he was living under abuse.

I am writing this as someone who lived in Birmingham England for eight years (not a 'no-go' zone because of its Muslim population; it just means a lot of your friends and colleagues are irritable when it's time to fast for Eid), with plenty of Muslimas in her life. Among real world Muslims the convention is different for every nation and every people. While the general 'convention' is that women present themselves modestly, ultimately and ideally, it is up to individual Muslimas (or female-presenting Muslim) to
decide how much they want to cover up or not cover up. A lot of cultural and personal context will go into this choice. Basically, I don't mean to condemn women—any women, but Muslimas in particular—who don't cover up as much through Max's voice in the fic. The Muslima who wears a bikini to the beach is just as valid a member of her religion as the Muslima who wears a burkini.

Just a quick clarifier. Thanks for coming to my TED talk.
Jasper the friendly ghost

Chapter Notes

I am convinced that Jasper's name is a play on that old cartoon and no one can convince me otherwise. Also, Jasper's surname comes from that of his voice actor, the wonderful Griffin McElroy.

Jasper, who has almost forgotten what the sound of other people is like, is startled when he hears heavy footsteps over his head. Ever since Camp Camp was quite rightly annihilated, Spooky Island has been cordoned off. Had the quarantine been enforced by something solid like a fence or at least a firmly worded sign, Jasper would feel a little less isolated, and a little less unloved. But without a concrete threat in place to warn people off coming to Spooky Island he cannot help feeling the silence is somehow his fault.

Jasper has always had the tendency to turn things around on himself. When something went wrong while he was alive, he was quietly sure the fault was his own. An intense kind of guilt was instilled in him during his years in the foster system. It was sort of his fault that his parents couldn't care for him. Though he has never known what circumstances compelled them- or possibly, just her- to give him up, Jasper thinks it must have been his fault. Each new house or facility he went into greeted him with the same beleaguered attempt at friendliness.

Welcome to the organisation. Welcome home. Here are the house rules. Please don't fuck them up as we are on a very tight budget and we have a tiny margin for error- don't be selfish by causing problems for other people. Stay quiet, be good, do your homework and smile at your foster siblings.

It was the same everywhere Jasper was sent. Everywhere Jasper has ever been marooned. Nothing ever changed. Guilt followed him into death and crippled him as the explorers and curious children stopped coming and the island grew silent.

He must have done something to make it happen. Six years ago when he watched the camp get torn apart from the shoreline, he knew it was his fault. Maybe that was a good thing? Places like Camp Camp shouldn't always survive. Places that kill children, whether intentionally as Jasper now knows Campbell occasionally did, or by a simple inclination of the land to rid itself of the people that walk on it, which is what Jasper identifies as his killer.

The bears and cliff aside, that is. Jasper now understands he was doomed the moment he stepped off the bus from Seattle. The land decided it was too crowded, picked one child from the random multitude and now here Jasper is, unable to pass on, unable to do anything with his grief and his anger and his incredible isolation but moon around the island, corporeal as the steam coming off a boiling pot, and fume.

That is what he is doing when Jasper hears the footsteps over his head. Jasper is lucky to hear them at all, considering the amount of time he spends out of the mansion.

He likes to take advantage of the daylight by walking the familiar trails, keeping a mental record of the animals he sees and visiting his favourite places on the island. Small as it is, there is plenty to keep a young kid entertained. Jasper likes to walk into the freshwater creek that bisects the island and pretend to splash in the shallows. When it freezes over he glides up and down the length of it and strikes the poses of a figure-skater. He plays levitation games by stacking towers of acorns on their
points, by confusing the local squirrels and coyotes with floating rocks. On days when he feels low, Jasper visits his grave and brings himself flowers. If the island weren’t unanimously and silently abandoned by all of the camps on Lake Lilac, Jasper is sure one of the favourite scary stories to tell now would be of the bunch of wildflowers that floats itself over to an anonymous patch of grass near the shore.

It has been so long since Jasper was buried there and not a sign of him remains. Jasper himself would have forgotten where his body was if it not for the indelible, inexplicable link his disembodied spirit feels to the body down there. Over the last six or so years, Jasper has been faintly aware of his body coming apart. The flesh has fallen away. The thrift-store sheet his body was wrapped in has long since dissolved into the earths. He’s a jumble of calcium and weathered collagen about seven feet beneath the grass. Jasper feels like that should bother him more than it does.

Honestly? Jasper is fine just existing for the moment. He has things to occupy his mind and time. He gets regular visits from the wildlife that swim across Lake Lilac to get to better feeding grounds without the annoyance of walking. His dream is to one day be surprised by a very confused, very lost moose. Or maybe a pack of wolves swimming to the island? Once there was a modest forest fire (it looked like somebody at Pirate Camp didn’t douse a campfire correctly), prompting a handful of the local wildlife to make the quick swim to the island for safety. For a couple of days afterwards Jasper had guests in the form of a stag and a few does, a disgruntled racoon and a black bear that was far more interested in knocking over the mansion’s ornamental outhouse than it was bothering the rest of the refugees.

But at least once every couple of weeks, melancholia seizes him and he just cannot bring himself to move, or to go to the shore and look out at the world that quickly forgot him. Sometimes it is because Jasper is afraid too much of the same scenery will spoil his appreciation of it, so he forgoes the woods for a levitation game.

Lately Jasper has spent his one day of hermitage in the storeroom at the back of the mansion. Back when Campbell was still free to come and go as he pleased, he kept a variety of unscrupulous products from his business ventures which were even more so. The FBI agents that stormed the island after they were finished with Camp Camp did not end up touching much of it. Jasper was terrified by the sudden invasion and made himself scarce until he saw their boats leaving the shore. On coming back he was surprised by just how much had been left undisturbed since the last time he saw it. The only thing in the menagerie of incriminating evidence that had been taken away was the filing cabinet where, as Jasper learned from reading invisibly over Campbell’s shoulder, the documentation for the tiny organ harvesting business run out of the island was kept. These files, along with a few about the children that had gone missing or been killed over the years in the general area of Sleepy Peak, had been bundled away into the boats.

Jasper didn’t really care. It left him with plenty of strange stuff to occupy his time. Ever since the weird kid wearing the fishbowl on his head tried to give Jasper his fishbowl, something had been a little different about the way the very misty Jasper interacted with the physical world. He began to learn to move things with his own strength. It was so hard he often blacked out in the beginning, but his ability has progressed in leaps and bounds since then. Six years with almost nothing to do but practice his levitation and manipulation skills? If there were an Olympics for ghosts then Jasper would be taking home the gold in the Levitate Pogs In A Perfect Spiral Formation category.

This is not what he is doing when Jasper is surprised by the footsteps upstairs. Levitating Pogs was the entertainment for the last hours; right now Jasper is doing a strength test of sorts by seeing how many large pieces of furniture he can hold up at the same time. So far his upper-limit seems to be the empty long-ago pillaged filing cabinet, a couple of chairs, a sofa that had to be moved out of the sex
dungeon because it was too blood-stained to be used, a desk piled with photos of children at angles that suggest the photographer was hiding in bushes when they were taken and a single adult-sized hiking boot.

At first Jasper mistakes the tromping over his head for the boot smacking the ceiling. It has been so long since he has heard the heavy tread of one of his own species that Jasper doesn’t really know what he is listening to, and so dismisses the noise as one of the weird, inexplicable host of them the mansion constantly makes. Jasper doesn’t make footsteps of his own even though he’s maintained the habit of walking on the ground- of walking, though, theoretically he could just float everywhere he needed to go.

It is only when Jasper hears a muffled cry of pain that he realises what he is hearing.

“-go of my hair!”

Cameron Campbell’s voice is instantly recognisable. Jasper is not about to forget the voice of the man that killed him. Put Jasper out of his misery, as Campbell would argue.

“Are you going to stop trying to run away from me?”

“Yes!” snaps the other, younger voice “There’s nowhere to fucking go, alright?”

“Not without shoes.”

“And you soaked me!”

“You shouldn’t have slept in all those pissy blankets. At least you smell clean, now.”

It’s a testament of just how much skill with which Jasper controls levitation that he does not drop the hundreds of pounds of furniture and the one shoe floating over his head. Carefully, like a cat creeping up on a bird, he lowers the pieces to the ground one-by-one. The photos don’t so much as shiver as the desk is set down. The hiking boot drifts back into the corner where Jasper found it. Jasper lets himself float to the ceiling and goes through it. As always there is an itchy sensation as what serves as his body passes through the old wood and plaster and pipes. Jasper is scratching like a madman by the time his head pops through the floorboards of the mansion’s main hall. Campbell and the other guy can’t see Jasper unless he choses to let them, which he does not.

But still- the kid has his angry green eyes trained right on Jasper and it’s unnerving as hell. Jasper glances over his shoulder and realises, with a sickening lurch, that the green-eyed kid is glaring at Campbell, not at the pre-teen head and torso that just sprouted out of the ground. And Campbell has this horrible, disgusting look on his face; this look of pride that makes Jasper seize up with dread. He feels sick. In the place of nausea or a rush of adrenalin, Jasper feels a dread so deeply rooted, so dark and urgent and so quick to wash over him in one foul, fear-smelling wave that he briefly loses himself.

For a fraction of a second Jasper is no longer a part of the world. Some other dimension claims him, and a second later he is back, even more terrified by what just happened, and still trapped between the kid he does not know and the man he cannot forget.

Jasper gets onto all-fours and crawls around the kid. Though he knows Campbell cannot see him or feel his presence, Jasper crawls until he gets behind the kid. Only then can he bring himself to get up and run. It’s a pointless gesture. Running from someone who cannot hurt him- from someone who would not think that Jasper is even in a position to be hurt anymore. Campbell buried that problem a long time ago.
And yet, there is still enough of Jasper McElroy to run into the cold white world outside with a deeper fear in his chest than he has ever known.

