## Anyway, I've Been There

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### Anyway, I've Been There

by **Caleb Nova (Caleb_Nova)**

**Summary**

It's the same place they left, but Dipper and Mabel aren't the same kids who left it. A story of the uneven after: new friends, new family, and the promise of a new tomorrow. (Gradual Dipcifica, Mystery Twins bonding, family ties, weird science, and the Power of Friendship™ —anthyding can hadplen!)

part one: anyway, i've been there (complete)
part two: new summer season (in progress)
It's late evening when Dipper descends the rubber-coated steps of a hissing, grumbling bus just after it has arrived at 2103 San Pablo Avenue in Oakland, California. It feels like the first step on the moon.

The air is different, somehow, and it's not just the exhaust that thickens it. He can't quantify it, exactly. It's less filling. It lacks substance. Cars course down the nearby street; behind them, apartments rise up five, six floors. People gather nearby outside the bus building, waiting for
everyone to depart. Suburbia stretches out around him with all of its uniformity, street lights and paved roads and even lines. Through a chain-link fence, he sees there are pine trees just across the road. They strike him as unimpressive, arranged. Fake.

He thinks, *This isn't real.*

Mabel stumbles blearily out behind him, Waddles held tightly in her arms. The pig is drawing more than a few stares from passersby. Waddles stares back.

Then their parents show up and it's all hugs and 'I missed you's and 'Mabel, Stan called about the pig but we still need to talk about it'. Six hours ago, Dipper was saying goodbye. Now he's saying hello, but the part of him that allows him to keep himself together has been flexed and warped and torn in half from overuse. He wraps his arms around his mother's waist and puts his face to her shoulder and feels like he's four years old. Mabel soaks their father's chest with tears. He's vaguely aware of the concerned looks his parents are trading. To them, it's only been three months. Just a vacation (with maybe a bump in the road, when Stan was having money problems). Nothing to be that upset about.

They pile into the car and start the short drive back home. Mabel hugs Waddles to herself and drifts off to sleep again, cheek pressed to the window. Their parents become even more visibly worried, no doubt having expected a chatterbox deluge from his sister. Mabel sleeps easily on trips, but always comes alive on arrival. They don't understand what she's left behind, and what it cost her. Dipper's tired silence draws much less attention. He can hide behind expectations.

California is just outside the window, and for a place that's been the focus of so much media, it looks utterly unremarkable. Before long they are in Piedmont and in their driveway in front of their two-story house that looks more or less like all the other two-story houses on the street, and there isn't a single trap door, bizarre attraction or secret room to be found within. The inside of the house smells like clean carpet and air conditioning; after three months in the Shack, it smells like a hotel. Dipper drops his bag and Mabel's suitcase in the entryway and feels as if he's just shed his skin.

“Glad to be back home?” his mother asks him, one warm hand on his shoulder.

He doesn't know how to tell her that home is six hours away and everything old is alien. “Yeah, I'm just tired,” he says.

“It was a long trip,” she agrees sympathetically. “You should go to bed early, okay? You and Mabel can tell us all about it tomorrow.”

She smiles down at him, happy to see her son back in their neat suburban home with its white walls, three beds and two baths. And Dipper's heart squeezes with so much horror it nearly brings him to his knees when he thinks of how close she came to annihilation.

She must see some of that in his eyes, and she pales. “Dipper?”

He pushes the feeling as far down into his gut as it will settle and stretches his mouth into a smile. “What's there to tell?” he says with an awkward laugh, voice cracking. “Just… helping out at the ol' Mystery Shack, fleecing rubes!” When his mother's eyes widen, he hastily corrects himself. “Selling to tourists. We learned a lot about business, and… fiscal things. Fiscality?”

His mother sighs. “I just hope Stan wasn't a completely terrible influence.”

Stan had been willing to lose everything he was and ever would be to save his family. Dipper doesn't know what kind of role model would be better than that. “No way, Grunkle Stan was awesome. We had fun,” he says instead.
“That's what worries me,” his mother says wryly. “All right, to bed with you. You need to get up at a decent time tomorrow, we've got school shopping to do.”

Dipper chooses not to think about that, not yet. He plods his way upstairs and makes a stop at the bathroom to brush his teeth. When picking up his toothbrush he reaches towards the wrong side of the sink and automatically leans a bit to his left to account for the crooked floorboard that isn't there. The tile room smells of towels, bathmats and all-purpose cleaner. Dipper's nose still remembers the burn of sulfur, blood and boiling water.

He looks into his own reflection and freezes, toothbrush prickly against his gums. He has the unshakable sensation that he's looking through a window, not a mirror, and another Dipper (Tyrone?) is staring back at him, caught in the same moment. For a long, shuddering second he's terrified to move because the reflection might not move the same way. And then what would that mean?

It doesn't happen, of course. He's almost four hundred miles away from the place where something like that could happen. He spits in the sink and rinses the mint from his mouth. Downstairs, he can hear Mabel explaining that Waddles is an indoor pig. He pauses in the hallway to listen just long enough to determine if he'll have to intervene. Their parents are used to dealing with and often shooting down Mabel's ever-shifting whims, and sometimes Dipper can lend her the weight of a rational argument. It's their first night back and the pig is still something of a surprise, so Mabel wins without his help; the contest ends with the stern declaration that if Waddles does his business in the house, she'll be the one cleaning it (which was also the case at the Shack, so it's not much of a threat).

When he walks into his room he turns on the light and stands near the door, surveying the scene. It's his bed, his shelves and books, his computer. But there's a copy of The Elegant Universe lying on his pillow with a piece of tissue fluttering out the top as a hasty bookmark, and it's like someone else put it there. He remembers reading the book, he even remembers leaving it on his bed just before he left for vacation, but he is still so overwhelmed by a crushing sense of disassociation that it might as well have been one of the paper clones who left it there.

Feeling something close to panic, he makes a fist and pushes it into his left thigh. The pain is immediate, and intense. He's pressing on the deep bruise left by… Well, he doesn't actually know how it happened. When it comes to moments of injury, he's spoiling for choice. But whatever its source, the bruise is proof. He's not crazy. His old home can't make him crazy. He's just coming back to the way things were when he is not the way he was (or something). Then again, he sort of wants to stick his head out the window and scream until everyone knows how close they were to Armageddon. So maybe he is crazy.

He sighs and pulls Wendy's hat off his head, running his fingers through his hair in agitation. “C'mon, man, get it together!” he mutters. “Not talking to yourself would be a good start…”

He's dislocated something, and it's not physical. The room, the house, the quiet street; he knows them all, but they aren't his. He's fallen through the mirror. He is surrounded by a ghost who wore his clothes and lived in this space, went to his school, ate in his kitchen. There are memories in every corner, attached to every object, but he can't touch them like he used to. He reaches out and finds his hand swiping uselessly in the gulf between where he was and where he is, who he was and who he's become, and the disconnect leaves something unbearably hard behind in his heart.

He falls into his bed and stares upwards, taking in the flat expanse of white-painted drywall instead of the vaulted ceiling and wooden beams he expects. He blinks. He's falling upward; it's like vertigo. He blinks again. He clenches his comforter in his hands to steady himself.
At some point, he falls asleep.

He wakes up when his mattress sinks to the left. Outside the window, the moon is shining through the curtains, giving them an eerie translucence. Mabel is crouched over him, her bright brown eyes next to a beady black pair. He's staring straight up into Waddles' chubby visage, which is not actually an unusual awakening for him.

“Waddles didn't get to say goodnight,” Mabel tells him, and presses the pig's hoof to Dipper's cheek.

The sight of her toothy, sparkle-metal smile eases something in Dipper's chest that he didn't even know had been tightened.

“Goodnight, Waddles,” Dipper says sleepily.

“Oink oink!” Mabel says, giving Waddles a verbal assist, and then she retreats to her bedroom.

She's just across the hall, and he already misses her. He's become accustomed to the constant sleepover of the summer. He picks Wendy's hat off the mattress next to him and holds it up to the dim light from the window. He's suddenly terrified that he'll never see her again, though he has no reason to think that's true. He fights the insane urge to run back to the bus station and make sure she's where he left her, that they all are. He wants to sleep in his attic bed. He wants to go downstairs and sit in front of the television where Grunkle Stan is probably sleeping. He wants…

He wants Grunkle Ford to reassure him that he's not inside a prison bubble. Because he feels like he is. Because he feels like at any moment someone will show up to make him see reality, and he'll look out the window to witness the world in flames.

He sits up and looks outside. The street is briefly illuminated as headlights scroll by, then there is only the dark and the suburban sprawl dotted with the pools of streetlights. It's a quiet corner of a city where people get up early and come home in the evening to their houses perched on their allotted patch of grass. Streets become roads become highways. The distant sound of traffic is constant and low.

“Agh!” He collapses back and presses the heels of his hands against his eyes with a great deal of force, as if he can push the sensations out of his head. What is wrong with him? He's home. He's fine.

Summer's over.

His door opens again and startles him from his frustrated reverie. It's Mabel, carrying Waddles and an armful of sheets. “So, Waddles and I were talking,” she says, depositing the pig on his bed, “and we decided that it's the perfect night for a sleepover!”

Dipper can't help but smile. “Waddles, you are full of good ideas,” he tells the pig, scooting to make room.

“And leftover spaghetti!” Mabel playfully pokes Waddles in the stomach until the pig rolls over with a grunt.

Dipper closes his eyes while she settles in with Waddles at the foot of the bed. He tries to precisely remember the sound of the wind through the pine trees that so often lulled him to sleep. It must work, because it's the last thing he remembers.
Dipper doesn't have a lot of friends.

He has the guys from Math Club and the guys from AV and the guys he sometimes sees at the game store in the mall, and occasionally the guys who sit at the corner table in the lunch room and play Tragic: The Garnering. None of them are what he considers friends other than in the general sense that they get along and they know each other and that's about it. He sees them on the internet and in games and shares common interests, but they have their own best friends and their own circles. He gets the occasional invitation, he hangs out sometimes, and he wouldn't count on any of them to help foil a monstrous conglomeration of gnomes.

When he was nine, his best friend Jeremy moved to Pasadena with his mom after a divorce. When he was eleven, his other best friend, Arthur, moved to Milwaukee when his dad got a job there. He still keeps in touch with them online, sometimes, if that counts. Even then, the contact only happens because they send him status updates and dumb memes. He'll comment if he has nothing else to do.

Dipper doesn't hold on to people. His connections are loose and when they break, he doesn't try to reconnect. He's always been that way.

But when he gets a rambling, twenty-five percent illegible long-form email from Soos, detailing everything that’s been done with the Shack plus about a hundred random anecdotes, he forgets to finish his first paper for English in his haste to respond.

He gets a text from Wendy the next week. He’s surprised because he just emailed her the number for his new phone (he and Mabel were gifted cellphones on a family plan for their thirteenth birthday; sometimes growing up is pretty alright) and hadn’t been expecting such a swift response. He spends three hours replying to her, both vying to create the most ridiculous emoticons.

Grunkle Ford sends him a subscription to *U.S. Science*, complete with a handwritten note pointing out an article of interest. Grunkle Stan sends him another Mystery Shack hat, along with a brief, typically gruff letter about how he’d had some stock in his car trunk after he left the Shack, Wendy's hat is too hot to be wearing in Piedmont, and Stan expects compensation in the form of indentured servitude. Dipper reads the affection between the lines and feels lighter. Mabel has her own correspondence and they share, every time. It's like they're working together to maintain the tether. He can tell Mabel is happy with him for putting forward the effort. She had probably expected him to rely on her to do the heavy lifting when it came to staying in touch, and it's not an unfair assumption.

In the afternoon, near the end of the first school month, Dipper is changing in the locker room. He pulls off his shirt and realizes he's forgotten to wear an undershirt for the first time.

The kid next to him (Wendell? Maybe?) immediately spots the bruising and thin scars that wrap around Dipper's arms and torso. "Whoa, what happened to you?" he asks.

“What? Oh, this,” Dipper says, pretending not to know while he tries to think of an explanation. “Um, I did a lot of hiking on vacation and fell a couple times.”