Max’s scalp feels like it is going to be bruised for the rest of his life. Presuming, that is, his lifespan still has a chance of extending into his eighties, but he’s so cold right now he is having serious doubts that he will make it through the next ten minutes. Campbell woke him up this morning by dragging him out of the car by the hair. Max has thick springy hair that curls in every direction, and so makes an ideal handhold for people who want to move him about without much effort. He has gained a bit of weight since the last time somebody pulled him by the hair, of course, but not as much as he would have liked to. Malnutrition in the early years can be a real bitch during puberty.

Luckily for Max, once Campbell was sure he’d gotten Max onto his feet he let go and ordered Max to follow him, and to leave the Dog-soiled blankets in the car. Max knew better than to argue on that point. Or to ask for a coat, or shoes. Plenty of people have survived exposure, he told himself. Nikki is probably doing it right now with her usual verve, and a bit more, probably, because she has always wanted a good excuse to wear the skin of a wild animal for warmth.

Max allowed himself to be lead to the edge of Lake Lilac. Perhaps the way they took was familiar. It didn’t feel like Camp Camp had ever stood here at all. Max would have wondered if they had come to the right place were it not for the remains of what must have once been the counsellors’ cabin sagging amongst snow-plastered trunks. At the edge of the lake sat a small motorboat. Campbell had him get into the front and steered them wordlessly across a channel of unfrozen water running through the otherwise thickly iced lake.

Max noticed Campbell had gotten another few layers from somewhere, and that he was hunched up so as to duck the spray coming off the lake surface, leaving Max to catch most of it. Cold wind numbed his face. Snatched the air from his throat. Max felt as if he were suffocating by the time they reached the shore and then Campbell went and made it worse by again seizing him by the hair and tossing him into the water when they were a few feet from the sand. Deep enough that Max was submerged when he fell. After all that Campbell still snapped at him for moving too slowly towards the mansion.

The only reason he didn’t die of cold water shock, he thinks, was thanks to a combination of already being half-frozen by the trip across the lake and because Max has never been so goddamned pissed off in his entire sixteen years before, which is helpful for keeping him warm.

“I’m going into the basement.” Campbell gestures to a dim staircase shunted into the ground “There should be clothes in the upstairs bedrooms. Don’t put anything on your feet, though. Socks are fine. But no shoes.”

“No shoes?” Max’s teeth chatter so hard the words come out mangled “Think I’m gonna run? Where?”

Campbell puts his back to Max and fiddles with a light-switch. He is just as surprised as Max when a light actually flickers to life above the dark stairs “I suppose you could run across the ice to the Woodscouts. Then again, I couldn’t really tell if the channel we used to get here was just a thin spot of ice, or if all of the lake is thin enough that you could fall through. After all the trouble you’ve caused me I can’t promise I’d feel generous enough to pull you out again.”

“I won’t go anywhere.” says Max.

Running to the Woodscouts sounds like a great idea. Max cannot believe he didn’t think of it himself. Honestly, if Pikeman oozed out of the shadows right now Max would gladly pretend for a moment that he is not a flaming aromantic and kiss Pikeman right on his greasy mouth. Tongue, too,
if the bastard wants it. Just so long as he gets Max the hell away from Campbell and gives him a pair of shoes.

Campbell puts his hands on his waist, a wrist catching the fold of his jacket so Max can appreciate the holstered gun “Come to the basement in fifteen minutes. If you’re late I’ll assume you’re trying to escape and come looking for you.”

“Does this place have hot water?”

Campbell blinks “Excuse me?”

Max tastes blood in his mouth as his chapped lips split “I said does this place have hot water? I need to warm myself through, or I’m going to die. You want to use me as a hostage. Now do you want a live hostage? Because if I have to spend one more goddamn minute of my life being this cold then I’m gonna give out. I’m just gonna die. And let me tell you, when David gets here—”

“David?” Campbell scoffs “What makes you think he’s coming—”

“Because he will. Because he’s always come to get me before. So you’d better do your best to keep me in a good condition until he gets here. You don’t want to know what happened to the first people who let me starve and freeze.”

Campbell is quiet for a moment. Max can see the veins twitching in his temple as he decides whether or not he wants to hit Max. Then he crosses the room and fumbles at a box of switches for a moment. With the mighty rumble of old wiring clearing its throat, the mansion comes to life around them. A boiler coughs in the basement. Lights wink on in twos and threes, illuminating the hideous bears in electric light for what might be the first time in six years. Water knocks through pipes beneath Max’s feet and over his head.

Campbell points up the stairs “Third room on the left. Give it five more minutes for the water to get hot. If you lock the door I have a fire axe I can use to unlock it.”

Max dashes up the stairs, raising dust every time his foot touches carpet, and slams the door of the dark bathroom as soon as he can get his shaking hand to close around the doorknob. He slaps the walls until he finds a light switch. Immediately a bulb blows. The others come on one by one, reluctant and sullen to suddenly be put back to work after years of idleness.

The room is frigid, being made out of tile, and with one of the windows hanging open. A pillow of snow lies underneath the open window. Of course it was summer when Campbell was last in the place. Otherwise he never would have let so much as a crumb of snow inside lest it cause the extensive water-damage Max can see has rotted the grout and cracked the tiles beneath his feet. He has to lean up to shut the window. The effort nearly knocks him flat.

Being so cold for so long is hard work.

Then it occurs to Max that he’ll need something to cover himself. Evidently the day Campbell last left the mansion must have been the laundry day, because there’s not a stich of towelling in the room. Loath as he is to leave the bathroom Max forces himself out into the hall, which the stale breath of a heater has only just begun to warm, and tears open doors until he finds the inevitable linen closet.

The first towel he finds he has to discard because something very messily ate a mouse on it, but the rest are salvageable.

By the time he gets what he needs and goes back to the bathroom, he figures the water should be hot enough. It hurts his hands to open the faucets. Too much heat too quickly.

The pain is incredible. Max strips and kneels at the edge of the tub on some of the towels so he
doesn’t have to touch the cold tiles, submerges his open palms in the steaming water, gritting his teeth against the pain, and splashes the scalding water on his chest. Warm the core first, Emmanuel says in his head, or you’ll have a heart-attack.

Max is no longer stranded in Campbell’s mansion. He is in Catbird. It is his third summer in the place. Thirteen years old, still too small for his age, still painfully skinny even though he eats as much or as little as he wants to. Emmanuel has rounded him, Nikki and Neil up for a survival lesson under the guise of a day-hike. They have gone up the slopes of one of the shorter peaks in the area and are stopped at the edge of a reedy pool. Emmanuel is up to his waist in the water giving a solemn lecture on how to beat out hypothermia, while also poised over the surface of the water, preparing to catch a fish with his bare hands.

“All the cold blood comes back to the heart at once. All them important parts. It freaks the heart out so it just gives the hell up, and you’ve got a man that’s cold and dead on your hands. So you gotta warm the core first. Give ‘em a hug. Put a warm pot of water on their chest. Stick ‘em in front of the fire with their chest pointed at it. Anything you can think of. What you ain’t gonna do is toss the poor sap head-first into a warm bath, first thing, otherwise he’s gonna cark it.”

Max is aware of being sweaty and bothered. He is tired. Three years after settling into Catbird, he exhausts quickly and easily. They have given him the lightest pack. He is both touched by the gesture and offended that they appear to have conspired behind his back to make him more comfortable. Neil is ridiculously lanky and tall. His legs protrude from his shorts and stretch into oblivion. His arms are different sizes. Nikki is in her shaved-head phase. She is angry about the rigmarole of taking care of her hair- of taking care of any sort of hair, so shaved it all off when a moment of impulsivity happened to catch her with an electric razor on hand.

Max splashes himself four more times before he allows himself to test the water. The pain is like being submerged in a fire. Like the one time when his mother, bored of her usual methods of abuse, experimentally stubbed out a cigarette on his collarbone.

“What I don’t get,” says Nikki, dipping her feet into the water “Is why you can’t just warn us about boys. Normal dads only want to talk about how horrible boys are. I’m turning into a teenager before your very eyes. Are you really gonna let me waltz into the dark world of hormones and dating without telling me how shitty boys are?”

“Language, Nikki. And girls are awful too. Anybody with a sex drive is gonna be bad news for the next five years.”

Neil grinned at Max. At that time he was not yet out to his parents and, having recently discovered that Max was an asexual-aromantic who did not care to broadcast his identity very much, considered them a part of a brotherhood of secret non-heterosexuals.

Max remembers rolling his eyes at him. Yes, Neil, he thought, I don’t have a sex drive and it’s funny to stare at me knowingly every time it gets brought up in conversation.

Ya Allah, does it hurt. Inch by inch Max lowers his blueing body into the hot water. When he grasps the edge of the tub to steady himself, the hand he brings out from the water is boiled red and steaming.

“Emmanuel, can I ask you a question?” while Nikki and Neil have gotten into the water up to their knees, Max lays sweating in the shade of a tree. He is miserably hot. But happy, he thinks, he may be happy today.

“Sure. Shoot.”
“How come you’re always telling us this stuff?”

Emmanuel hangs over the water, statue-still “Somebody’s gotta make sure you know how to take care of yourself.”

“But shouldn’t you be telling us how to balance a budget?”

Nikki shakes her stubbly head “Stop trying to make my dad make sense. It’s never gonna happen.”

“Sometimes life is budgets and oil checks. But that’s all human life, you understand? At some point human life is gonna turn to animal life. Something is gonna take you out of your safe space and make you a scared animal. So you gotta know how to survive as a scared animal.”

Max bites his lower lip. He bites it once three years earlier and again, now, so hard it prompts a spurt of blood from his wounded lips.

Max has been a scared animal for most of his life. He finds himself looking at Emmanuel in a new light. Wondering how many of those scars are from wild animals and self-inflicted accidents, and how many of those may have come from the grandparents Nikki never talks about.

Emmanuel plunges his hand into the water. A fish comes wriggling from the water, choked in his bare hands, which he hefts over his head. Nikki lets out a cheer. Neil claps politely. Max, seized by an unexpected wave of grief for him and for Emmanuel, takes advantage of the triumphant clamour to let out a sob. It is over as quickly as it came. Max wipes his eyes once three years ago and now, again, though they are tearless. He wipes a film from his eyes and blinks. His surroundings come into focus for the first time. Max makes his hands into fists and, putting his face beneath the water, begins to plot.