It's not a very good answer, considering the precise contours of his wounds, but most of his fellow
thirteen-year-olds aren't much for forensics. Wendell asks if it hurts, Dipper lies and says it doesn't anymore, and then he exits the conversation as soon as he can without being obvious about it. He doesn't need the attention.

There is a small part of him that's actually glad someone else saw where Bill grabbed him, because it means it was real.

The days blend together. Everything is just like he remembers it. The exception is how the girls in school catch in the corners of his eye in a way they hadn't, before Wendy. Girls in sweaters, blouses, skirts and t-shirts. Pastels and perfume. They gather in groups by the lockers and at the lunch tables and something must be hilarious, because they always seem to be laughing. When he walks past and a peal of giggles follows after, he thinks it must be directed at him. He has no evidence for this, and some part of him knows it's his newly-teenage brain betraying him, making him self-conscious, but it's a thought he can't always shake.

He sort of misses the days when girls weren't so notable. They all kind of pale in comparison to Wendy, in his opinion, even though the vestiges of his crush are slowly flaking away like stubborn old bark. Maybe it has less to do with Wendy and more to do with the fact that none of these girls know anything about secret bunkers or dream demons or how the world almost ended. Nobody knows those things, outside of Gravity Falls.

He wants to interact with girls only in the abstract, anyway. Mostly, he wants to be left alone. And, mostly, the other denizens of the school oblige.

But not always.

It's Tuesday and he's trapped in his own head. He walks down the crowded corridor with his cap pulled low, on his way to his next class. The stream of students flows around him and they might as well be air currents or fresh water salmon given how alone he feels.

Then he walks headlong into something solid. He bounces back a step and looks up.

He doesn't recognize the face that's glaring down at him, but he does recognize the type: Big, mean, entitled. There's always someone who likes to throw their early puberty-gifted weight around. Public school is full of kids who consider themselves sharks. Dipper's seen a thing or two over the summer, though. He knows what's really out in the water.

“Sorry,” Dipper says blandly.

The bigger kid shoves Dipper back before he has a chance to move. “Watch it, twerp,” the big guy says harshly.

In the previous year, Dipper would have stammered something and slunk off, or maybe even gotten angry, depending on his mood. Current Dipper, however, has stared death in the face. And death didn't have acne on its jawline or the wispy traces of an unfortunate mustache, so he figures he's probably okay.

“Hey, whatever. Go ahead and be a jerk about it,” Dipper tells the older kid, and then steps around him and plunges back into the moving crowd.

He doesn't know who that kid is or if he'll somehow pay for his insolence later, but he doesn't really care. His only regret is that he didn't try harder to think of what Grunkle Stan would say. Of course, whatever that would have been would probably have started a fight. For the first time in his life, Dipper considers that he might have won a physical confrontation. Not because he's gotten bigger
(though he is stronger, at least), but because he knows what it's like to fight when your life literally depends on the outcome. Not because someone bumped into you in the hall or someone said something behind your back or someone kissed your ex, but because losing means you die. It's a question of perspective, he supposes. The stakes really change things.

And it's some low stakes in Piedmont, all around. At least from where he is standing.

Later, on the bus ride home, he can feel Mabel's stare against the side of his face like a worried spotlight. He resists the urge to roll his eyes. Maybe if he pretends not to notice her concern, she'll let it be. That thought is the closest he's been to optimism all week, so of course it's an entirely false hope.

She nudges him in the ribs, making him squirm. “Why's your face all broody?” she asks. “Were you up all night fighting on the internet again?”

“That only happened once and that show finale was garbage!” he immediately fires back, and then sighs, slumping in his seat. “It's nothing, Mabel.”

Mabel's eyes narrow a bit too perceptively for his liking. “Melanie said some poophead shoved you in the hallway.”

“That only happened once and that show finale was garbage!” he immediately fires back, and then sighs, slumping in his seat. “It's nothing, Mabel.”

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“Melanie should mind her own business,” Dipper says stubbornly.

“Well, what if it's my business, huh?” she says, getting up on her knees to put her hands on his shoulder.

That, Dipper can't argue with. Not after all that's happened. “I'm fine. It was just some guy being a jerk, and I walked away. End of story.”

“It better be. Or I'll show him a couple things I learned from Grunkle Stan! Thing one, and thing two,” she says, dramatically raising each of her fists and kissing them. Then she makes a face. “My hands taste like rubber cement.”

Dipper doubts the big kid would be all that impressed. Then again, Mabel had once showed up covered in various unicorn fluids after apparently delivering a savage beating to the mythical creatures, so maybe the kid should be. “I don't think that'll be necessary, but... thanks, Mabel.”

“Got your back like a buttcrack, bro-bro,” she says cheerfully, plopping back into her seat.

Still, he doesn't miss the way she keeps watching him the rest of the ride, and he knows she isn't done with him yet.
Mabel worries about Dipper.

She knows he's having a hard time readjusting to the level living in Piedmont after surviving a localized apocalypse. And it's not like it's just that easy for her, either. She doesn't have a magic raygun that blasts away bad thoughts (though that would be so awesome).

But Dipper doesn't have the support in Piedmont that she does. Mabel has Louisa and Haley and Sarah and Phoebe and Michelle and Tammy and Tina and Pooja and the girls from the knitting club at the rec center and Waddles. Sure, she feels like she's not quite the same person she was when summer started. Sure, she feels like she's left an important part of herself in Gravity Falls. And yes, all those friends of hers don't understand how she's changed and she doesn't feel as close to them as she used to. But they're still her friends, and they are still there for her. And she texts Candy and Grenda and Wendy all the time, and messages them on social media, and commented on every single picture Grenda posted from Austria. Mabel misses them and Soos and her Grunkles so much, but they aren't gone, not really.

And, yes, sometimes Mabel wakes up in a cold sweat and sees triangles in the shapes of the shadows on her ceiling. But she'll be fine, because she believes she will be.

She knows that he probably misses the journals. Getting to read through all of them after they'd been restored by the reset of Weirmdageddon had been wonderful for him. He had let them go easily enough at the time, when Grunkle Ford decided to throw them in the bottomless pit. It had been a clean break, which seemed like something they all needed then (burning everything with Bill's image on it had helped, too).

But, even if that had been best for Grunkle Ford, maybe it hadn't been best for Dipper? He has his new journal that he made, with the pine tree symbol on the cover, but he's barely touched it since they returned. And, okay, Piedmont just doesn't have as much to write about, obviously, but, still… It hadn't been only the mystery of the book inspiring him. He had loved keeping a journal.

She wonders (though not often, because the thought is painful) if Dipper should have stayed with Grunkle Ford. Maybe he would have been happier pursuing anomalies or whatever it is Stan and Ford are doing. She's been watching him, and even though everything seems more or less the same, she knows it's not. He's hiding himself just enough that Mom and Dad don't notice (they are starting to). It's harder for him. Dipper is all about Gravity Falls and its weirdness. He'd been obsessed with the journals and monsters and magic. It changed the way Mabel sees the world, too, she gets it, and leaving the Falls is one of the hardest things she's ever done—

(and, deep down, where thoughts are almost unarticulated, she suspects — as Dipper also must — that she can't really go back to how it was, that the weirdness is a part of her now in ways which will manifest in time, she's not done changing, and her attempts to rebalance herself in Piedmont are just a temporary convenience until she finds the Falls again)

—but it is done, and they have a life to return to. It's not like it's a bad life. Just… not as exciting.

She looks out her window at the backyard, where there's neatly trimmed grass, two trees, and not a
single fairy, and thinks, *Okay, maybe he has a point.*

Unlike Dipper, Mabel has a very limited tolerance for introspection. She’s had more than enough deep thinking for one day, so she flops off her knees to land next to Waddles, who is half-asleep at the foot of her bed. She presses her face close to his and his eyes open. He sits up, ready to be the center of her attention.

“What do you think, Waddles? Will Dipper snap out of it?” She pushes her fingers against his chubby cheeks, slightly opening his mouth in time with her words as she intones, “Of course he will, Mabel. He just needs our help.” She drops her hands, pauses, then puts them to his cheeks again to add, “Oink oink!” She grins brightly at the pig. “Waddles, you always know just what to say.”

She watches Dipper closely for the next week. He seems something close to normal at home, but when she sees him at school it's like he's only partially there. He's always been prone to boredom at school, the sort of student who needs to be challenged by Honors classes just to maintain his interest. But even those and his extracurriculars don't seem enough to keep him engaged anymore. Maybe now that he’s spent a summer grappling with the kinds of equations and mysteries that led to magic and multiversal monsters there's not really anything eighth grade can throw at him that's worth his while.

Mabel’s not worried about his grades. Dipper's too smart for that, he can pass without really trying. What worries her is how, as a month slips by, his friends and interests slip through his fingers. Dipper has never been a social animal, but in the past he'd put forward at least some effort. She's glad he's texting Wendy and Soos and replying to the sporadic contact they have from their Grunkles. She's glad he's clinging to the family they made during the summer, just as she is. But she watches as he sits on the edge of every lunch table conversation and she knows what he's doing, even if he doesn't.

He's letting go of Piedmont.

Which is a problem, because they still have to live here. And because Mom and Dad are getting more worried about him by the week, and it's probably only a matter of time before they send him to a therapist he can never be honest with.

And Mabel wants Dipper to come back to her, too. She wants them to be engaged in something, together, to be the Mystery Twins again. She spends time with her friends and talks and knits and bezazzles her face to impress them, but afterward she'd really like to see Dipper grab his journal and send the both of them off into an adventure that will change something, even if that something is just them.

Her inspiration comes from the local morning paper.

Her dad is reading it while he's eating a bowl of boring whole-grain-bran-dad-flakes and drinking juice without any plastic dinosaurs in it so what's the point. On the back page is a small, special interest column. Mabel catches the words 'abandoned' and 'ghost' and asks if she can see it when he's done. Dad is momentarily taken aback, having never been asked for his paper before, but he obliges.

The article is a rather tongue-in-cheek piece detailing a pair of homeowners who fled their domicile after what they claimed was a haunting; the author assumes it is a publicity stunt of some kind, possibly courting the attention of less-than-reputable reality shows like *Ghost Harassers*. But what if it isn't? And even if it is, Mabel doesn't care, because she and Dipper are just the team to prove it, either way.

What Dipper needs is to get back in his groove. Maybe a pine tree journal is good enough for normal
stuff, but Mabel has this idea that it isn't good enough for weird stuff. If Dipper is missing Gravity Falls and everything that came with it, then she thinks she might be able to bring a piece of the Falls back to him, even if only in a small way.

First, she gets a ride from her mom to an arts and crafts store, where she buys the nicest, leather-bound, real-parchment journal she can find. It costs more than she has, but when her mother questions why she wants it so badly and she explains it's for Dipper, Mom gets that same look in her eye that she and Dad have had since the end of summer when they're thinking about him. Mom buys the journal.

Mabel takes it back home and sets to work in her room, digging through her crafting supplies for glue and gold paper or vinyl. Late that night, she sneaks into Dipper's room and traces his hand on a blank sheet while he's asleep. She spends a solid hour trying to decide if the new journal is number one or number four.

Eventually, it becomes Journal A.

She waits until the weekend to spring it on Dipper. She's not good at waiting or keeping secrets she wants to share, and her energy levels overcompensate. By Wednesday, Dipper suspects something. By Friday, her parents take away her Mabel Juice.

Saturday morning, she pops the lock on Dipper's door, smears a dollop of honey on his cheek with a plastic spoon, and tosses Waddles into his bed. The pig eagerly sets to work, licking the honey up and bringing Dipper, sputtering and flailing, into consciousness.

“Waddles! Come on!” he protests, trying to hold the pig back from his face. Waddles' hooves wave determinedly in the air as he tries to surge forward.

“But Dipper, you're just so sweet!” Mabel proclaims, poking his knees until he pulls his legs up.

He rolls over and hides beneath his comforter as Waddles roots around for another way in. “Ugh, Mabel. This is one of two days we get to sleep in. Why would you do this to me? Or yourself, for that matter.”

“Because… Big reveal—” she tosses the newspaper article at him. It lands on his shrouded head, and Waddles, never all that picky, begins to chew on it. “It's ghost hunterin' time! And I know you ain't afraid!”

Dipper cautiously peeks out of his protective cocoon. “Ghost hunting?”

“Oh, yeah, only the best thing to hunt, like, ever. Woop woop!” Mabel clambers over him until they are face to face. “Pack it up and move it out, bro-bro. This train is rollin', non-stop to Spooksville!”

Dipper tugs the sloppy remnants of the article out of Waddles mouth and examines it. “…Wait, you think this is for real?”

“It's in the paper, Dipper! That's what old people who care about boring stuff read so it's chock full of truthiness!”

He looks doubtful. “I don't know. It's just not weird around here like it is in Gravity Falls.”

Mabel has already anticipated this reaction and dug through her memory for the perfect counterpoint. “No, but Grunkle Ford said he went to Gravity Falls because it had the most anom-a-whatevers, not the only ones. Besides, remember that grody old spider-lady?”
She can see him start to come around, and her excitement grows. “Well, I think that was still in Roadkill County, but… it would have been outside the barrier. And, yeah, he did say that…” Dipper sits up. “Mabel, I think you're right.”

“I'm always right,” she happily reminds him.

“Yeah, because eating all that Smile Dip was clearly the best decision,” he says.

She feels slightly nauseous just thinking about the pink powder. “It wasn't a mistake if I learned something.”

“Like what?”

“That it was banned for a reason, and it tastes much worse the second time around.” Her grin falters. “So much worse.”

“Okay, let's stop talking about that,” Dipper says quickly, probably recalling the sound of her vomiting late into that night.

“Instead, we should talk — about — this!” Mabel reaches behind her and grabs the book, presenting it triumphantly.

Dipper squints. “‘The Sibling Brothers in The Magical Mystery of the Mythical Museum's Mystical History?’”

“Whoops!” She tosses that book aside and reaches back again, making sure her fingers close on leather this time. “Talk, about… this!”

“What is…” Dipper trails off as he takes in the sight of the new journal. “Wait, did… Mabel, did you make this?”

She holds it even closer to his face in response, waggling it enticingly.

He is speechless. He reaches out and takes it, rubbing his thumbs over the fresh leather. Then he frowns and places his hand over the golden one on the cover. It's a perfect fit. “How… Oh. That's why there was magic marker on my fingers.” He cracks the journal open, breathing in the scent of fresh parchment. “Mabel, this is amazing. You are seriously the best.”

“Oh, stop it, you,” she playfully demurs, waving a limp sweater arm at him. “I figured you'd need it when we get to ghost harassing. I know you have the other one already, but—”

“This is better,” he interrupts, placing his hand on the cover again. “This is… I don't know, it's just… right. I was trying to start over and be different with the whole pine tree thing, but… I think a part of me never really wanted to.”

Mabel is just happy he likes it. “Nothing like the original recipe!”

Dipper, who is beginning to appear more interested and engaged than he has since he stepped off the bus, suddenly looks crestfallen. “But, I don't remember everything. There was a lot on ghosts, I can remember… some of it. Maybe not enough.”

She refuses to believe that. “Yeah, right! There's probably only a million ghost facts rolling around in your giant smarty head. You just need to get out there, Dipper! Use it or lose it!”

His disappointment morphs into determination, and her heart rises at the sight. “We can at least see
what kind of ghost it is. If there is one. I'll email Grunkle Ford, too, just in case. He probably won't get back to me in time for it to matter, though.”

“It'll matter next time,” Mabel says slyly.

Slowly, Dipper smiles. “Yeah. Next time.”
The woman on the doorstep is staring down at Mabel like she's some kind of sugar-fueled, be-sweatered alien. Dipper is doing his best to look competent, and, well, older than he actually is.

“So… You're here to hunt the ghost?” the woman says for the third time.

“Yes, ma’am!” Mabel loudly confirms. “Dipper, show her your journal! Show her! …Dip?”

Dipper isn't sure Mabel understands that nobody else has any context for why a journal would mean anything. And Journal A doesn't, unfortunately, because aside from a few starter notes, it's blank. Whatever the case, he's let her speak for both of them long enough. He stands up straighter.

“Hi, I'm Dwipper— Dipper— and this is my sister, Mabel. We saw the article about the ghost problem you're having and we're here to help.”

The woman takes long enough to mull that over that Dipper begins to wonder if she’s fluent in English. “You're here to help,” she slowly repeats.

“Yes. We're here to help,” Dipper reiterates. He's trying so hard to look taller that his neck is starting to ache.

“I see. Well, no offense, but we were hoping for someone with a little more experience—”

“Pshht! Experience?!” Mabel interrupts. “Lady, my brother's hunted super nightmare-fuel ghosts that straight turn people into wood! Which, I can tell you, feels pretty weird,” she adds with a tone that implies it's some sort of fond memory. “Plus, he's a mega smart turbo nerd. Trust me, this guy is the only guy you want to bust your ghosts.”

“Just give me a chance,” Dipper says. “I'm not charging you anything. At least let me see if I can find out what kind of ghost it is.”

The fact that Dipper's impromptu consultation is free seems to be what finally sways the woman. “I just came back to water the flowers, but if you want I can show you around,” she finally agrees.

She takes them into the dining room, a small rectangular space with an overabundance of lace and fake electric candles. A small brass chandelier hangs over a table that's been set, but the plates and silverware are in disarray. Dipper glances down at the thick white carpet, where several forks are scattered. He can see what looks like the glittery dust of something glass that was shattered there.

“It usually happens in here,” the woman says. “Last time everything was rattling and that was it, we'd had enough.”

“Look at all these doilies,” Mabel enthuses, rubbing the fabric between her fingers.

“So what happens, exactly?” Dipper says seriously, ignoring Mabel's fondling of everything decorative and delicate.

“The lights start to flicker, first. Then things start to move, just one or two things, to start with,” the
woman says. “They fall over, sometimes they float and then fall. When it's really bad it all shakes and rattles. Just the plates and things, though, never the house.”

“Have you ever heard voices, or seen any writing?”

“No, nothing like that. I've often felt that someone was watching me, or close to me when I was in here,” she says.

“Category Two, maybe,” Dipper mutters to himself. He starts making notes in his journal. “Hmmm… Is it just in this room?”

“The things moving around, yes. But I've felt a presence elsewhere.” The woman appears to be slightly confused as to why she's humoring him. Dipper barely notices; he's in the zone.

“Dipper, look!” Mabel calls out laughingly. He turns to see she's draped herself in no less than ten different doilies. “How fancy am I, one to a thousand? Just kidding. I know it's a thousand!” The woman is not happy. “Okay, I think you kids need to—”

There is a sudden gust of air, cold and bracing. It rushes through the room like the edge of a storm, sending the doilies flying off Mabel and her tumbling to the floor.

“Mabel!” Dipper exclaims. He dodges a tacky plastic candlestick and runs to her side. “Are you okay?”

“I hit my butt,” Mabel says, looking dazed. Then she sits up excitedly, no worse for wear. “Did you hear it?”

“I heard the wind. It made a 'woosh' sound,” Dipper says, confused.

“No, the voice! The voice knocked me over — which was totes rude — and said, 'trouuuuurrrruuut,'” Mabel intones.

“Trout?” Dipper says skeptically.

Mabel shrugs. “Or 'get out'. I think he was talking with his mouth full.”

“That would make more sense. Unless this ghost really hates trout? Did you guys eat a lot of fish, in here…?” he asks the woman.

Mabel's eyes widen. “Maybe it is a trout. A ghost trout! A GROUT!”

The woman, meanwhile, has been backing towards the door, her face pale. “Not this again,” she says tremulously, and then flees.

Dipper and Mabel stare after her. “…Did she just leave us alone in her house?” Dipper says.

“It's our house, Dipper. We live here, now,” Mabel tells him, slinging an arm over his shoulder.

“Then a ghost isn't doing our equity any favors.” Dipper flips his journal open and begins to scribble furiously. “Okay, so the ghost wanted us to leave. Or, maybe just you. Why just you, why didn't it knock all of us down?”

“It's probably a boy ghost. He pushed me down, so he likes me but doesn't know how to say it.”

At the top of the page, Dipper writes, 'REMEMBER: THEY ALWAYS HAVE A REASON'.
“There has to be some clues around here. We need to make the ghost reveal itself, and—what are
you doing?”

Mabel has pulled off her headband and is rapidly braiding her hair. “I'm making some pigtailed for
him to pull.”

“Mabel, it's a ghost. I really don't think it's into you.”

“Come on, Dipper,” she says, not stopping her braiding. “Jeff? Mermando? Those cute vampires?
I'm irresistible to supernatural super-hunks. Not that the gnomes were really hot or anything, but
when you're as adorable as I am, you gotta take the bad with the good. I cast a wide net, bro.”

Dipper wants to tell her she's crazy, but the evidence is surprisingly strong. “Okay, that's plan B.
Plan A is to determine the reason behind the haunting. Every ghost wants something, it's just a matter
of what.”

Mabel holds out her fists. “Yeah! Mystery Twins?”

Dipper grins and presses his fists to hers. “Mystery Twins.” They rotate their clenched hands in
opposite directions and then back, making the sound of a gun cocking, and then pull them apart with
an explosion noise.

When their customized fist pound is completed, Mabel is smiling at him so widely she almost looks
deranged.

Dipper can't help but laugh. “What? What did I do?” He lifts his hat and runs a hand through his
hair. “Do I have something, did the ghost—”

“Nope! Just with you a hundred and fifteen percent, bro-bro.” She makes finger guns in his direction.
“Let's bust this vapor dweeb.”

The search begins in the most likely place: The basement. There's a lot of boxes and an ironing board
and some very old workout equipment that Dipper contemplates for a moment, wondering if the
woman would be willing to part with it as payment (assuming he succeeds). Mabel happily dives into
the mess like it's a rummage sale. For his part, Dipper is trying to be precise, considered. If he's going
to do this sort of thing professionally, then he needs to be professional. No more counting on Journal
3 to do all the heavy lifting for him, no more getting tricked and accidentally freeing his quarry. He
needs to follow Great-Uncle Ford's example and start using his head to its full capacity. He's on his
own, this time. No notes from a mysterious author to guide him.

Well, he's not actually on his own. He observes as Mabel pulls a long piece of golden tinsel out of a
Christmas storage box and drapes it over her shoulders like a scarf. He can always count on her.

“Wow, what a spooky room,” Mabel says loudly, finding a walk-in closet for the sump pump in the
far corner. “I sure hope there's not any cute ghosts in here!” She steps in and twirls around
beguilingly.

Dipper isn't completely sold on her theory, but he still stops and watches, just in case. Mabel had
been kind of a creep-magnet in Gravity Falls.

Nothing happens. Mabel bats her eyes at nothing in particular for a few more seconds, and then her
shoulders slump in disappointment.

“Hey, it was worth a shot,” Dipper tells her.
Mabel shrugs it off. “Like I want some dumb old ghost mackin' on me anyway. It wasn't a total waste, though. I found this!”

She holds up a dusty light-up disco ball, complete with a rotating stand. “Whoa, party people,” Dipper says with a grin.

Mabel sets it on a nearby box and checks the battery compartment. Finding it empty, she raids a few double As from a plastic robo-dog and slaps them in. The disco ball lights up and the shimmering colors are brilliant in the darkened room, dancing rainbow flecks gliding across the clutter. It's sort of disorienting. Dipper squints and has to look away.

“That's better,” Mabel says with satisfaction, content with her impromptu atmospheric makeover. She begins bobbing her head and humming 'Taking Over Midnight'.

Without warning, the disco ball goes flying off the box and crashes to the floor. It breaks on impact, instantly plunging the basement back into gloom.

“My glamorous lifestyle!” Mabel laments, reaching for the broken toy.

“Wait, don't touch it!” Dipper warns her. “Sometimes spirit kinesis can do weird things to an object. It could be dangerous.”

Mabel stands back as Dipper approaches the ball. He slowly nudges it with his foot, and then holds his hand near it, checking if he can feel any severe temperature variance.

“Is it all ghosty?” Mabel asks.

Dipper drops his hand and purses his lips. “…I don't know. I wish I had my EMF meter.”