“I was starting to worry you’d run away.”

Max thumps down the basement steps. He is buried beneath about 1000$ of expensive sweaters and designer scarves to the point that the robust central heating has begun to make him sweat, along with a pair of ski pants that feel more high-tech than his laptop. But, in accordance with Campbell’s wishes, he remains bare-foot.

Campbell waves him over to a desk pushed up in the corner “I want to show you something.”

With his hands in his pockets, Max shuffles over. There is no way of knowing how much of this mess is from the neglect of six years and how much of it was from a tantrum, the echoes of which Max could hear all the way upstairs as he was drying himself off. Campbell’s face is red from the effort. His chest heaves, pushing his ribs out at frightening angles. He has stripped down to a ratty T-shirt and some jeans for this work. Sweat pours freely down his face and speckles the papers he wants to show Max.

Max stops about four feet away from Campbell and squints “What is it?”

He has to fight off the urge to bite Campbell’s arm as it wraps around his shoulders and pulls him closer “Some very sensitive information.”

It’s pictures of children, as Max feared it would be. Nothing explicit. Nothing repulsive out of the horrible context of this mansion. But knowing what this basement can mean, as Max scans the grids of grainy photographs of children, taken at a distance, taken of smiling faces, taken of little bodies in beds that are not quite hospital beds with trays of freshly soiled tools laid out beside them.
Max covers his mouth.

“Can you believe they didn’t take this away?” Campbell points towards a filing cabinet missing every one of its drawers “They mangled that thing over that. Every piece of it is gone. Every last name in there. But they leave photos like these. What does that tell you about the sort of people we’re dealing with?”

Max licks his lips “Dealing with?”

“You know. The kind of people that are after me. They’ll be coming after us soon. Me, specifically.”

Max strains away from him. At last, Campbell lets him duck out from under his arm and back away.

“You think I have fantasies of persecution?” Campbell laughs harshly, shuffling the papers with trembling hands “They aren’t fantasies. I was put in Super Guantanamo. Can you imagine how much people would have to hate me to not only put me into the American prison system, but the extra-government prison? You think those FBI men just took me away to Guantanamo because they felt like it? No. I had a cell waiting for me there for a long time. But you know what’s really funny?”

Max shakes his head silently. He wrings his hands inside his pockets.

Campbell reaches under the desk and puts a fat canvas bag on top of the photos “Look in there.”

Hesitantly, Max tugs at the strings that hold it closed. His heart stutters as he realises he is holding a bag stuffed with bundles of money. Packs of bills bound up with rubber bands, hair bands and paper-clips. Quickly Max closes the bag and pushes it away from him.

“They left all that fucking money. They take away their names and their bank accounts, but they leave all this fucking money just, laying around. For six years.” shaking his head, Campbell puts his back to Max “What do you think of that?”

Max takes his hands from his pocket and raises the dumbbell he has been turning over in his hands for the last couple of minutes “You’re right. It’s funny.”

The dumbbell comes down on the back of Campbell’s skull with a wet thump. Campbell crumples across the desk. Max drops the dumbbell and runs.
Urban-legend looking motherfucker

Chapter Notes

CW: suicide by gun. No, it's not anybody we're attached to. Well. I guess some of us are attached to them, but speaking as an intellectual I think y'all are weird.

Gwen’s first instinct upon finding the Quartermaster on her doorstep is to mace him. Grab Hen, kick the fucker in the throat and empty her mace can into his lone eye.

In the six years since the universe realised its greatest mistake and caused Camp Camp to be burned to the ground, Gwen hasn’t heard a peep out of him. She just kind of assumed he had melted into the woods from whence he appeared at the ass-crack of dawn on the first day Camp Camp received new kids. Neither she nor David knew where he lived in the mean-time.

Was he a Seattleite? Was he from one of the other towns seeded throughout the woody ranges, and if so, was it one of the hyper-gentrified bay and hiking towns, or one of the more back-woods po-dunk towns that makes the tourists roll up the windows and step on the gas? Was he just a Bigfoot in a convincing human disguise?

Gwen starts to close the door in the Quartermaster’s face, but he puts one muddy snow-boot in between the door and the frame and steps onto the welcome mat inside. She grabs the baseball-bat Hen keeps in the umbrella bucket for occasions just like these and is getting ready to swing when the Quartermaster pulls her into a hug. She freezes. He thumps her in the middle of the back and lets go, putting his hands (a hand and a hook, rather) into his pocket.

“Done good for yourself.” His voice is utterly casual as if it was pre-arranged that he would arrive on Gwen’s doorstep in the small hours of the morning.

“I done what?” she lowers the bat, feeling impotent and disorientated “What? What’s going on? Why- how did you get here?”

“Drove.”

“How did you know I’d be here? This isn’t even my apartment.”

“Your sister’s.” he says.

He’s right. Gwen is in the middle of one of the depressive moods which occasionally side-swipe her and flatten her on her back so she can’t go to work and can’t shop for herself and can’t do anything, really, but cry in bed. Whenever this happens Gwen cashes in a week of the sick-days she saves up for this specific purpose, and camps out in the seldom-touched bedroom of Hen’s cryptid of a roommate. Gwen has never seen the man nor heard his voice before, but there must be someone splitting the rent for this pleasant little hovel with Hen, because she wouldn’t make the rent for this place on her own. And his overlong business trips always seem to coincide with the times when Gwen needs to crawl away into a hole and play dead for a couple of days.

How the Quartermaster not only knows where Hen’s house is and what time to appear so as to catch Gwen while she is also here does not bear thinking about. But Gwen’s thinking about it anyway—about the Quartermaster lurking at the bottom of her street in a darkened car, following her onto the
train as she headed for Hen’s rental with a heavy bag and a heavier heart, so much so that she didn’t notice him tromp on after her, or trailing behind her as she picked through the steep roads and watched her duck into the house with a tear-wet face.

How long has he been here? How many of the three days Gwen has spent laid up in the empty bedroom has the Quartermaster lain in wait?

“Why are you knocking on my sister’s door in the middle of the goddamn night?”

“I need to talk to you about Camp Campbell.”

Gwen’s stomach does some interesting acrobatic moves. A shiver passes over her skin. How hard would she have to hit the Quartermaster to get him to go away? To knock him out the door and slam it on his ass?

“Why? It’s over. It’s all over. Why the hell would you come here wanting to talk to me about that? There’s no fucking point. Go away.”

“It’s got important again.”

The persistent casualness with which he handles her is infuriating. Really, it is like they have made plans, and Gwen is the one in the wrong for treating him this way just because she went and forgot. Gwen frames herself in the hallway to prevent him from advancing further into the house. His sister is sleeping not too far away. If he just knocks Gwen over and charges the stairs he could be into Hen’s room before Gwen has time to scream.

“David n’ his boy are in trouble.”

Gwen stops “Are you serious? Are you just trying to get into the house?”

“Try to call David. See what he says. If he picks up. But he won’t, cos he’s been shot.”

Again, Gwen’s stomach constricts. Shot.

Being shot is something that happens to people on the news. To the older men that take their grandkids up into the mountains to hunt and fail to explain the equipment properly. To former spies and unfortunate victims of home invasions and the colleagues of a person who has a big problem with their workplace and a bigger gun cabinet.

Being shot is not something that happens to the people Gwen loves.

She stares at the Quartermaster for a long time. Long enough to realise she has been freezing this entire time. When she has weeks like this, she isn’t always aware of what her body experiences in any meaningful way. She has a burn scar on her left hand from a time when she did not realise she was pouring kettle-boiled water on her hand as it rested on the countertop, rather than the cup it was directly beside. It’s snowing. How long has it been snowing?

After a moment, Gwen decides the Quartermaster must be telling the truth.

“Is he ok?”

“He’s moving around but I don’t think he’s ok.”

“Were you with him when it happened?”

One of the Quartermaster’s bushy eyebrows raises “Why would I be?”

“I don’t know. You’re on my fucking doorstep. I don’t understand- what happened to him?”
“They didn’t tell you?”

Gwen crosses her arms over her chest and glances towards the stairs. The landing is dark. She must have been shouting her head off at the Quartermaster, and Hen just slept on through it. Good to know Gwen can rely on her sister for back-up.

“Tell me what?”

“Campbell got out.”

“I know that.” then Gwen falls silent as she connects the information. She feels numb. Number than she already is. Her body is so heavy Gwen has to sit down. The Quartermaster’s tracked slush and mud in on his boots. All over the tile. Staining the welcome mat.

“What the fuck?” she pulls at a lock of her hair “Oh Jesus. What the fuck. What the fuck. He shot David? He really shot David?”

The Quartermaster nods “Like I said, he’s moving. He’s going back to the camp now. Campbell already went, but he didn’t go alone.”

Gwen knows what he means without having to hear it aloud. At the same time, she immediately knows what she has to do. Without another word to the Quartermaster, she turns around and takes the stairs on all-fours. She barrels into the absentee roommate’s bedroom and gropes in the dark for the suitcase she brought along with her, snagging a pair of jeans and her heavy winter jacket. At Camp Camp Gwen used to change laying on the floor of her room because she was afraid the Quartermaster might be standing outside of her window, using some incredible old-perv eagle-eye to examine her through the curtains.

Now, with the door hanging open and the sound of boots coming up the stairs, Gwen strips without hesitation.

Not even when he stands in the doorway and watches her “It never got out, really, what happened at that goddamn camp. I was hopin’ it would. Spare me the trouble ‘a telling people myself. I been waiting for six years and it looks like the situation’s goin’ the other way. Some shit’s happening to kids. It’s gonna get bad. It’s gonna get bloody and the bloody part’s gonna be inflicted by a man who should’a been smothered in his crib, he’s so fuckin’ rotten.”

Gwen pulls a sweater over her head. She gets on her knees and pats the dark carpet for her mace keychain. It’s almost nothing. But that’s still better than absolutely nothing. She should be able to find something more substantial on the way over.

“An’ I know you know it too. The way you’re just lightin’ up outta the door. This ain’t gonna get fixed ‘cos there’s too many damned people who like it the way it is. Fucked up. ‘Cos fucked up keeps ‘em safe. Fucked up means a whole lot a people are never gonna know where their kids went. A whole lotta missing kids are gonna stay missin’. And those people who like it all fucked up, they’re gonna work for as long as they live to make sure things stay fucked up ‘cos they don’t wanna admit the only reason they’re still livin’ is ‘cos they took a little piece of a missin’ kid. Not into their homes. Not into their hearts. They took the hearts. They took the hearts and other things and I stood by an’ watched it happen because lettin’ it stay fucked up was either than un-fucking it.”

There it is. Gwen shoves her meagre weapon into her pocket, then starts looking for her hiking boots. Hen planned that they would take a hike at the end of Gwen’s bad week. Hen is convinced that alpine air and some fresh creek water can see off any depressive episode, so she always insists that Gwen brings her hiking boots. And even though Gwen has used these so many times in the last six years she swears she can still smell Camp Camp on the soles.
“Did you drive here?” Gwen straightens up, stuffing her feet into the boots “Give me your keys.”

He tosses a set of keys to her. Gwen dashes past him, snatching her phone and charger up off the dresser. She’ll call Hen in the car. It’s going to be hard to explain, but it would be harder to wake Hen up, explain what the hell is going on and who the hell the grizzled urban-legend-looking motherfucker in their house is, and then Hen would insist on coming with her, which Gwen does not want. Hen has her own life. She doesn’t need Gwen’s bad choices from six years ago affecting her life more than they already do.

The cold hits Gwen like a physical wall. Gwen stops, doubles back to the closet and snatches three coats out. All she can think of is how Campbell has Max. Campbell was never a good man- and definitely not a kind man, so she can only imagine how cruel he might be once he is alone with a kid and has no one watching over his shoulder.

“They’re the car?” Gwen gestures up and down the dark street “What did you drive here?”

“Just outside.”

Her boots aren’t necessarily built to grab at the snow, so Gwen has to make a real effort not to fall on her ass three times before she gets ahold of the handle and jams the keys into the lock. Gwen tosses the coats onto the other seat and throws herself in front of the steering wheel. She glances up at the Quartermaster framed in the square of light that is the mouth of the hallway.

“Shut the door.”

He does.

Somehow Gwen knows he is not going to get into the car. There’s no verbal exchange- not even a change in his expression or the way he holds himself, but it is clear that the Quartermaster has no intention of getting into the car.

Gwen turns the key in the ignition. As soon as the engine has sputtered to life, the Quartermaster turns away from her and starts walking down the street, presumably in the direction he first came from. Ice has already begun gathering on the roads. Gwen is driving much faster than she should, especially with the reduced visibility from the snow and the darkness. She glances at the dashboard and is surprised to see she has a full tank. That should get her most of the way there. How far is Camp Camp from here? Six hours? Five hours?

If she keeps her foot on the gas pedal and sticks to the faster roads then Gwen should be pulling into Camp Camp before the sunrise is finished.

The Quartermaster waits for Gwen’s tail-lights to pull around the corner before he pulls the gun out of his pocket. He holds the gun flat in his palm, testing its urgent weight.

Gwen is on her way. David and the agents and their cultist will get there maybe an hour before she does. The Quartermaster has done as much as he is prepared to do. Whatever happens now is up to them. Whoever lives through this, whoever dies, it’s all up to them and the Quartermaster can’t bring himself to lift a finger to help them. It’s too much. It’s been too many years.

Besides, the Quartermaster has done too much on the cursed grounds of that goddamned camp to ever go back there. He puts the gun to his temple and, with a deep breath, puts the one and only bullet in the gun through his temple.

“I heard somebody screaming,” says Neil.
In the shotgun seat, David swivels around carefully to look at him. Neil has been quiet for the entire drive, either digesting the wild situation he has inserted himself into or because he doesn’t want the others to realise how goddamned stupid they have been to let a teenager come with them on an impromptu rescue mission. At worst Neil’s parents may accuse them of kidnapping. At best, when all of this is over Neil will have to explain to his parents why he thought it was alright for him to latch onto a pair of FBI agents and their murder-butler on the way to retrieve an escapee from Super Guantanamo.

David straightens up “What do you mean?”

“I heard somebody scream.” repeats Neil.

He is jammed in the far corner, shoulder-to-shoulder with Khalil, who immediately got in between Neil and Daniel. If Neil is perturbed at being squeezed into a tiny space with a man who once attempted to kill him then he has yet to show it.

“No you didn’t,” says Winston shortly “We’re moving at 80mph. It would be impossible for you to hear someone screaming unless they were standing in the middle of the road. Then all of us would have heard it. You’re just on edge.”

But David is disturbed. Could Neil have heard Max? They are only about twenty minutes out from Camp Camp- these last twenty minutes will probably prove the longest of David’s life- but perhaps Max escaped and has had enough time to take himself out of the camp. Max is fast in spite of his little legs. David has spent every morning of the last six years racing Max to be the first in the bathroom and has only won twice. One of those times was because Max’s leg had fallen asleep, forcing him to crawl on all fours. Even then David only beat him by a couple of seconds.

“When did you hear it?”

Neil crosses his arms and shifts so that less of Khalil’s elbow is digging into his side “Like, a half hour ago. I didn’t mention it because I thought I was, um, hallucinating, or something. But I’ve been thinking about it. I really did hear something. I’m not losing my shit or anything. I heard someone scream.”

Winston looks at David with this sort of ‘don’t indulge the child’ expression, which David ignores “What sort of scream was it?”

“A human one, definitely. I know what it sounds like when a bobcat or whatever is screaming and it wasn’t like that. I mean, the animals who sound like humans when they scream- it wasn’t one of those. It was a person.”

David takes a deep breath “Was it Max?”

“No. No, it was a girl. Max has a smoker’s scream.” Neil breaks off with a wince “Oh. Um, maybe don’t tell him that I just told you-”

“That he smokes?” David rolls his eyes “I know that. Max thinks just because he’s standing behind a tree when he smokes that he’s invisible. He thinks he’s found a good hiding spot just because he’s put his cigarette pack under a floorboard. I’m more interested in finding out who’s keeping him supplied with cigarettes than I am stopping him from smoking.”

Khalil furrows his brow “It’s not Ered, Inshallah, or I might have to reconsider my stance against using corporal punishment under my roof.”

Winston laughs “When Ered was four she stabbed another kid with a plastic fork at her kindergarten,
and Khalil spanked her for that. He cried harder than she did.”

“You guys aren’t taking this seriously.” mumbles Neil.

“What do you want us to do? Turn around? We’re almost there. We don’t have the time or the reason to backtrack for a half hour and comb the woods for the source of a scream that only you heard, Neil. It might be nothing. And if it’s something? I guarantee you it’s just some kids fucking around in the woods. There are camps all over the place. Plenty of schools are doing their fieldtrips for the autumn semester. What do you want me to say, Neil?”

Neil glowers at Winston “Something that shows you’re at least taking me seriously?”

“Did we or did we not let you come along on the trip to capture a mass-murdering organ-thief?”

Neil falls silent. David is not sure whether he should feel bad for Neil or grateful that he’s shut up. More than anything David needs some silence to think about what is going to happen at Camp Camp.

Obviously, Campbell needs to be killed. No question of that. The first time Campbell was taken out of their lives David made the mistake of trusting that, though he remained alive, he was never going to threaten them again. He knows better now. With some people, the thing that will ensure they are never able to hurt anyone again is death. Their trials will fall through because of a technicality and put them back on the streets, freeing them to show up at David’s student dorm in the middle of the night and scream abuse at him until campus security takes them away.

The police won’t take the situation seriously so that David is methodically stalked until he leaves the state. Then, later, when financial troubles and personal woes give him no other choice but to return to the family homestead, no one is prepared to think poorly of the man he is forced to live with, so there is no one for David to talk to about why he moved so far away from his family in the first place.

But of course David got lucky the first time. His mother and grandfather were removed for him by a stroke of good luck- for him, anyway. The car was totalled on a mountain pass. David cried at the funeral mostly for the relief of finally being free. He had the house to himself, an education degree under his belt and a summer job he had convinced himself he enjoyed, so, theoretically, the world was his oyster.

The second time David imagined his problems had been solved for him again. The universe removed a problematic person from his life, so David was free to choose what happened after that point, without worrying about Campbell threatening his plans or his happiness.

Six years later the man comes back with a gun and a finely aged grudge to steal David’s son. Now, if that is not a bit of finger-wagging on the universe’s part for not tackling his problems head-on, then David doesn’t know what to call it.

But he can still work this out. David is certain that he is going to have to kill Cameron Campbell. It won’t be the first time he has killed for Max.

“We’re here.” says Khalil.

Six years after every building was razed, Camp Camp is a ruin of trees and slouching piles of wood and pipes. Most if it is just a field at this point, with a scattering of tall grass and hardy wildflowers that are slowly disappearing under the snow. Out past the ruin, the first lights of a sullen dawn have begun to touch the frozen surface of Lake Lilac.

A strange thought comes to David then, unbidden, from the very back of his head: I’m home.
David opens his door “Let’s find my son.”
Sanctuary, kind of, sort of, not really.

Chapter Notes

CW: non-graphic mention of one specific sexual act and an older-than-a-minor character despairing at not having lost his virginity yet. Also, military school is mentioned and briefly described.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weird thing is that Max remembers the way. He has only ever had to make his way through the woods from the Woodscouts twice. The first time it was almost dark, and he figured out where he was going mostly through trial and error, by putting his foot into a lot of empty sets and burrows, climbing trees to swear at the darkness and confounding path ahead of him. It took him hours to get back to Camp Camp. David was, of course, waiting up for him, alarmed by the fact that Max was missing but too wise to his ways by now to expend the energy looking for him.