“This ghost is a real party pooper,” Mabel observes.

“It's just knocking over random things. Is that really its deal?” Dipper says, standing back up.

But as he looks at the shattered disco ball, he notices that the battery compartment in the bottom has sprung open, and he remembers the fake candles upstairs. He sees the segmented plastic shards of its reflective surface and thinks of the ground glass in the dining room carpet.

“Mabel,” he says slowly, the pieces coming together, “I think I have an idea.”


What follows is an afternoon adventure involving a lot of running, a little bit of screaming, and the supercilious, highly unpleasant spirit of a former interior decorator who hates everything about the taste of the current homeowners and doesn't much care for Mabel's treatment of doilies. It ends with a whole lot of broken glass and a pentagram drawn with mustard and ketchup.

“Just let me even out the tablecloth!” the ghost pleads as it bangs its insubstantial fists against the invisible barrier of its condiment cage.

By this point, Dipper's heard it all before. “No way, man. You need to move on and stop obsessing over salad forks, because that is not healthy, even if you are dead.”

“But have you seen those dollar store fake candles? How can they sleep at night?” the ghost howls.

“Hey, these are neat!” Mabel defends the candles, pulling one out of her pocket. “You can fight evil living wax statues with them.”
The ghost seems stumped by that non-sequitur and momentarily falls silent. Dipper recites a low-level incantation from memory while he can still get a word in edgewise. With a bright flash, the spirit is banished from the dwelling and sent on its way.

Dipper closes his new journal with dramatic relish. “Another ghost successfully banished. That's two down. Just the two. …It was a lot more impressive before I said it out loud.”

He wishes he could count the ghosts from the Dusk 2 Dawn, but he had given them what they wanted, not banished them. Of course, if that’s his standard then his count should probably be one and a half, given the lumberjack ghost had escaped. Not a great record, really. Hopefully he’s improving.

“I could really go for a hot dog right now,” Mabel says, looking at the pentagram.

Dipper looks around the kitchen, for the first time noticing just how much of a mess they've made. “…We should probably get out of here.”

They put a few things back where they think they might have gone before giving up and leaving a note on the counter, written by Mabel and complete with an illustration of Dipper holding his journal aloft triumphantly over a sheet ghost with Xs for eyes while Mabel punches it (WE BUSTED YOUR GHOST. SORRY ABOUT THE KETCHUP. <3 <3 PS — MYSTERY TWINS 4LYFE!!!).

That night, Dipper spends the entire family dinner with his nose in his new journal, scribbling away. Their parents seem no less concerned for him, but Mabel can't stop smiling.
decisions should be a desert, bright and clear

When Mabel's mother asks her if she'll be trick-or-treating with Dipper this year, Mabel immediately responds in the affirmative, head already dancing with visions of entire pillowcases stuffed with candy. It isn't until Mom walks away that Mabel's enthusiasm begins to dim as doubt sets in.

She doesn't want to upset their newly cemented sibling bond, especially in the wake of a successful ghost busting, but the fact of the matter is that Dipper had been a real butt about Summerween. Sure, it wasn't the real Halloween; close enough, though! She worries that Dipper really is done with the holiday, too 'grown up' to care about candy (which is a total load. Even grownups should care about candy).

But if Dipper couldn't even summon the enthusiasm for trick-or-treating when their literal lives were on the line, what’s the chance he will care now?

Mabel puts off talking to him about it for almost half a week, which is basically a million years by her standards. She doesn't want to come up with costume ideas yet, because all her ideas are for twin stuff. Not that it matters since she thinks of, like, twenty ideas anyway (macaroni and cheese! No, they did a food theme for Summerween. Mouse and keyboard? Cop and robber? CENTUAR-TAUR!). Darn her amazing creative brain!

Finally, she corners him in his room while he's in the midst of moving his discarded piles of laundry into his hamper (Mom must have yelled at him). She plays it cool.

“So, Halloween is coming up,” she says ultra-casually, leaning against his door frame and letting one arm dangle.

He stops what he's doing and squints at her. “…Are you having a stroke?”

Okay, so maybe she's gone a little far on the 'casual' part. She straightens up and wipes away the drool from where her cheek had been smushed against the jamb. “You know, Halloween? Like Summerween, but hollow?”

“I know what Halloween is, Mabel. You want something.”

Big pitch. “Dress-up-for-Halloween-and-go-trick-or-treating-with-me!” she says in one breath.

“What?”

“Come on, Dipper!” she cajoles. She pulls a folded MabelVision Board™ out of her pocket and unfurls it dramatically, revealing a mass of images mostly created from Mom's clothes catalogs. “Look, we could be Ghost Harassers! Or Globnar contestants!”

Dipper looks uncertain. “I don't know. Getting chased and almost eaten alive sort of gave me a newer, more horrified perspective on trick-or-treating.”

She pulls out the big guns. “Don't you want to spend time with me?”

“Wow; straight for the guilt, no attempt at subtlety whatsoever,” Dipper says, unimpressed.
“Listen, bro: Real talk. We don’t have a lot of Halloweens left before we end up being those gross older kids who go around when trick-or-treating is supposed to be over. Is that what you want? Showing up after the candles are out, making your voice all high and wearing a mask to hide your teen boy mustache hairs? Do you want that, Dipper?!”

Dipper drops an armful of t-shirts into his hamper and turns around. She’s surprised to see the amusement on his face. “Mabel, all you had to do was ask. Of course I’ll go. Who knows, this really could be our last time.”

She beams at him, joyous and relieved. Then she drops her MabelVision Board™, suddenly struck by the best idea ever in the history of time and space. “Oh my gosh. Dipper, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I’m thinking about Halloween,” he says gamely.

“Close enough!” She grabs him by the shoulders and looks him straight in the eyes. “Mabel and Dipper: Government Dudes.”

It takes Dipper a second to make the connection. “Government… You mean Agent Powers and Agent Trigger?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that,” Mabel says in her most deadpan voice (which, like a lot of her voices, sort of sounds like Mr. Upsidedownington).

Despite her inability to mimic Agent Powers, Dipper is immediately on board. “We could wear cool shades!”

“And ear pieces!”

“And black ties!”

“And imprison anyone who gets in our way!”

“Whoa, pull it back,” Dipper says.

Most of the accessories are easy enough to produce. They buy some plain black sunglasses at the store and Mabel makes ear pieces out of old curly phone cords and earplugs. The pieces of the suits come from a second-hand store in wildly varying sizes, and Mabel puts her sewing machine to heavy work. In the end, she manages to alter them into some reasonable facsimiles. She would have preferred to rent real suits, but it turns out that would be beyond her price bracket. Suits are way expensive; who knew?

Mabel is highly motivated. Summerween had been, to put it mildly, something of a disaster. Trick-or-treating is supposed to be about candy, not avoiding death at the hands of a self-loathing, revenge-driven, spider-limbed mass of ick. So maybe Piedmont is a bit too normal, all around, but on Halloween night, for once that would be a big plus. Mabel doesn't have to expect anything more dangerous than high school kids being jerks.

When the big night arrives, she and Dipper stand in front of the mirror in her room, both of them with arms crossed, mouths firm, and eyes hidden behind smooth black plastic. It’s pretty rad.

“Agent Mabel,” Dipper says, tone cool and impersonal.

“Agent Dippingsauce,” Mabel acknowledges.
“I believe we have some candy to requisition.”

“Ten-four, over and out, breaker breaker.”

“Let's roll.”

They don’t so much 'roll' as they do 'walk', but they still feel cool doing it. There's something freeing about being behind a pair of solid black shades, as if Mabel can look out at the world and it can't look back in. She gets why all the government stooges (as her Grunkle Stan would say) wear them. They're the modern equivalent of a ninja mask.

There's a price to be paid for fashion, though. By the time they are done with their street she’s tripped twice and walked into a fire hydrant.

In the end, it's all worth it. They reconvene in Dipper's bedroom and dive onto the beanbag chairs, spreading their haul out on the floor. It's edible confetti, a brightly-colored bounteous buffet just waiting to be savored. Mabel fully intends to. She starts with the full-sized chocolate bar that some beautiful soul dropped into her pillow case.

Dipper sees her full bar and immediately begins searching for his. “No way, where's mine?”

“I think I got this at that house when you had to run back to pee,” Mabel says through a mouthful of chocolate.

“Of course, Of course,” Dipper says in disgust. He reaches down and picks up a much smaller bar, looking at it as if it has let him down by existing. “Why do they call these things 'fun size'? There's nothing fun about a small candy bar!”

An hour later and Mabel is deep in the throes of a sugar high. The world is wide and wonderful and Dipper is the best brother ever and every video game they play is the best game ever and every piece of candy she consumes is better than the last.

An hour and a half after that and she's deep in the abyss of a chocolate coma, eyelids half-open as she slumps on the beanbag chair and hears Dipper talking to her as if he's in another room entirely, distant and sort of muffled. She makes a halfhearted attempt to pay attention.

Dad shows up in the doorway and sends them to bed with a reminder there's still school tomorrow (Wednesday is a dumb day for Halloween). Mabel sluggishly brushes the taste of candy out of her mouth and accepts the presence of a low and constant stomachache, like she does every year. Her sheets are cool against her feet as she slides into bed and feels the lump of amalgamated high fructose corn syrup in her gut begin dragging her down into slumber.

Across the hall, she knows Dipper is also climbing into bed, but he won't be sleeping, not yet. He will be reading for at least another hour, and maybe even after that. He's only eaten a fraction of what she did. It's not that he doesn't love candy, but he loves what Halloween stands for even more. He loves it as a celebration of all the things in life that interest him (and many of which they've since discovered are very real). His behavior during Summerween had worried her, but this time he hadn't tried to ditch her to find a party or to act older. He'd gone with her, like always.

Her eyes close, and she's thinking of all the candy she'll be eating for the next week or so. And she's thinking of which ones are Dipper's favorites, so they can trade.

Like always.
It's getting close to what Dipper's mother calls 'jacket weather', the drop in temperature that indicates the coming of winter. Or at least what passes for winter in California. Dipper knows that 'jacket weather' in Piedmont means 'heavy coats and numb hands' weather in the Midwest. His friend Arthur posts pictures from Milwaukee, some of which feature the sort of snow Dipper's never seen in person. It makes him wonder if it will snow in Gravity Falls, far from the coast.

He’s ready to trade his shorts for jeans whenever necessary and doesn't put much thought beyond that into his wardrobe. His mother, however, has a keener eye for such things. She pulls him aside after breakfast on Saturday and looks him over critically.

“We're going shopping today. You need some new shirts and long pants,” she tells him.


“Ones that aren't going to fit you, goob. You're sprouting like a weed, and you're not going to school with your ankles sticking out of your pants like capris.”

Dipper grumbles and complains a bit more, even though he knows there isn't any getting out of it. His mom doesn't make him go shopping very often, so when she does, she makes him. But as he's getting ready, he goes into Mabel's room and stands in front of her full-length mirror and is forced to admit that Mom might have a point. His shirt is dangerously close to revealing his stomach and he's on the cusp of showing off an unsavory amount of leg. At least there's some hair on those legs. Some. Still, he doesn’t think he can pull off Mayor Cutebiker's signature look.

Mom drags him to the mall, which as far as he's concerned is one of the circles of Hades that has somehow risen, bloated and neon-drenched, from the bowels of the earth. He manages to avoid going to any of the trendier stores that sell clothes using pictures of naked people and smell like a fire in a body spray factory. He ends up in the department store section of the mall, dragging his feet behind his mother as she picks out shirts and pants and then dumps them in his arms on the way to shooing him into the changing rooms.

The only thing he makes sure they buy is another vest with an interior pocket. They have to go to two other stores to find the right kind, but it's worth it. His mother seems amused by his attachment to a certain type of clothing, which he gets. It's not like he's ever cared much about his clothes before, but his old vest saved his life on more than one occasion simply by having space for Journal 3.

Journal A is roughly the same size as Journal 3 and should fit just fine. Dipper is still grateful that Mabel had the insight to make him such a gift. With the pine tree journal, he'd been trying to do his own 'thing', find his own style. Journals with golden hands on the cover had, after all, been Grunkle Ford's stock in trade. But the pine tree journal had never felt right, never grabbed him in the same way. Writing any observations regarding weirdness and the supernatural into it had seemed… off. Maybe it was just force of habit. Whatever the case, he's decided that the golden hand motif isn't a Grunkle Ford-only thing — it's a family tradition. He's following in his mentor's footsteps.

Besides, with a blue pine tree already on his hat, carrying around a journal with another blue pine tree on it had sort of felt like he was trying to accessorize or something.
The next week, he and Mabel are walking home from the bus stop. It's in the low fifties and windy, and loose leaves rattle across the asphalt and pavement, collecting in storm drains and against curbs, whirling around neatly mowed front yards. It's sweater weather, and Mabel is happy to oblige. Her fuchsia sweater proclaims, 'Shoot for the Moon!' over a well-knitted depiction of the moon and an anthropomorphic rocket high-fiving.

When they near the house, Mabel splits off and goes running to the backyard to play with Waddles, like she does every day after school. Dipper, not in any hurry, sticks to the sidewalk and heads for the garage.

It's because of this that he sees the car coming slowly down the street, slow enough to gain his attention. He doesn't know much about cars, but he knows an expensive one when he sees it, and this one looks like it's probably worth more than his house. When it draws near him, it slows even further and then rolls to a stop.

Dipper is beginning to wonder if he should run before he gets human trafficked or something, though that would raise the question of why anyone who could afford a car like that would need to sell him. He stands his ground, figuring they're lost and one of those tinted windows is about to roll down so someone old enough to not be aware of the maps on their smartphone can ask for directions.

Instead, the rear door pops open and Pacifica Northwest steps out.

“Pacifica?” Dipper says dumbly. Obviously, it's her, but it's a rather sharp adjustment to his expectations.

She flips her hair up haughtily and approaches him. “Dipper Pines. So you do live here.”

“Uh, yeah. Where else would I live?” he says. “Wait, are you stalking me?”

“As if,” she retorts. “I was… in the neighborhood, and I saw you.”

Dipper doesn't need a pair of Mabel's Skepticals to doubt that. “You were 'in' the neighborhood. You.”

“I live in California, you know,” she snaps.

“You do not, you live…” Dipper suddenly remembers what happened to her home. “…Somewhere other than Gravity Falls. Right.”

Pacifica looks at him like he's an idiot. “We only lived in Gravity Falls during the summer. Did you really think we spent all year in a logging town, in the middle of nowhere?”

When she puts it that way, Dipper actually does feel like an idiot. The kind of money the NorthRICS have (had?) doesn't come from small Oregon towns on the low end of the economic scale. Northwest Manor may have been their ancestral home, but Pacifica's parents are probably into banking or hedge funds or some other rich person thing Dipper doesn't know much about. Rich people go where the money is. Wall Street, or whatever.


“And you drove all the way up from Malibu to Piedmont so you could cruise slowly down my street,” Dipper says.

“Of course not,” she scoffs. “I flew.”
“Of course, because why wouldn't you spend that kind of money to argue with me on the sidewalk,” Dipper says, rolling his eyes. “Look, I have homework to do and, unlike some people, I can't pay someone else to do it.”

It happens so quickly that Dipper almost misses it; and if he hadn't seen it before, he wouldn't have recognized it. What flashes through her eyes is hurt, genuine and unmistakable to the rare person who has seen the youngest Northwest vulnerable and alone. She buries it quickly behind a prideful twist of her lips, but not quickly enough.

“This was a dumb idea,” she hisses, and turns on the heel of a designer shoe.

Dipper can't help himself; whatever else she is, he thinks she's sort of a friend and definitely a comrade (and in his mind he can see, in a second of vision so clear it's as if it's happening again, the light of the scorched sky and the beam they floated through as they parachuted into the heart of darkness, and the way she hid her fear behind disdain but went with them just the same). He reaches out and catches her arm, half expecting her to pull away.

Instead she faces him again, and up close he can see dark circles beneath her eyes that even her expensive makeup can't camouflage. “Pacifica, I'm sorry,” he says, and he means it. “I know you didn't come all this way to fight with me. …You didn't come all this way to fight with me, right?”

Pacifica doesn't move. She looks down to where his hand is still lightly wrapped around her wrist, and her face lapses into an open heartache that he's seen only once, by the dusty rays of a flashlight in the room of a long, dark history.

“You're real,” she says beneath her breath, and then Dipper understands.

“You want to come in for a minute? I bet Mabel would like to see you,” he says, almost to his own surprise.

She seems to come back to herself and pulls away from him almost absentmindedly. “I can't. I'm not supposed to be here.”

Dipper shrugs. “Just saying, if you're already in trouble…”

For a moment, she glances towards his house with something that might be longing. “…No. I have to go before Mother notices.”

Dipper is about to ask how her mother could possibly miss her daughter flying into San Francisco and renting a driver, but then he thinks about what he saw of her parents and it makes more sense. “Some other time, then,” he says mostly to have a response, not because he believes it will ever happen.

But her mouth firms and she looks fiercely towards the car. She seems to gather her courage, and then reaches into her designer purse and pulls out a scrap of paper which she shoves into his hand. “It's my number,” she explains, not meeting his eyes. “I just need to… It's not…”

In another time, another place, Dipper probably would have given her grief about her sudden loss of eloquence. But this is not the right moment for that. Instead, he writes his own number on a portion of the paper and tears it, handing half back to her. “Don't be a stranger, Pacifica. I mean, we were all there. That has to mean something, right?”

“Right,” she says, sounding relieved. "We were there. It happened."

“Yeah,” he tells her, making sure to look her right in the eye, “it did.”
Pacifica's mouth lifts in a smile, and it's not smug or cruel or pasted on. Then Dipper freezes awkwardly as she impulsively steps forward and wraps her arms around him for a second time. He starts to raise his hands to hug her back, but just as quickly as she touched him, she steps away. Her eyes are wide and her cheeks are slightly pinked. She takes a deep breath and then says, “If you tell anyone about this, I will sue you.”

He can't tell if she's serious, so he scoffs at her. “You don't have a case.”

“I have money.”

“Touché.”

When she reenters the car, her eyes catch his just before the door closes, and he thinks she is smiling again. It isn't until he keys in the code for the garage and steps through the lifting door that he realizes he is, too.
Mabel loves the Christmas season. It's the one time of the year when the world aligns with her taste in everything: More sweaters, more glitter, more lights, more cookies and more cheer!

Of course, Christmas is still weeks away, but that won't stop her from embracing the spirit.

“Oh, Christmas hog, oh, Christmas hog! You are so plump and shiny!” she sings as she wraps Waddles' torso in tinsel.

Her parents have been a bit slow to take to Waddles (“Couldn't you have brought back a dog?” her mother had asked plaintively), and it remains unclear if Alameda County even allows pigs to be kept as pets. Mabel isn't too worried because she's pretty sure she's seen someone with a pot-bellied pig before and is definitely not making that memory up. Waddles is already house trained, though, which has helped smooth things over quite a bit. He's never been an outdoor pig, much to Grunkle Stan's disgust. But if Waddles could win over Grunkle Stan (he punched a pterodactyl in the face to save Waddles!), then Waddles can win over anyone. Her parents will come around eventually.

“How could they not?” she says out loud, pressing her nose to Waddles' snout. “You're so porkin' adorable!”

She's distracted from her task of making Waddles beautiful when her phone makes the chime of a new message. She hurries over to her desk to see who it is, picking up her thoroughly bezazzled Shimmery Twinkleheart phone case and swiping the background photo of a carsick Dipper to unlock it.

Soos: hey hambone just a heds up but I think your supposd to check your mail to day

Mabel immediately checks her email, but there's nothing but a few notifications. She frowns, disappointed. What was Soos— WAIT HE MEANT OLD PERSON PAPER MAIL.

Mabel flies down the stairs to where she knows her parents pile the morning mail on the table and usually don't sort through it until after dinner. It's mostly a mess of bills and flyers, but underneath a bunch of coupons for Big Big Beef is a yellow package. The return address is for Honningsvåg, Norway.

“So exotic,” Mabel breathes. She presses the package close to her face, sniffing it. “It smells like Norway,” she decides. Norway probably smells like paper.

She scurries back up to her room and leaps onto her bed. Waddles follows her, sensing her excitement (and maybe paper scraps to chew on). She pauses just long enough to text Soos back and then eagerly tears open the top edge of the package and reaches inside. She finds a thick sheaf of paper, bound together with a rubber band. There are two distinct envelopes. One has her name on it, the other is for Dipper. Dipper's is where most of the thickness comes from, and Mabel guesses that must be from Grunkle Ford. Probably a lot of nerd stuff.

Dipper is out playing video games at someone or the other's house, so she'll have to wait to hear what he got. Well, that just means she'll have to stretch hers out a little longer. She settles back onto her pillow and neatly bisects the top of her envelope with her nail, trying to emulate a trick she's seen
her mom do. Problem is, her mom has longer nails.

“Ow ow ow paper cut!” Mabel hisses, sticking her thumb into her mouth. “Why would you do that? I just want to read you!”

Her letter is from Grunkle Stan. It's typically gruff and to the point and makes Mabel smile until her cheeks hurt.

Ford's been talking about that internet mail malarkey but I told him we'd just do this the old fashioned way before we head out again. I hear you made Dipper another journal. Did you hit your head on the way home or something? The last thing that kid needs is that kind of encouragement. He's probably out looking for Nazi gold or some garbage right now, thanks to you. You tell him I said if the apocalypse wasn't enough weird for him then he's as crazy as Ford is.

But look who's talking, right? I'm in Norway about to go hunting for something weird myself. Guess I never did learn. Anyways, Soos says the Shack is doing well, though you already know that, seeing as you probably hear more from him than I can right now. Which is good, because the last thing I need is him yapping at me over the phone. Finally getting some peace and quiet out here, and all I had to do was go out to the middle of the freezing ocean. We haven't found anything as weird as what's back home yet but judging by how hard Ford's been staring at his gizmos it's just a matter of time.

I hope you're keeping yourself out of trouble. And if not, then I hope you're destroying the evidence like I taught you. I don't want to get any angry letters from your parents, so don't do anything that isn't deniable. And don't ever talk to the cops. Ford just read this over my shoulder and he's giving me dirty looks now. Don't talk to him, either.

I know you and Dipper will share your letters, since you two are so unnaturally close and all. So Dipper, staying out of trouble goes twice for you, because I ain't around to club any zombies if you decide to recite anything without paying attention. I know you got a passion for this stuff, kid, but cut an old man some slack and try not to give me a heart attack. Besides, you think your parents are going to take it as well as me if you drag some kind of Elder God spawn back to their nice little place in the suburbs? Just be smart and be careful. I know you got a problem with that second part.

Tell Waddles I said hi, and that I wish he was here because I haven't had fresh bacon in months.

-Stan

“Psshht. He loves you,” Mabel says to Waddles.

For a moment, Mabel wishes she was on a boat to parts unknown, sailing towards adventure. Dipper isn't the only one who craves a little more excitement around Piedmont. What Mabel wants even more, though, is to see her two Grunkles working together, reforging the bond they'd broken so many years ago. Her heart swells at the thought. Thirty years apart, and they were finally becoming brothers again. It just makes her so happy!

And Mabel and Dipper are good, too, so it's even better. Dipper got a little stupid for a while after they came back, but she forgives him. The Mystery Twins can never be stopped!

“Can't stop, won't stop!” Mabel declares, grabbing Waddles' front hooves and doing a little dance on her knees with him.
He's mostly shed his tinsel wrapping and it's all over her bed and floor, which just won't do. So, while she's waiting for Dipper to get back, she grabs the camera from his closet and starts filming Mabel's Guide to Decorating Your Christmas Hog. A little specific, but 'tis the season!

When Dipper finally gets home, she's waiting for him in the living room with his letter in her hands and a big grin on her face.

“Guess what, Dipper?” she says, holding the letter behind her back with anticipatory glee.

He eyes her warily as he takes off his jacket and puts it in the closet. “Mabel, did you eat a jar of marshmallow fluff again?”