The second time around it only took Max an hour and a half from the point at which he’d run to edge of the Woodscouts’ property to the point at which he spilled over the doorstep of the mess hall and swore to the lunch-crowd that he would castrate every last one of those neo-fascists if they ever tried to kidnap him again. Nikki whooped and waved her fork to indicate she’d help.

Apparently, Max’s little monkey brain is far more efficient at storing survival information than he thought. Why would he have any reason to think that he’d ever need to remember the way to the Woodscouts Camp from Camp Camp? And in so much detail that he can tell exactly where he is going with the whole place covered in snow? Shit like this can’t be real. Shit like this constitutes the major plot-holes of bad horror movies.

His ears ache. Max has the eerie sensation that someone is whispering in his ear. Either it’s Allah, telling him the way, or it’s one of the ghosts the Quartermaster swore fill this land up to overflowing.

Max hasn’t eaten for the better part of the day. The last thing he had in his mouth was cigarette smoke. At least there’s water, everywhere. Max sweats underneath his heavy winter clothing. He figures he would be sweltering if it wasn’t for his bare feet, to the extent that he might be tempted to strip one of his coats off.

“That’s another really good way to die,” says Emmanuel, still waist-deep in that creek three years ago, still waiting for a fish to swim by, innocent of the doom hanging over it “Takin’ off yer clothes. Some people get too hot. They take off their jackets and the sweat they got on ‘em cools off. It’s about as bad as tossing a bucket of water over your head before you go out in the snow. There’s a term for it. I forget what.”


Paradoxical undressing, Max repeats to himself. The reason so many people lost in the snow are found naked as well as dead. As he runs, he allows himself a rare moment of nostalgia for the house he lived in before David took him away- how his mother blamed so many things she didn’t understand on djinn.

She wouldn’t pray. She wouldn’t practice a single one of the tenants of Islam in her own household (love, peace, generosity, caring for people weaker than her- in fact she seemed to make an effort to
act in direct contradiction to those), but she was happy to appropriate the existence of djinn. Not as a test of her faith, of course, but as a faint breath of malevolence that invaded her house to hide her car keys, give her summer colds and ensure the toilet paper ran out far sooner than she thought it would.

To encourage himself to keep moving in spite of his exhaustion, Max imagines his mother is running after her. The way he saw her last. Sweatshirt, sweatpants, tired from a long day at the cafe. She smells of roasted coffee beans and sickly-sweet menthol cigarettes. Her teeth are bared at his father—now-and she is saying something about the minimum wage. Even as she is chasing Max along the snowy shore of a frozen lake towards a group of people that actively tried to brainwash him the last time he encountered them, she is sunk into the chipped leather chair in the living room, her eyes following Max as he crosses the room.

Back then he knew not to move quickly. He had to treat his parents like horses that could be spooked easily; if he moved too suddenly, he could expect a retribution from rearing hooves.

He comes up on the edge of the Woodscout Camp a lot more quickly than he expected to. Max crests a slope and is suddenly looking down on the rail-straight rows of the Woodscout Camp. It can’t be any later than six in the morning and yet the camp is already alive with frantic activity.

The training pitch in between the cabins and the various halls is filled with people doing their best to run in bulky winter clothes. An early-morning jogging drill, it looks like. After he moved in with David, Max learned the Woodscouts was technically a sort of military-preparation camp. The reason they were so strict with discipline and uniform and remained gender segregated despite existing in the twentieth century could be chalked up to that. About two years ago, girls started to be admitted too because of the fuss that was raised when a long-time Woodscout came out as trans and wasn’t allowed back into the camp because she began to present as female.

Max is too far off to tell what the gender ratio looks like. Everyone is swaddled up in regulation-grey winter jackets and pants made out of some crinkly material that Max can hear rustle even from up here, and he must have a mile more to go before he gets within earshot of the Woodscouts. Starting down the slope, Max wishes for a pair of binoculars. This winter crowd must be made up of the disciplinary kids. The ones that get drummed out of military schools. God, what kind of thing would you have to do to make your parents think it was a good idea to send you to this armpit, next to a camp that was shredded by the FBI for belonging to the (alleged) head of a child abduction ring?

Max knows he cannot just run straight to the crowd. That would cause too much confusion. Anyway, the last thing he wants after escaping from a murderer is to throw himself at the mercy of a crowd of sleep-deprived juvenile delinquents and kids with behavioural problems. He has read ‘Lord of the Flies’. He knows how that situation would end up.

What Max needs is an authority figure. Again, his monkey brain is tossing all sorts of useful information at him as he carefully slips and slides down the slope, his mother pursuing him in his mind.

Arms, being the sunshine apple-blossom honey-peach person he is, managed to make friends with the silent, terrifying Petrol during one of the numerous clashes between their camps. They have been emailing each other back and forth regularly over the last six years. Petrol is still here, Arms says, but one of the others they knew from the old days has moved off to Canada. Max has a feeling it was Billy with the unpronounceable last name, but he cannot be sure. It would probably be best to seek out Petrol and whichever of the other two it is that has hung around. The idea of having to kiss Pikeman comes back to him, for some reason, and causes such an intense reaction of repulsion that Max is tempted to run back the way he came.

When he reaches the bottom of the slope Max is so exhausted he considers just stopping, right there. Imagining his mother’s coffee-stained fingernails reaching for the back of his neck no longer compels
him to run. His feet feel like raw wounds, both of them. When he looks down he can just about make out in the half-light that they are, indeed, ripped up pretty good. A glance back up the slope shows that he has been leaving a trail of faint bloody footprints for the last dozen feet or so. Max cannot feel so much as a twinge of pain in either of them. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to lay down for a moment. Just a quick breather.

Max sways on his feet. He is unsure if he is going to collapse where he is or surge through the last fifty or so feet between him and what he takes to be a staffroom.

And he thinks of David. David as he was on the night it became apparent to Max that he could rely on this man to protect him as well as he could, as often as he could, for as long as Allah would allow him to protect Max. It was proved to him by means of an unspeakable gesture. Literally, Max and David have never been able to talk about. Everything else they could talk about. The commonalities between the abuse David endured and the abuse Max had so recently escaped from. The strategies they each employed to avoid their parents. How goddamned hard having that emotional, physical history of scars makes it to connect to people, even to people who have gone through the same kind of thing.

But what David did for him was fucking unspeakable.

Max remembers what he looked like. Coming to the top of the stairs, tentative, frightened in a different way than the usual, because the silence that had fallen after this particular shouting-match between his parents didn’t strike him as the normal kind. The kind of defeated silence they could each take to their own corners to stew in, preparing for the next round. This was a silence that spoke of finality. Therefore, when Max came to the top of the stairs and saw David was stood at the bottom, he knew exactly what David had done. Max did not need to look for the blood, carefully wiped from the rain slicker his future guardian wore to prevent any stray drips, or at the bruise forming on David’s jaw, which he would later say was from clipping his chin on a kitchen cupboard, to know what was in the living room.

He nodded to David. He knew what David had in mind without being told- he knew to go back to his room and sleep through the night as if nothing was wrong downstairs. David would go away and come back in the morning, after Max told the police he was the only other person Max could turn to. And then the future was theirs to decide.

David never wanted this for him. David didn’t commit that horrible, necessary evil he committed so Max could die of the cold at the bottom of a hill, only feet away from safety.

Max lifts his head. He trains his eyes on the building and forces himself forwards on bloody feet.

Like the rest of the camp, Pikeman was stirred from his bunk by the cacophony of the morning reveille. In the old days, before Lake Lilac was sent reeling by the government-mandated destruction of Camp Camp, the Woodscouts were woken up by a scout leader playing their trumpet into the PA system. Tunes varied from a classic like the first few bars of ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ to something more recent and pop-orientated, like the opening of ‘Welcome to the Black Parade’, depending on how the man on muster duty felt. Nowadays they get woken up by the scoutmaster banging pots and pans together into the same PA. Sometimes he shouts. Sometimes he swears. When he swears, the language gets as about as brutal as it can without adding in any racial slurs. The gendered slurs he’ll go for, though.

Pikeman isn’t exactly pleased by the changes which have gradually overtaken the Woodscouts. They
were always a bit militant and discipline-focused, but after Camp Camp ended in absolute and resounding disaster they had to branch out a lot or face closure. The scoutmasters called in old favours and gave the business a complete overhaul, changing it from a camp for kids with their eyes set on cadet training to an organisation with legitimate military contacts. Now, anyone enrolled in the Woodscouts is expected to move onto some sort of basic training after graduation.
The focus on wilderness survival and fitness has moved onto a programme that is decidedly more violent. Whoever had the idea that the Woodscout’s twelve to eighteen year old delinquents should be trained in hand-to-hand combat is going to get a letter bomb from Pikeman, as soon as he figures out their address.

On the plus side, now that Pikeman is old enough to be considered staff he has a few luxuries. Missing the morning drills, for example, and availing himself of the staffroom without a touch of the guilt for invading a nominally adult space he felt when he was younger. This job has worked out alright, actually.

While most of the rest of the camp is outside jogging in minus temperatures, Pikeman has his feet up on the back of the space-heater, on its maximum setting, and a magazine open in his lap. Actually it’s a volume of French poetry concealed within the pages of a sports mag because absolutely everybody- Petrol’s traitorous ass included- give him shit whenever they catch him reading anything that does not have either an athlete on the front cover or the phrase ‘history of the ___ war’ in the title.

He and Petrol were lucky to miss coaching duty this morning. Instead, they have been able to retreat into the warm womb of the staffroom to keep an eye on the phones in case anybody’s parents call in. Which they rarely do. Petrol has a laptop open on their shared desk and is looking over a budget spread-sheet with glazed eyes.

Two identical mugs of coffee steam beside him. Pikeman made the cups earlier and managed only one sip of his cup before he forgot which one he first put his lips to. Petrol also appears to have forgotten which mug is his.