“That's right, we got letters!” She thrusts it forward and waves it in his face. “From Norway!”

“Norway? Wait, is this from Grunkle Ford?!” And just like that, he's almost as excited as she is. “It is! He must have answered my questions!” He snatches it out of her hand and holds it like it's made of something precious.


Dipper glances towards the kitchen, where Dad has started dinner. “Not here.”

Navigating Dipper's room requires kicking laundry out of the way. Mabel boots a pair of jeans towards his unused hamper while he jumps into his desk chair, skidding across the plastic floor mat and tearing at his envelope. The first piece of paper he pulls out looks like regular correspondence, but there are about six or seven additional pages that are absolutely covered in scribbles.

Mabel runs over to the chair, wraps her arms around Dipper's neck and reads over his shoulder:

Dear Dipper,

I hope this letter finds you well in Piedmont. It's been a very long time since I've been to California, and I should like to visit it again someday. Perhaps Stan and I could come see you in the future? We can't make plans now, of course, but I'm certain my work will take me back to Gravity Falls once we've settled things out here. I wish you could see some of the dimensional distortions I've already cataloged — truly fascinating anomalies! My equipment has proven somewhat unreliable under such harsh ocean conditions, but I'm confident I'll be able to adapt it given a little more time. I often find myself wishing you were here to offer some suggestions. Your insight would be appreciated, and it would have been an excellent chance to develop your intellect further. But, I understand your place is with your parents, for now. I've had a few talks with Stanley about it, and as much as it pains me to admit, I'm not sure my original offer of apprenticeship would have been what's best for you. My eagerness to once again connect with another mind led me to jump the gun a little and, truth be told, I had other motivations which were far from altruistic. I still believe you have a bright future in the pursuit of science, Dipper. But perhaps that's no reason to rush your childhood. I know that you and Mabel intend to be there for each other, no matter what. I wish Stanley and I had done things your way, but we're doing our best to make up for lost time.

Regarding your concerns about possible ghost sightings, I've done my best to recreate my original notes on the subject. I'm afraid my memory isn't perfect, but I think I've recorded all the most pertinent information regarding the distinct categories of apparitions. I am somewhat surprised that you asked, given your current location. Paranormal activity is not impossible in Piedmont, of course, but I hope you understand that it is unlikely. Don't let it discourage you if you can't find
anything concrete. I wasted considerable effort on wild goose chases in my youth before I eventually found Gravity Falls. There are plenty of anomalies out there, but it’s rare for them to be concentrated enough to easily discover.

I’m guessing public schools haven’t changed all that much since I attended, so I’m sure your classes offer little for someone of your acumen. Still, I urge you to put forward the effort and do your best. I managed to fulfill my ambition despite not gaining admission to my college of choice, but I will always regret losing out on that experience. Don’t let your eagerness to get into the field stall your education. If you concentrate on your studies, I don’t see any reason why you couldn’t attend West Coast Tech someday!

Now, when it comes to contacting me, electronic mail will be your best bet. Unfortunately, I can’t guarantee any timely responses, considering the nature of this endeavor. Just know that I will do my best to reply whenever a connection is possible. Digital technology developed at a fantastic pace while I was gone, but there are still some substantial limits, I see! I’ve heard it’s possible to communicate via satellite at these latitudes. Perhaps I’ll look into that at some point down the road.

For now, though, it’s back to the search!

Stanley is telling me that Mabel will read this letter as well. Mabel, I’ve borrowed the remainder of the unicorn hair you recovered to create a defensive shield for the Stan o’ War II. I thought you should know that your efforts are still protecting your family. I’m wearing one of the sweaters you gave me right now! It’s practical in these climes, yet also fashionable. I hope you and Waddles are both doing well. Also, my advice to Dipper regarding schoolwork and studies applies equally to you, young lady. You are capable of great things.

With love,

Great-Uncle Ford

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” Mabel lets out a high-pitched noise of happiness and squeezes Dipper’s neck until his eyes begin to bulge. “They’re getting along and they love us, Dipper!”

“Mabel,” he chokes, tugging at her elbows.

She releases him and rushes back to her room to grab her letter. She returns and hands it to him eagerly. “Now you read mine!”

Together, they huddle over the letter, sharing in its warmth.
It's Thursday, and Mabel is slumped face-first on her bed pretending to be dead because it's a better alternative than doing one more page of her stupid math homework.

Dipper is attempting to coax her back to the land of the living. “Come on, Mabel, you're really close. Just a few more problems.

“No. I'm dead,” she says into her pillow.

“You're not dead.”

“Bury my bones in the backyard. Burn my homework in my memory. Waddles is the new Mabel.”

“Okay, well…” Dipper clears his throat. “Luckily, I know a thing or two about raising the dead. ‘Corpus levitas—’”

“NO!” Mabel shoots off the bed and attacks him with her sweater sleeves, thwapping mightily at his face.

“Hey, it worked!” he laughs, right before he catches a sleeve full across the mouth. “Ow. Ow! Mabel!”

“Kill the necromancer!” she howls, continuing her assault as he covers his head with his arms.

He recovers long enough to shove her back onto her bed, which surprises Mabel, as she's accustomed to overpowering him. “Hah! I forgot I'm taller than you now,” he says.

“Puberty is unfair and should be banned,” Mabel declares.

“Al-pha twin! Al-pha twin!” Dipper chants.

Mabel groans and rolls back over to pretend to be dead, but she's letting him have his moment. She always sort of knew that her time as the taller twin had an expiration date — especially after Grunkle Stan subjected her to that awful facts-of-life book. According to that Book-Which-Must-Not-Be-Named, her growth rate has peaked and she won’t be much taller than she already is (if she ends up anything like her mother, she’s going to be a bit shorter than average). Dipper, meanwhile, is just hitting his growing stride, a stage that might easily last into the second half of his teens.

That doesn't mean he can get complacent, though.

“Fine, take a ten minute break,” he says, and as soon as he turns around to leave she leaps off the bed and onto his back.

“DEATH FROM ABOVE!”

She wraps her arms around his face so he can't see and tightens her legs around his thighs until he stumbles to the floor, the impact rattling the knickknacks on her shelves.

“Kids!” their mother calls up the stairs. “You're supposed to be doing homework, not
roughhousing!"

“‘It can be two things!’” Mabel yells back.

“‘Help! Dipper down!’” Dipper says, his voice muffled by carpet.

“‘Dipper, is your sister beating you up?’” Mom says wryly.

“‘…No!’” he denies.

“You two cut it out before you break something. And that math better be done by bedtime,” she says, voice fading as she returns to the living room.

“I think I have rug burn on my chin,” Dipper says pathetically.

“That’s what you get,” Mabel tells him, poking him in the back of the head.

“Got it. I can never let my guard down ever again, for the rest of my life.”

“It’s lonely at the top, bro-bro.”

“This doesn’t feel like the top,” he says, Mabel still kneeling on his back. “I feel like I’d probably be able to breathe at the top.”

He surprises her again when he pushes himself up despite her position, dislodging her weight. Puberty really is unfair. She tumbles to the side and stays there, unwilling to rise because there’s nothing waiting for her up above but math homework. Truly, the worst and nerdiest of homeworks. So of course Dipper is awesome at it.

Dipper wisely faces her as he backs away out of the room. “I’m going to get a drink. You want anything?”

“I want Pitt Cola,” Mabel whines, raising her arms and clenching her hands like a needy toddler.

“I know!” Dipper exclaims with keen empathy. “Agh, what do they put in that stuff? I… I need it.”

At school the next day, Mabel is politely listening to her friends have a lively debate over which &ndra song is the best and which is merely the greatest. She opens her mouth to settle the issue by describing how Taking Over Midnight destroyed a zombie horde and it’s not like any song can top that. Then, for some reason, she turns to look over her shoulder to where she knows Dipper usually sits with his friends. He’s there, all right, scribbling in a notebook while everyone around him trades Tragic cards. It’s not Journal A, though. It’s just a regular old spiral-bound notebook.

She realizes that he never brings Journal A to school with him. She supposes she already knew that, but never really thought about what it means.

It means he knows no one is going to take what’s in that journal seriously. It means that Mabel’s friends will, at best, think she’s great at making up stories and, at worst, think she’s being a weird liar for attention. It means the letter she wrote to her parents about Grunkle Ford coming through the portal, the letter she never got a chance to send in the whirlwind of events that followed, would have been dismissed as fantasy (or maybe she’d be seeing a therapist now, instead).

Slowly, Mabel closes her mouth and picks at her food. The girls at this lunch table will never really be her best friends ever again, will they. She can’t share the things that are most important to her anymore. Is that how school will be from now on, forever? She can never truly be herself again?
How does Dipper stand it?

She floats through the rest of the day in a daze. On the bus ride home she sits next to Dipper, hugging her backpack to herself, waiting to get home so she can disappear into Sweatertown.

Dipper notices. He nudges her gently with his elbow. “Hey, what happened?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs. “Just realizing some stuff, I guess.”

“Tell me about it.”

She looks at him gratefully. “Remember all those zombies we exploded with the power of Love Patrol Alpha?”

“I never agreed to that name,” he says immediately. “But, yeah.”

“My friends were talking about &ndra and I was going to tell them that *Taking Over Midnight* is the ultimate weapon, and I realized I couldn’t.” She frowns. “One of the greatest moments ever and I can’t tell my friends about it. What kind of friend does that make me?”

“Mabel…” Dipper stops whatever he was going to say, looking like he’s searching hard for the right words. “Mabel, when I was having a hard time when we got back, you helped me snap out of it. You were right when you wouldn't let me just stop trying. I didn't know how to be in Piedmont again, but we still have to be here, and that's not the worst thing ever. …But, at the same time, I think we have to let go a little bit. Because when you know what we know, and nobody here does, it's like… How normal are we ever going to be able to be?”

Mabel shrinks into herself, the bottom half of her face disappearing into her sweater. “Not helping, Dippingsauce.”

“No, Mabel, it doesn't have to be a bad thing,” he tries to explain. “I mean, is it terrible that we belong more in Gravity Falls, now? People spend their whole lives looking for some place to belong. We're only thirteen and we already found a special place that we're a part of. Don't you think that's valuable? Right?”

Slowly, she begins to emerge from her sweater.

“I'm not saying that Piedmont and Mom and Dad aren't important, I'm just saying that's not… the whole thing anymore. I mean, I don't know about you, but… I feel like I have a duty in Gravity Falls. I really think I belong there, Mabel. I want to go back and fill Journal A with notes and if I have to go to school here and then college wherever to learn what I need to know to do that, then… Well, that's what I have to do.” He puts a hand on her shoulder. “You helped me see that. You were right. We shouldn't just give up in between summers.”

Mabel doesn't see her future that clearly. She doesn't know what she's going to do when she grows up. But she knows that Dipper will be there, and now she's certain that Gravity Falls will be, too.

“And we aren't alone,” he continues. “We have Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford and Soos and Wendy and Candy and Grenda and Pacifica and, heck, I bet even McGucket would want to talk if we called him. They know what we know, and maybe just knowing that helps, if that makes sense.” He looks at her, mouth raising in a half-smile. “And we always have each other.”

Mabel throws her arms around him and squeezes until he makes a strangled noise of protest, and she doesn't care one bit if the other kids on the bus are watching.
“And we have Waddles!” she reminds him, cheek pressed to his as she grins.

He laughs awkwardly, arms pinned to his sides. “Yeah, can't forget about Waddles.”

(Mabel still feels the faint pull of guilt when she thinks about her parents. She loves Mom and Dad, and she wants them to be a part of her new life facet, but at the same time she doesn't know how well they’d take the pretty dangerous facts. It's something she and Dipper need to discuss, but she's in no hurry to do so.)

When they arrive at their bus stop she steps off the vehicle feeling so much lighter than she had when she got on. Dipper is really good at the whole reassurance thing, which would probably surprise anyone else, but not Mabel. She has too many memories of him going out of his way to make her feel better. And while, in this case, his pep talk definitely had a darker edge and no easy solution to her problem, it had hope for the future. Besides, he’s right. They have friends who know the truth, and they have each other.
Another day of school, another bus ride home. Mabel doesn’t mind the routine, but it does suffer in contrast to the wild and varied days of Gravity Falls. When the bus arrives at the stop, she is looking contemplatively out the window. She sees a California winter, but in the mirrored layers of reflections she envisions a different climate from a different bus ride. She sees the sharp hills and valleys, and the endless evergreens.