Both of them ignore the cups for fear of being forced to finish the mugs and risk an indirect kiss from sharing a cup. It’s just not right, says Pikeman’s father in his head, for the lips of two men to touch the same cup before it’s washed again. That’s why you never share a beer outta the same bottle with nobody. We don’t tolerate that kind of behaviour under my roof.
Pikeman isn’t sure what kind of training Petrol has about the etiquette of two guys drinking out of the same cup, but he’s determined that the staffroom won’t be turned into a scene out of ‘Brokeback Mountain’, no matter how much he might actually be down for that kind of thing.

But there is an unmistakable awkwardness in the air. Second by second the room gets more and more tense. Pikeman is more and more aware of the fact that he is twenty years old next month and has only ever been kissed by a girl. Feels like he should have dispensed with his virginity a long time ago. If not that, then at least gotten a blowjob somewhere along the line. His complexion is no longer the minefield it once was- and besides, if somebody’s going down on him, it’s not like they have to look at his face if they don’t want to.

Honestly it wouldn’t be so tense to sit in this increasingly stifling staffroom with Petrol if Pikeman could do so as a ‘real man’. He is sure Petrol has had plenty of experience in the bedroom, or the backseat of his car, or whatever, though it’s not something they talk about. Maybe if Billy hadn’t packed his ass off to Canada with a scholarship (to fucking VanArts, because Billy had secretly nursed a talent for hand-drawn animation) then it would be less awkward. Billy had a way of dissipating the tension, sexual or otherwise. The three of them would be sitting on the bleachers, waiting for the coach to read out their physical scores to the entire assembly of anxious Woodscouts, then Billy would start whispering a story about the time he shot his aunt in the knee with a BB gun out of the corner of his mouth and put them all in silent stitches.

Goddamn does Pikeman miss Billy. And, goddamn, is Petrol starting to look better and better the
longer Pikeman sits in this drowsy staffroom. The collective huffs and puffs of about three hundred juvenile delinquents should really do something to the blood rising to his face and other, more embarrassing places that require him to strategically position the sports/poetry, but if anything, the element of danger only makes it worse.

Pikeman opens his mouth. Petrol looks up at him expectantly.

Then, Pikeman is saved from saying something catastrophically stupid and horny by what he takes to be a ghost crashing through the door.

He drops the both of the books. Petrol startles, knocking one of the coffee cups off of the desk. A wave of cold air rolls into the staffroom. Pikeman jumps to his feet and reaches towards the mantlepiece with the vague idea of tossing the clock there at the interloper. Then the interloper pushes their hood back and, with a jolt of absolute horror, he recognises somebody he has not seen in six whole years.

“You fucks are still here.” rasps Max.

Fuck.
It would have to be Billy that moved away and not Pikeman. Fucking Pikeman. Six years have passed since he last interacted with the bastard and yet Max’s inclination to hate this man with all of his might is still as strong as if Pikeman attempted to abduct him the day before.

Pikeman drops a sports mag with a skinny book hidden inside of it. The guy behind the desk, unmistakably Petrol, knocks a coffee mug to the floor with his elbow. He lets out a croak of surprise or protest. There is a stifling bubble of heat in the staffroom thanks to a busy space-heater pushed into the corner. Max slams the door and pads over to the space-heater while the other two gape at him. Oh, God, yep, his feet are hurting now.

Like needles are being pushed into his heels with every step. But it is not as bad as the first time.
Max lowers himself to the ground and puts his back to the timber wall, his feet shoved right up to the lip of the space-heater. Again, he has left a trail of delicate bloody footprints behind him.

“What the-” says Pikeman at the same time Petrol starts to say “Are you-”

“I was abducted.” says Max. It sounds ridiculous to his ears. Unfortunate, and dramatic, and altogether unbelievable.

Pikeman and Petrol are thinking the same sorts of things. Victims of abduction are women. Young women with wrists bound up in tape wearing theatrically ripped slips, or young children, breathless from runs through the woods, sobbing for their mothers. And white, usually.
They are not small brown teenagers who kick in doors with barefeet, sit themselves down in front of the space-heater and demand assistance.

Max hugs his knees to his chest “Cameron Campbell abducted me. Do you have a phone? I need to call my dad.”

“What the hell?” for some reason, Petrol has climbed on top of his chair like a housewife fleeing a mouse “What the hell is going on?”

“I just told you!” says Max acidly “For fuck’s sake, help me!”

Pikeman stutters out “Is that really you? Max, from Camp Camp?”
“Yes! It’s Max! Manajith Luna, recently escaped abductee!” Max realises he is crying a little bit “I just had to run for an hour and a half through the snow and the dark so I’d really appreciate it if you don’t make me explain myself to anybody else but the cops. Can you call them? Call some kind of security? Just, give me your phone.”

“We’re not allowed personal cellular devices on camp grounds.” says Petrol in a voice far too meek and high for the big body that it is coming out of. He could be reading the words from the page of a rulebook.

“Then go get somebody! Look, I’m bleeding. My feet could get infected if they don’t fall off from frostbite first.”

At last, some sense of reality kicks in, and Pikeman ducks under the desk for a first aid kit and a huge metal bowl still greasy with the remnants of a popcorn snack. He opens a door that Max didn’t see earlier, marked ‘staff bathroom’, and jams the bowl into the sink to fill with hot water. All the while he keeps an eye on Max. He seems afraid that if he looks away from Max for one moment, the boy will disappear into thin air.

“Patroclus, get down from the damn chair! Make sure he’s not about to go into shock or something!”

Timidly, Petrol gets down from the chair and edges over to Max. He crouches as he gets closer, only relaxing when he is close enough to see that Max is, in fact, breathing, with a pulse hammering in his temple, and gives all appearances of being very much alive.

“The hell happened to you?” he breathes.

Max unzips his heavy winter jacket and flings it towards the desk. The inner-linings are damp from sweat “I told you. I was abducted. At gun-point, from my house in Catbird. Cameron Campbell-”

“Is in Super Guantanamo.” Pikeman crouches at his side with a steaming bowl of water, which he gestures for Max to put a foot into.

Max does and grits his teeth against the exquisite pain. Ya Allah, the pain!

“No, not anymore. He came into my house and shot my dad in the stomach, or the chest, or the arm- I don’t know.”

“Your father?” Petrol blinks “You mean David? The counsellor from Camp Camp with the smile and the bad hair?”

“There was nothing wrong with his hair.”

“Is he dead?”

Max grimaces. At least, that is what he thinks he does, but judging by the way Petrol reels back he has made a far more horrifying expression than he intended to “No! No he’s not fucking dead. I would know it! He’s coming, soon, probably, to kill Cameron Campbell.”

Pikeman and Petrol exchange a knowing glance over the top of Max’s head. Suddenly, he hates Petrol too. Look at the pair of them. Big bastards with grown-men’s beards and height advantages and the vestiges of teenage acne on their cheeks. Max hates them. Max hates this staffroom and the bowl of bloodying water at his feet and every single one of the anti-social little bastards doing their drills on the training pitch, and most of all, he hates Cameron Campbell so much that it is making his teeth hurt.
Standing, Pikeman goes to the door “I’m going to go get someone. Petrol?”

Petrol cannot get away from Max fast enough.

“Stay here.” says Pikeman without conviction.
He hurries out and slams the door behind him. A second later, without surprise, Max hears something scraping across the porch and being shoved under the front door handle.

“Don’t panic, ok?” Pikeman must expect Max to throw a fit “Don’t move! This is for your own good! We’re gonna help you, Max, but I can’t let you run around anymore! You're a danger to the kids and to yourself.”

Max wants to laugh. The weediest pre-teen could snap Max over their knee right now.

“Where the fuck do you think I’m going?”

“Stay there!” shouts Petrol “We’ll be back with a security officer! They have guns!”
Max isn’t sure if this last part is meant to warn him or reassure him.

As soon as he is sure they are gone, Max puts his back to the floor. He lays down and crams his other foot into the warm water, not caring that it hurts to do so, or that the heaviness of his bones feels like it is crushing him into the floor so he’ll never be able to stand up again. Max closes his eyes. He is not in danger of falling asleep. Not now, in so much pain, and so recently delivered from death’s doorstep.
He does not think he will ever be able to sleep again.

But, at least, his eyes are closed and his mind is drifting away from the stuffy staffroom, so that Max does not notice when a figure not much smaller than himself drifts in through the door. The door remains closed while the little person manages to walk through it as if it were nothing but a square of empty air.

Jasper McElroy stops just short of Max’s outstretched hand and hangs over the other boy. His eyes are dark and angry. He stoops and, with both hands, reaches for the silent and wet-faced Max’s throat.

Chapter End Notes

For those of us who aren’t giant classical nerds, Patroclus is the name of Achilles' right-hand man. Most accounts claim they were cousins, but the older ones (read: the ones predating the revisionist push to eradicate all mentions of queer relationships from the mythical canons) say they were lovers. I thought it would be funny if Petrol was short for something noble and classically and, traditionally, very queer, considering the way Pikeman's horny-ass mind was working in this chapter. Also I'm such a nerd it's a wonder I can function in society at all so I think these sorts of jokes are funny.
The woman makes it about a quarter mile off the road after she gets out of her car. She veered off suddenly and made a terrific crash when the hood of the car hit the ditch. Daniel watched her from his own car, idling, as she rolled a window down and heaved herself out from behind the crumpled steering column. He gave her a head-start. Not intentionally. The moment he saw the white flash of her dress whip into the treeline on unsteady legs he wanted to go after her, but he couldn’t make himself get out of the car.

Killing women isn’t easy for him. Daniel would like to call himself an equal-opportunity murderer, but he feels like a perverted psychopath every time he takes a knife to female flesh. In a society where violence against women is so reviled and the men who commit it looked upon as scum, Daniel cannot help but feel like Ted Bundy or a footballer caught beating his wife in front of a security camera.

Each time he must tell himself that these women are being murdered from a sense of duty rather than sport. They have done something to merit being on his list. Something to merit the anger of secret government agencies far more righteous than the CIA or the FBI, so he feels more secure that he is not indirectly contributing to the continuation of Guantanamo Bay. Super Guantanamo, at least, only imprisons people who have been undeniably connected to large-scale incidents of domestic terrorism. Daniel is doing a world the favour when he removes these women from it, and even striking a blow for feminism because he’s recognising that women have the same capacity for evil as men.