As she steps off the bus with Dipper right behind her, she takes a deep breath of the cool air. It’s as bracing as his advice. His words from the previous day are still lodged somewhere just below her heart, slowly being absorbed, filling it like helium. She is lifting, rising over what had seemed before to be insurmountable. The sidewalk scrolls beneath her feet, the sky is a crisp, empty blue, she’s got her brother at her side and a weekend to look forward to. Life is good.

And then, suddenly, life is awesome:

When they approach their house, there’s a pickup truck parked in the driveway. It looks sort of new — not new new, but, like, used car dealer and in pretty good shape new. Mabel looks to Dipper, but he only shrugs, as curious as she is.

“Maybe Mom and Dad bought us a car!” she suggests.

“Might be a little soon for that,” Dipper says dryly.

Mabel puts her hands on her hips and grins. “They must have heard how great we were at Globnar racing.”

“No, if they’d heard about that we’d still be grounded.”

The mystery is solved when a large, familiar figure lumbers around from the front of the cab. He’s wearing a brown beanie and a thermal sweatshirt with a t-shirt over it — a green t-shirt marked with a big, sloppy question mark.

Mabel's backpack hits the sidewalk with a thump.

“SOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSSSSSS!” she screeches, rushing across the lawn towards him like a deranged linebacker.

Soos' face lights up at the sight of her. “Mabel!” he yells back, opening his arms.

Mabel barrels straight into him without slowing, leaping upwards to catch his neck in a hug. He staggers backwards a bit, knocking into the door of the truck. She is beside herself, hugging him and tugging at his hat, kicking her feet in the air.

“You came to see us!” she exclaims, shaking him excitedly.

“Of course! I missed you guys. Dipper, dude — bring it in!”

Dipper isn’t far behind Mabel. He and Soos exchange a high five and then a one-armed hug. Soos’
other arm is still supporting Mabel, who has climbed him like a tree and is basically assaulting him with her unfettered affection.

“Did you know I needed cheering up? Do we have telepathy?! What number am I thinking of?” Mabel covers Soos’ eyes with her hands.

Soos tilts his head back, trying to see beneath her fingers. “Uh, six. No, seventy-four! What was the question again?”

“Nice new truck, man,” Dipper says, admiring the relatively shiny vehicle.

“Yeah, that's my new work truck. Pretty sweet, huh? Check this out—” Soos somehow manages to juggle Mabel and open the passenger door at the same time. When he does, running lights appear at the edge of the step to get in, as well as at the top of the door frame. “It's like an alien blast door or something! Total sci-fi. I was like, the future is now, you know?”

Mabel slides down and beams up at him. “And you drove it all this way to see us, you big softy!”

Soos shrugs bashfully. “Well, Melody is in Portland for the weekend taking care of some boring stuff, and the Shack is always pretty dead this time of year. I closed up shop because I was alone and went to get gas at the station, and the station is sort of on the south side of town, and I was, like, hey, Dipper and Mabel are to the south. So I drove here.”

Dipper frowned. “You were alone? What about Abuelita?”

“She moved back out of the Shack after Melody moved in with me. She didn't like all the customers making noise all day, anyway,” Soos said. “Me and Melody are in my old break room, the one with the carpet that turned me into a pig. That was a very enriching day. Oh, and dudes — I cleaned up the attic some for when you come back. I left it pretty much how it was, though.” He pauses, sudden worry in his eyes. “Er, you are coming back, right? For sure?”

Mabel has honestly never even considered the possibility she won’t be going back to Gravity Falls in the summer. As far as she's concerned, that's not an option.

“Even if we have to walk,” Dipper says.

Soos relaxes, looking relieved. “Walk? I got your ride right here, dawg!” He thumps his fist against the side of his new truck for emphasis.

“We could fill the back with water,” Mabel says. “Pool party all the way to Oregon!”

“A pool with wheels? Aw, man, I bet nobody has ever thought of that before, ever. We should, like, copyright or trademark that. Hey, do either of you dudes know the difference between a copyright and a trademark? I think that might be important.”

“How is the Shack doing? I know you said it's dead around Christmas, but other than that…?” Dipper asks.

“It's going great!” Soos proudly proclaims. “It's like a big town landmark now, so everybody sends the tourists our way. Plus, Melody is, like, a total genius at business. All the numbers make sense when she explains it, you know? And I keep making attractions just like I did for Mr. Pines. When you guys come back you should check out the Komodo Wagon I made. It's a dragon on wheels, so it's even deadlier! Kind of like your pool with wheels, Mabel. I guess great minds think alike, huh?”

“Synergy!” Mabel says, another cool word she learned from her boss days.
“Wendy's in school right now, but I already told her she could have her job back over the break. And she picks up hours on the weekends sometimes.” Soos digs around in his pants pocket and extracts a very rumpled and soda-stained wad of paper. “Speaking of hours, I've been putting together this business report for Mr. Pines and I thought you dudes could pitch some new attractions, too. You know, to spice it up a little.”

“Flea circus! No, fairy circus! Fairies riding circus elephants and the elephants can dance!” Mabel proposes.

Dipper puts on his thinking face. “Wait, for Grunkle Stan or Grunkle Ford? Because I guess technically Ford still owns the Shack, but Stan ran the business and paid the mortgage, and Stan promoted you to manager, but Ford still owns the Shack… Where do your profits even go?”

“Oh, Melody could answer that better than me, but there's a bank account it all goes to and I get paid out of that and so does Melody and sometimes Wendy.”

“What name is it under?”

Soos digs through another pocket and pulls out a crinkled check stub. “…Stan Pines,” he reads.

“Well, that tells us nothing.”

“Who cares?” Mabel says, impulsively hugging Soos again and making him fumble his check stub. “They're working together!”

“Heh, well, as far as I'm concerned I still answer to Stan,” Soos says with a shrug and a grin.

“It is Stan's business,” Dipper muses. “I don't think Grunkle Ford would want to get into running a tourist trap. Or shut it down, since they've reconciled and everything.”

“Grunkle Ford will do all his dangerous nerd stuff in his mad science-y lab and Grunkle Stan will fleece the rubes upstairs!” Mabel says, as it's perfectly obvious to her that's the one and only possibility.

There's a gleam of excitement in Dipper's eye when he considers that. “Yeah. Yeah, maybe that's how it'll be.”

“And Soos will be there, too. Boop!” Mabel says, poking Soos' stomach playfully.

“Ha ha! One more time,” he says.

“Boop! Beep bap! Beepity-beepity-bop—”

Soos chortles breathlessly and bends over slightly, protecting his bulk with his arms. “Ha ha, okay, no more. I'm gonna pee a little.”

“I guess it'll be a full house,” Dipper says.

“Actually, Melody is already talking about getting a place of our own,” Soos says, rising back up and wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes. “She likes the Shack, but I don't think she likes living there as much. I don't get it, but, whatever makes her happy, heh!”

Mabel loves the Shack, but even she knows its 'rustic charm' isn't for everyone. “So what are we doing while you're here?” she asks Soos. “Sightseeing? Mall shopping? Hang gliding??”

“I'm down for whatever, girl-dude, we can go mall gliding. First, though, I brought you guys
something.” Soos walks around to the back of his truck and bends over into the truck bed. “I heard you were, like, totally deprived down here, so I thought I'd hook you up.”

He lifts an entire case of Pitt Cola.

“Soos, you are a king among men,” Dipper says seriously.

“Mabel Juice: Gravity Falls Edition is back in stock in your local kitchen!” Mabel cheers, mouth already watering.

“Three more where this came from, dudes,” Soos says, patting the case. “Oh, and Dipper, Stan had me go down to the basement and look for something. I don't know if I got them all, but this is what I found.” He goes around to the cab and reaches under the passenger seat, pulling out a shoe box. “Sorry if it smells like shoes. This was the first box I could find that wasn't full of cereal.”

Dipper takes it from him with a puzzled expression. When he opens it and looks inside, he lights up. “What… Where did you…?”

“What is it? Dipper, what is it?” Mabel presses him, overwhelmingly curious.

“It's pages! Pages from Journal 3, photocopies! I didn't think I'd ever…” Dipper's expression contorts into a very odd combination of emotions.

Soos looks worried. “Aw, man, I didn't mean to break him.”

Mabel tugs the box out of Dipper's limp grasp. Inside, she sees black and white pages of paper bearing the imperfections, misaligned borders and smudges that are the telltale signs of a photocopy. She still recognizes some of the content, though: Sure enough, they are pages from Journal 3.

“Where did you get these?” she asks, letting Dipper take the box back.

“Down in Ford's lab where the portal used to be,” he replies. “They were all in that desk with the spot that burns you even if you lick your finger first.”

“It's here. It's all here,” Dipper says in a tone of something approaching reverence. “Or, at least most of it, I don't know for sure… These must have been made before Weirdmageddon, I don't see any of the pages that were restored… And all the invisible notes are gone, but still, I can… I can start with these!”

“Grunkle Stan must have used the copy-majig… That's why he gave it back to you!” Mabel says.

“Devious old man…” Dipper mumbles through a smile, and his eyes are suspiciously shiny.

Mabel crosses her arms and grins at him. “Dipper, are you crying?”

He straightens up and fixes her with a superior look. “I'm not crying. Nobody is crying. I'm just very grateful to have information of such scientific import restored, as anyone would be.”

Mabel knows that Grunkle Ford had wanted to start over, to intentionally lose information about Bill (it had been Mabel who had suggested the journals be tossed into the bottomless pit, as she had once disposed of the Truth Telling Teeth there). But Grunkle Stan must know how important Journal 3 had been to Dipper, if he'd pointed Soos to these copies. And besides, most of the stuff about Bill is still missing; Grunkle Stan made photocopies from the original, incomplete state that Journal 3 had been in. And now Dipper has a better starting point for Journal A, with some of his source notes restored!
“This calls for a celebration!” Mabel announces loudly. “Soos — Pitt me!”

“You got it, hambone.” Soos tears through the plastic covering and plunks a can of soda into her waiting hand.

Mabel raises it as if it was a golden chalice. “To our bestest friend Soos, and our bestest day ever with him we’re about to have!”

Dipper also raises a can. “To Soos!”

Soos joins in. “To me, Soos!”

They plunk their cans together and pop them open with a choir of hisses, drinking deep.

“Mmm! Hck-hck, geez,” Dipper coughs, lowering his drink. “It's so bad, but it's so good.”
By the time Dipper and Mabel's parents arrive home later in the afternoon, Soos is ensconced with the twins on the beanbags in Dipper's room, deeply embroiled in a colorful racing game while empty cans of Pitt slowly take over the carpet around them. Mabel is riding a peach cola sugar high and never intends to come back down. She's got Soos on her left and Dipper on her right; she’s smack in the middle of a warm family-friendwich and if she concentrates on the TV it's so easy to pretend it's summer again.

“Soos, don't you do it!” Dipper yells as he sees Soos readying a weapon in his corner of the screen.

“Ahhhh! Turtle shell's gonna get you, dawg!” Soos warns, laughing as he hits the fire button.

A shadow falls across the room from the doorway. “Hello?” It's their mother, her expression uncertain as she takes in the sight of her children playing video games with an adult stranger.

Mabel quickly pauses the game and jumps to her feet. “Mom! Mom, Soos came to visit us! Isn't that awesome?”

“Oh, how nice,” Mom says faintly. “So you’re… Soos?” she asks as if she's not sure what she's saying or if she's saying it right.

Soos lumbers to his feet, wipes his sweaty palm on his pant leg and holds it out. “Hi, Mrs. Pines, I'm Soos. I'm the manager over at the Mystery Shack.”

She takes his hand, expression still puzzled. “You run the Shack?”

Dipper quickly jumps into the conversation. “Soos has been working at the Shack for a long time, and Grunkle Stan promoted him right before we left.”