It still feels wrong when he catches up to the woman and puts the knife between her shoulder blades. There’s something about stabbing a sobbing woman in a pure white dress that makes him sick. Maybe it’s the irony of the situation? A woman dresses herself in the Western colour of purity and holiness on the day she is to be executed by an ex-cult member who was recruited specifically to murder her and her colleagues in a child-trafficking ring.

As Daniel knocks her to her belly and straddles her spine, driving the knife in again and again, he wonders if this woman might not have had some sort of premonition that compelled her to dress herself beautifully.

From what he judged in his week or so of observation before today the woman generally did not worry about beauty. Professionalism is what she went for- crispness and freshness to match the suits she wore for her work and pantsuits for her leisure time. Daniel did not even know she owned something as filmy and summery as this all-white dress, which looks more like the sort of slip a model would put on for a photoshoot than it does something a woman comfortably settled into middle-age would want to wear.

Then again his targets sometimes do weird things on the day he kills them. Just two weeks ago his target called their daughter for what he understood was the first time in fifteen years. The man managed to fight, cry and apologise to his daughter. Daniel waited on the patio as the evening wore on into the dead of the night, unable to bring himself to murder a man mid-reconciliation with his adult child. Granted, his daughter probably had a good reason to have estranged herself from him, considering that her father was heavy into human trafficking and the sale of organs on the black-market. But who was Daniel to judge?

Hot blood splashes across his face. Daniel clamps his mouth shut and keeps going. He has grown used to breathing heavily through his nose when he kills somebody- too often he’d get a mouthful of blood and feel more like a maniac than ever when he swallowed it. Hannibal Lecter. Not the fun one.
with the husband and the Danish accent. The weirder older one with the tongue thing.

All-in-all Daniel stabs the woman about twelve times in the back. When she has stopped struggling he turns her over and to deliver the final blow to the face. She is no longer alive- not by any long shot. But Daniel does not feel he has completed his job until he has ruined the face somewhat. Besides, it will make the body a tad harder to identify and give him a little more time to move onto his next job. Not that the police ever search for him in any meaningful way. Or if they do they do not get far into the investigation before Khalil or Winston or one of their colleagues intervenes.

Daniel balances the tip of the knife above the bridge of her nose and raises his palm, preparing to strike the knife home. Sometimes he wonders if people aren’t a little bit psychic on the days they are to die. White dresses. Calls to a long-lost, long-missed child. Why would Daniel’s targets feel the need to take little steps towards absolving themselves of crimes that are still providing them with an obscene profit? Why the white if the woman knows she is blood-stained beyond all redemption? Why weep with his daughter if the man knew he’d left so many other people’s children alone and hurting without a second thought?

Daniel whacks the butt of the knife. Her nose and much of her forehead give way with a satisfying squelch. He extricates his hands from the mess and flicks a bit of grey stuff from his wrist. Yawning, Daniel stands and starts back towards the road. The knife dangles from his hand like a heavy bag of groceries. He leaves a few sprinklings of blood behind him. An entire handprint on the trunk of a tree when he nearly trips and has to catch himself.

No matter. Daniel could be caught with a severed head in his lap and the Millers would find some way to wrangle him out of the situation.

(Three years later)

“There. Across the lake. There are lights on in the mansion.”

No sooner than Neil has rather unwisely blurted this is David off. Moves like the wind, for a man with a gaping hole in his arm. Khalil calls for him to stop. Winston dispenses with the pleasantries entirely and dashes after David, his nostrils flared so wide with the effort of sprinting you would think he’s trying to use them as a net.

It is a short but thrilling race; Winston catches David by his good arm. David tries to wrench away and is put into a headlock for his efforts.

“David!” Winston wheezes “We have to think! Do you understand me? We have to think about what we’re doing!”

For a moment David looks like he might bite Winston, but then he sags “He could be there.”

“Oh maybe he isn’t. Maybe Campbell put on the lights to make us go over the lake so he could snipe at us. The lake is frozen this time of year, isn’t it? He’d have a good shot.”

Daniel understands the impulse. Lights, draped at the edge of the grey horizon like a string of paste-pearls. Anybody would run straight for them. Especially if they thought their child might be tucked up behind those lights with a madman.

Winston lets go of David, who takes a step back towards the car “You have to tell me what to do. I don’t know what to do in a situation like this. Tell me how I get my son back. Tell me exactly what to do and I will do it, but if I feel like it’s not going to work or you’re not taking this seriously
enough then I’m gonna do something stupid. I won’t mean to do something stupid- it’s just gonna happen.”

“You think we’re not taking this seriously?” Khalil tries not to snap, but he has been trapped in a car too long with too many people to be nice “We drove here for six hours. We left Ered on her own in the house- and I know she’s snaffling some of that port in Winston’s desk and watching porn on the flat-screen just because she can-”

“While Max might be dying.” says David coolly. Khalil stops and takes a deep breath. He throws his hands up in the air as if grasping for a point that has escaped him “Yeah! Yeah, we’re worried about him too. I know, this is hard, I know what it’s like to have your child in danger.”

Daniel wonders if that is a subtle jab aimed at him. Well, if Khalil didn’t want to have to worry about his daughter’s general safety then he shouldn’t have gotten into this line of work. Normal people don’t knowingly work with serial killers.

“Well, if Khalil didn’t want to have to worry about his daughter’s general safety then he shouldn’t have gotten into this line of work. Normal people don’t knowingly work with serial killers.

“Alright, give me something to go on! Give me an instruction. A plan of action. A gun, I don’t know.”

Neil winces. From what Daniel remembers of this kid, he was aggressively non-confrontational at Camp Camp. The kind of kid whose gangly and cringing just summons down hordes of grade-school bullies and high-school dickheads. He’s wearing mascara now, and heels, which doesn’t strike Daniel as particularly appropriate for walking across an icy forest floor. In a pinch he could probably use those heels to put an aggressor’s eye out. Then again Daniel doesn’t expect Neil to do much but sit in the car and mentally berate himself for dragging the group down with another civilian to worry about.

“Absolutely not. David, you don’t know what to do with a gun. You’re more likely to have it used against you then be able to use it yourself.”

“Then what the hell do you want me to do when I find Campbell? Use some strong words?”

“You’ll be with one of us. You won’t have to do anything.”

Now, Daniel doesn’t know David very well. He has thought about the other man plenty of times in the last couple of years- thought about tracking him down to apologise, to make him understand how far out of Daniel’s control things were at Camp Camp. And in his memories there was always a sweet if beleaguered person. Willing to put up with whatever was thrown at him because he had a near endless well of patience to draw upon. That man seems to be gone. Of course. What did Daniel expect? People who are otherwise warm and welcoming will not open their arms to the men that once attempted to kill their children. Daniel shouldn’t even be mad that he nearly had a wildcat set on him. At least it wasn’t a bear.

What Daniel does not has not changed within this man since the last time he saw David is his ferocity. Daniel would not know to think of David as ferocious had he not spent the tail-end of his formative years around people who were predatory or angry or frothing with desperation. Cults tend to attract those kinds of people. The kinds who have nowhere else to go. The kinds that want to isolate themselves because they are fundamentally at odds with society in some way. And people like David, people who were hurt and need a place to lick their wounds for a while. People who know how to meet the eyes of a predator without cowering. People who will absolutely not suffer to be hurt again. When Daniel first met David he could tell, even through the fog of hurt and confusion his brainwashing had cast over him, that David was one of those people who was not
only prepared to fight for himself, but who could and would turn that ferocity out at any instant.

In short, David is not the sort of person who is going to be able to hang back when the opportunity to hurt the man that hurt his son arises.

Khalil and Winston still think they’re calling the shots. David doesn’t argue with them either, perhaps unwilling to waste the time that it would take to make a scene. That or he doesn’t want to unnerve Neil anymore than the poor kid already has been.
Daniel really expects him to throw a fit when Khalil suggests David had better go with Daniel, wherever he ends up going. Winston will go along on his own and keep in contact with his phone. He will stay by the mouth of the camp in case Campbell tries to take the most obvious route of escape, and search for the car he used to get here. Apparently he started out the trip by stealing David’s car as well as his son but there is no guarantee they have finished the trip in the same vehicle. Campbell could easily source another car for himself. The man has no allies that Daniel has been made aware of, but he’s resourceful enough to hijack a car if he needed to.

It goes without saying that Neil will stay with Winston. If all goes well Winston won’t be dealing with a lunatic serial killer and Neil can just pass the day away crying into his sleeve until his friends are brought back to him. God, what a stupid kid to put himself in this situation. Daniel cannot believe the lengths some people are willing to go to in the name of friendship. Family is one thing, but who cares about friends? Somebody you might never talk to again after you finish high-school. Somebody who will move away to another town for another college. Fifteen years from now when Neil sends a friend request to Max’s Facebook inbox, Daniel wonders if Neil will be thinking about today.

Khalil says goodbye to his husband with a kiss that would probably be longer if they didn’t have such an audience.

Between the three of them there is one gun holstered to Khalil. If things go badly- and they definitely will, for at least one of them- Daniel is going to have to make do with the knife in his pocket. It will also fall to him to save David’s bacon, if Daniel knows his luck. Much as he hates to be the one always bringing a knife to a gun fight, the notion of having David indebted to him for saving his life is not an altogether unattractive one.

“I’ll text you every half hour. The code-word.” promises Khalil.

Daniel has spent enough time listening in on those two’s business conversations to know the codeword is simply ‘Ered’.

“If the text doesn’t come through then assume I’m in trouble. Or we’re busy getting Max away from Campbell. Otherwise, I’ll keep an eye on my watch and stay in contact.”

Winston nods. His face is utterly blank, like a jack-o’-lantern whose candle has begun to gutter inside. Retreating. Putting his survival instincts and professional judgement in the front while all the human things, the love and the fear and the wish that he was just at home with his man and his kid, are ushered to the back to wait until their labour is finished.

Daniel is jealous, in some small and petty way. He wishes there were things about himself he had to put away before he was ready to put his life on the line. But the only thing Daniel has ever had to lose is just that- his life.
And that has turned out to be a lot cheaper than he hoped.
By the time they come to the edge of the frozen lake, it is obvious David no longer has any painkillers in his system. His teeth are gritted. He moves awkwardly as one who is not used to holding himself so as not to jostle a wound. His breathing is laboured. The bitter morning cold seeping in through their coats makes it a hundred times more painful, Daniel knows. Wounds exude uncomfortable feverish heat as the tissues stitch themselves back together and being in the cold only makes that worse. Half of your body turned to the fire, half of your body submerged in ice water.

Fortunately for David, he won’t literally have to get into any ice water today. In spite of the earliness of the season the majority of Lake Lilac has already iced over. Certainly, there is a huge swathe of ice that travels unbroken from the lake shore to that of the island. Looks like it’s just over a mile away.

Daniel glances over at Khalil, who is testing the ice with the toe of his boot. It’s going to be a hard walk. Each step will have to be calculated so as to stick to the safe ice. The terrain is not necessarily going to be smooth going all the way across. Add to that a stiff breeze is picking up and it’s the perfect storm of conditions to sap an injured man of all of his strength. They might have to carry David over to the other shore.

Then again it might be better that David is totally out for the inevitable confrontation with Campbell. Otherwise they might be flossing pieces of the old bastard out of David’s teeth, and Daniel would have to see those wonderful teeth used for anything but the smile he remembers from the old days at Camp Camp.

Khalil stares steadily back at Daniel and says “Stick to the blue and the clear ice. Keep of ice with snow on it if you can manage it.”

David’s survival experience with the great outdoors is inadequate, Daniel guesses, from his next remark “But there’s snow on everything. It’s snowing right now.”

Khalil pinches his own brow through his gloves “No, I mean ice where the snow is all piled up. It can warm up under there.”

“Snow is cold.” says David in what Daniel takes to be his kindergarten teacher’s voice.

“Just stay behind me. Really, stay behind me. Step where I step. If you fall through the ice then you’re probably going to die.”

David cocks an eyebrow “Alright. Whatever you say.”

Of course Khalil takes the lead. He’s done things like this plenty of times before— that is to say, hiking across frozen lakes without any of the proper equipment like shoes with gripping soles or a stick to test the strength of some ice before he puts his foot on it. Khalil isn’t the sort of man to share too many stories about what he has done and where he has been in the name of domestic security, but Daniel has heard plenty of stories. Apparently the man was once thrown out of the Trans-Siberian service on the last leg of its trip. He had to walk the last 142 kilometres between Ussuriysk and Vladivostok and showed up at the apartment of his contact in the latter. That is to say, kicked the door in wearing the haphazardly skinned pelt of a black bear, with the beginnings of frostbite on his nose, and demanded to know who to kill for the inconvenience.

The lake doesn’t present much of a problem for him. Khalil moves quickly and carefully. He keeps his eye fixed on the horizon, squinting against the wind and the gentle flurries of snow caught up in it.

Still, the progress is hard-won. The wind is strong enough that it pushes them sideways a little bit. Daniel hovers a lot closer to David than the other man is probably comfortable with— but it he will be grateful to be saved from falling directly on his injury if he does lose his footing.
“You need to tell me what he did.” says David when they have gone about a fourth of the way. It is the first time any of them have spoke except for the occasional order from Khalil- watch this patch, put your foot here, stay away from that snow-pocket.

“It has nothing to do with why he took Max.” says Khalil without looking back.

“So? I have a right to know.”

Daniel bites his lower lip. He wonders if he should speak up. David really doesn’t need to know. Daniel doesn’t want him to be thinking about that sort of horrible stuff when all he really should be concentrating on is crossing the ice.

“They never told us,” continues David “You. You never told us what was going on.”

“Trafficking.” Khalil gags on something- a piece of snow or ice kicked up into his way.

“Trafficking.” David sucks a breath past his teeth. It might be pain. It might be horror “What? Children?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking of. It wasn’t a sex market. It was more of a…more like a butcher’s market.”

David swallows with some difficulty “How big was it?”

“Expansive. A lot of the clientele are people you would know from the tabloids. Pillars of the community types or small-town philanthropists. Some of them are dicks too, but mostly, they’re people you think of as pinpricks of light in a dark and hopeless world. God’s idea of irony or something.”

“And none of them have been arrested?”

“Some of them are the people who do the arresting. Besides,” Kahlil stretches his arms briefly above his head and glances back to the shore, in the direction where his husband would be “We live in the kind of country where joe-cop can gun a kid down in the street in broad daylight and get nothing but suspension. Men can beat their wives on camera and never worry about a repercussion. So who cares if a celebrity’s doing something diabolic to children? They’ve got the contacts to make sure the shit never goes public. They’ve got the money to pay the police off. Or they’ve got friends in the police who make sure nobody cares. All we can really do is send Daniel after the low-hanging fruit.”

David casts a glance back at Daniel.

Huh, he’s thinking, so that’s all he’s good for.

Daniel opens his mouth to protest when something whizzes past his earlobe. Through it, actually. Daniel can’t feel any pain but he does feel an enormous glob of hot liquid splashing on his shoulder and the back of his neck. On instinct his falls to one knee, grabbing David by the collar to bring him down too.

David falls on his knees hard. And then Khalil has slung an arm about him and flattened him into the snow on his belly.

“Daniel?” mutters Khalil.

Pressing a hand over the remains of his ear, Daniel nods silently.
"What the fuck?" gasps David.  

He expects to hear a gunshot to accompany the gunshot wound.  

"Campbell’s got a rifle." Daniel peels off one of his gloves and balls it up over the wound, bracing himself for the pain that’s about to hit him in a sickening wave “Silencer. Came from the island.”  

Just a bit over halfway left to go. Visibility is shit so there’s no chance of spotting Campbell’s position on the shore, let alone hitting him with return fire.  

“Ok. Ok, if he’s firing at us, that means he’s lost his leverage.” surmises Khalil “So that means Max has…has gotten away from him.”  

Or died, Daniel adds mentally.  

David has picked up on this as well. His face blanches with fear "If he’s hurt him-"  

“No, listen, Max is fine. Just hold it your head that Max is alright. Worry about getting to him now and then you can worry about everything else when we’re off the ice.”  

Another bullet passes overhead with a low whistle. It’s off-centre, though, which means Campbell might have lost them when they all hit the ice. Won’t be too hard to find them again. Black and blue clothes picked out against the ice and the snow.  

Daniel rips the wool of his mitten open and tucks it between his jacket collar and the rim of his hat so he can free up a hand. There’s a lot of blood coming out of the wound. It will stop soon. Too cold.  

“I’m not turning back,” says David breathlessly. He is on his side at an awkward angle to keep the weight off of his sling “I’ll crawl on my belly if-”  

“Ok. Keep your voice low. We don’t know what kind of acoustics he’s getting.”  

Khalil nods to Daniel, ordering him to go ahead. He will stay back and keep David safe. More than anything Daniel wants to object. He wants to tell Khalil to put his ass on the line for once, husband and daughter be damned. Daniel wants to say with David. For the life of him he cannot think of a reason why- he just knows he doesn’t want to let David out of his sight.  

But Daniel gets down on his stomach and crawls anyway.  

He feels a wave of rankling disappointment that David does not call after him. Ask him to stay back. Send Khalil instead.  

Daniel is aware of leaving a small trail of blood on the ice behind him. A dull throb of pain has started- feeling is returning to the area. Assuming they make it to the mansion and have enough time to ransack through its medicine cabinet, Daniel fully intends to dope himself up. Provided that there is enough painkillers for David to take some first.  

His clothes are waterproof, but the speed at which he’s crawling makes him sweat and chills him on the inside. Heat pours out of his ear along with blood from the hole in his ear. Within a couple of moments Daniel’s teeth are chattering. The hand he took one layer of gloving off of has become so numb he is not even sure it is still there. Just a lump of hand-shaped ice filling up his glove.  

The third bullet takes Daniel by surprise. This time it comes out with the shattering report of a rifle being fired over ice. The sound echoes so explosively Daniel briefly stops and clasps a hand over his good ear. It is quickly followed by a roar of laughter. Unhinged, mocking.  

Then Campbell calls something out. Daniel cannot make out what he is saying except for the last part “…end this like big boys!”
The voice is bouncing all over the place. He cannot hope to pinpoint where Campbell’s voice is coming from until he gets a little bit closer. Worse than that, the snow is letting up a little bit. Daniel won’t be able to see a goddamn thing but if Campbell just squints he’s going to be able to find the black spot of his coat in the snow.
Daniel raises his head just a little bit. The shore is already in sight. Daniel remembers that he is wearing a white shirt. The combination of white and the unremarkable grey of his waterproof pants…

“Fuck it.” mutters Daniel. He rolls onto his side and opens his coat. As he pulls it over his head there is a breath-taking explosion of pain.

Gritting his teeth, he yanks off the jacket and sweater he had on underneath. Then it’s just a white long-sleeved shirt between Daniel’s bare skin and the snow. Ignoring the agony emanating from the side of his head, Daniel pulls the collar of his shirt up over his nose and the back of his head in an attempt to cover up his blond hair. A slice of his stomach is exposed to the cold air.

Daniel shrinks in on himself. He rolls his shoulders back and stands up. For two or three seconds Daniel stays still, his chest heaving, his eyes wide with the fear of a bullet crashing into his chest. When he is still standing after the fifth second has passed Daniel steps forwards carefully. The ice bears him well, though it’s covered in snow. There are maybe about 100 yards between him and the shore.

He kicks a foot back and peels one of his boots off. Then the other, then his socks, and then he is barefoot. Daniel sinks his toes into the snow and finds a grip. He puts his head down and starts to run headlong towards the island where the bullets are coming from.

Chapter End Notes

People in this fic sure suck at keeping their clothes on in cold weather

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