Soos smiles proudly. “Mr. Pines needed someone to manage the place while he's—”

“On vacation!” Dipper interjects. He looks to Mabel for assistance.

Mabel bares her braces in a smile that's really more of a grimace: She hates lying and even more so when it's to her mother, but, she supposes that Grunkle Stan is *technically* on vacation… “Yep! Grunkle Stan's taking it easy, just… kickin' back. 'Cause he's old.”

Dipper doesn't look especially impressed with her addition but continues, “So Soos is the new manager and tour guide, and since the Shack is closed this weekend he drove down to visit.”

“Look what he brought us!” Mabel enthuses, holding up half a can of Pitt.

“Oh, wow. I haven't had one of those since college,” Mom says. “Didn't know they sold it up in Oregon. That's quite a drive to bring some soda, Soos.”

Soos scratches the back of his head. “Well, it was kind of a, what'dya call it, spur of the moment type thing.” He drapes an arm over Dipper and Mabel's shoulders and grins down at them. “Guess I just missed some of my family, you know?”
Mabel melts a little inside, bubbling over with fondness. “Soos, you magnificent marshmallow!”

Dipper pats Soos on the shoulder, but he's also watching their mother with concern.

It seems warranted, because she still looks a bit confused. “Is Soos staying for dinner?” she says.

“Soos, how do you feel about lasagna?” Mabel asks him.

“Lasagna's great, dude. It's like really hot noodle cake,” he says.

“You're more than welcome, there should be plenty,” Mom says, turning to leave. “Dipper, it's your turn to set the table tonight.”

“I'll be right down,” Dipper calls after her. As soon as they hear her going down the stairs, he looks at Mabel worriedly. “You think she heard too much?”

Mabel begins twisting a strand of her hair, deeply uncomfortable with their deception. “Dipper, it's Mom.”

“Do you really think she's ready to hear everything? Just try to explain how we had to distract a murderous demon so Grunkle Stan could get his mind erased without us being grounded until we're eighteen!”

Mabel sighs and slumps to her knees to hug Waddles, who's licking one of the Pitt cans. “I know.”

Dipper looks apologetically at Soos. “Sorry, man. We haven’t really told our parents much, so they don't…”

“They don't know why we're Pterodactyl Bros,” Soos says sagely.

“Yeah. The whole 'apocalypse' thing is… really hard to work up to. And I don't even know how to explain Globnar…”

Soos looks doubtful. “But, dude, that's your mom and dad. Is it really cool to keep all that stuff from them?

Dipper and Mabel exchange a look and, honestly, Mabel isn't sure if it’s ever been a good idea. It just seems like the only option, at least if they want to go to Gravity Falls again.

“We still have to figure it out,” Dipper says, “but let's just keep it to ourselves for now, okay? Pterodactyl Bros only.”

Soos nods as if he's taking a solemn oath. “Pterodactyl Bros only. Plus Mabel.”

“Plus Waddles,” Mabel says, holding up the pig.

“Plus Waddles,” Dipper gravely confirms.

Soos ends up sleeping on the couch that night, though even after a whole evening in his company Mabel's parents don't seem to know what to make of him. Mabel is disappointed they don’t find Soos as lovable as she does, but she supposes he's never fled from a giant mechanical monster with them. It's a strong bonding experience (as was so much of what followed), but not a very replicable one.

The next day they do some sightseeing in Soos' new truck. The cab gradually fills with the clashing aromas of about five different kinds of fast food and the rattle of souvenir keychains, which Soos has developed a rapid obsession with (“It's a souvenir that goes everywhere with you! No wonder people
love these things in the gift store,” he’d observed).

“Soos, I don’t think you can fit these in your pocket anymore,” Dipper says as he attaches the latest keychain to Soos’ keys, which have become a massive tangle of metal links and fabric straps and sort of look like some kind of wig.

“No problem, dude; just clip it to my belt!” Soos says, raising one arm as he slows to a stop at the light.

Dipper finally gets the mess attached to a belt loop, leaving it jangling on the seat. “You will definitely be making a fashion statement.”

“Fashion is a noble pursuit,” Soos says wisely. “Plus, I can carry, like, an infinite number of keys now. Why doesn't everybody have more of these? These things are sweet!”

“I guess you could say you've really latched onto them, eh, Soos?” Mabel grins.

“Ha ha! Oh, man, Mabel — you have not lost it.”

They end up driving to the bay and looking out across the water to where the Bay Bridge's gray, cross-beamed towers span the rippling waves. It's not an ocean of evergreens, but it's not a bad sight, either. Soos takes a bunch of pictures for Melody and then they all pose in front of the vista together after spending far more time than should be necessary trying to figure out the timer on Soos’ camera.

Finally, tired and more than a little bloated, they pull back into the driveway. Mabel opens the door, spilling a bunch of cups and used napkins onto the asphalt. “Someone will get that,” she yawns, heading for the garage.

“So, Soos, what do you think of California?” Dipper asks as they go into the house.

“It's pretty all right, dude. Your trees are kinda small, so that's weirding me out a little. It's not super cold, though, so that's a pro. It's nice, but I think I'd miss all the stuff you can do with snow.” Soos shrugs amiably. “I like it, but I don't know if I'd want to live here, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Dipper says.

It's only five in the evening, but it's already time to say goodbye. Melody is due to return Sunday night, and Soos has his responsibilities around the Shack for when it reopens on Monday. Mabel presses her cheek to the question mark on his shirt, unwilling to release him. It’s been easier, somehow, to miss him when he was just letters on a screen or a tinny voice through a speaker. Now that he's actually here, all chuckles and enthusiasm and unconditional love, she feels like letting go of him is peeling away a part of herself all over again.

“You'll come back to see us again, right?” Dipper says, looking hopeful.

“You know it, dude. Hey, I'm just a text message away,” Soos says, grinning down at them. He puts his hands on Mabel's shoulders. “Do me a favor, hambone?”

“Of course,” she says, trying not to sniffle. It's not like he's going away forever.

“You think you could put some of your scrapbook pictures on the internet or something? I want to show some of them to Melody, you know, since she missed out on so much. And I know you got all the best pictures! You're, like, a scrapbooking Amadeus.”

Mabel wipes at her eyes and smiles. “You got it, Soos.”
They wave to him as he drives up the street, caught between the glow of his visit and the vacancy of his sudden absence. Mabel leans into Dipper's side and tries not to feel bad. It’s been a good day, and there will be others.

“He'll be back,” Dipper tells her.

“He'll be back,” Dipper tells her.

“Or we will,” Mabel says.

Dipper's eyes are far away when he replies, “Definitely.” Mabel can almost see the shadows of the pines move through his mind.

Their parents have been watching from the doorway, letting the twins say goodbye. They still seem puzzled by the depth of Mabel and Dipper's attachment to Soos.

“I didn't realize you guys had made such good friends up there,” their mother says when they come back to the house. She's clearly trying to hide how perplexed she is.

“We're bros,” Dipper says.

And it sounds inadequate, but Mabel knows it's a truth profound.
It's the week before Christmas break and Dipper is on his computer trying to finish a homework assignment instead of what he wants to be doing, which is constantly checking his email to see if Grunkle Ford has responded. He also wants to read through all the local papers he's gathered, searching for anything anomalous. It's depressing how ordinary most of the news is. One might think that a near-apocalypse would have shaken the world up a little bit. Instead, it wasn't even a blip on the radar outside of Roadkill County. Which seems impossible, but, then again, so does everything else about it.

The incident with the ghost has Dipper thinking about what happened in Gravity Falls, which he's done plenty of before. Weirdmageddon had been averted, and the world saved from becoming Bill's extremely breakable new toy. Now, though, Dipper's starting to consider the consequences that might still apply beyond the sleepy town, even after a narrowly aborted extinction-level event.

Dipper knows that Grunkle Ford first came to Gravity Falls because he discovered that the town had the greatest concentration of 'anomalies' (which is such a wide-ranging term; what had Ford been looking for, exactly?) within the continental United States. What Dipper wants to know is how his Grunkle made that determination. It implies a lot of things, like records or prior research or maybe just that Grunkle Ford had been taking the tabloids and the *Fortean Times* seriously. Which, as it turns out, isn’t illogical or ridiculous.

The question that's bothering Dipper is how the rest of the world still thinks it is, and how long they're going to be able to *keep* thinking that it is.

He’s looked at as many news sources as he can find, but not even the National Weather Service reported anything unusual around the time of Weirdmageddon. The boundary of the Falls had kept everything in, so far as the outside world is concerned. But Ford isn't out sailing because he's taking a cruise. He said there were anomalies, and Dipper must assume the use of that word was deliberate. Maybe the weirdness of the other dimension is spreading, seeping through a weakened skin. Or maybe it's always been this way and, somehow, people just don't notice.

Dipper knows there are more satellites in the sky and camera phones in pockets every year. The world isn't the mystery it once was; it grows smaller all the time. Common wisdom has it that the only frontiers left are in the endless space above and the darkest ocean depths below. Gravity Falls is isolated, but Oregon isn't the dark side of the moon. Heck, the Mystery Shack is a tourist trap, and enough people pass through to keep it afloat! Plus, the Society of the Blind Eye is no longer keeping anyone ignorant. The new Mayor may be taking a hard 'Never Mind All That' line, and most of the town is likely to follow it, but how long until someone in Gravity Falls decides they want to be famous?

Just between Dipper and Mabel, they left the Falls with some evidence. Mabel's scrapbook contains a few inexplicable oddities, including photographs of McGucket's mechanical monstrosities, aspects of which are years ahead of the technological curve. Dipper knows that won't be the case for too much longer, considering how many patents McGucket already has pending, but it will still probably be at least half a decade before any of his tech becomes commonplace outside a military testing ground.
Mabel even has a few strands of unicorn hair still taped to one of the scrapbook pages. Dipper doesn't know if they differ in any substantial way from horse hair other than in their magical properties, which will probably defy typical scientific measurement. Really, he feels like they have just enough evidence to attract the lunatic fringe, but not enough to go mainstream. If he could go back to Gravity Falls, he could get the kind of evidence needed to go mainstream. The question is, would he want to?

He doesn't know what to make of it. He puts all his thoughts into his new journal and emails Grunkle Ford a second time. He writes about the encounter with the local ghost and includes his ruminations on how the weirdness of Gravity Falls relates to the world, and whether it's only a matter of time before the town sees tourism for reasons entirely separate from the Mystery Shack. On one hand, Dipper likes to think of himself as a champion of the truth. On the other, he is afraid that truth will be the death of Gravity Falls; not as a town, but as a haven for the otherworldly.

There's still so many questions. And he wants to be trying to answer them, not writing a stupid two-page paper about political efficacy!

He groans loudly and puts his face in his hands, rubbing at his eyes. Across the hall, he hears an answering tortured groan from Mabel. He groans again, louder. Mabel groans back, even sillier. Soon they are making the most ridiculous, extended noises of discontent they can muster, an exchange of wordless vocal distress.

“What in the world are you two doing?” their mother calls up the stairs.

“Homework!” they both answer.

“That doesn't sound like homework.”

Later that night, Dipper is lying on his bed staring at the ceiling as he tries to will his mind to sleep. It's a familiar conundrum, one he usually solves by reading until his eyes burn and he has to close them. But the thing is, he knows that reading will, eventually, send him to sleep; attempting to use sheer willpower is much more unlikely to work. And that's sort of what he wants, because he has this prickling sensation that there's a nightmare coming on, just waiting for him to pass out. Sometimes he feels like it's just the memories, a natural result of some scary things that have happened, and he can cope. And then sometimes he feels like maybe it's Bill who's waiting for him to fall asleep, and those are the bad nights. He knows the difference between a nightmare and a demon's dreamscape. He's not mistaking the former for the latter. It's more that he's afraid someday he'll close his eyes and get the latter when he's expecting the former.

It's because he's so aware, now, that there are other dimensions around him. He can't see or touch them, but he knows they are there. Ford thinks Bill lied about the source of anomalies being other, weirder dimensions: He believes that they are naturally occurring and drawn to Gravity Falls by the Law of Weirdness Magnetism. Dipper isn't so sure. Ford's conclusion seems more based on Bill being a total liar than the body of evidence. It's true that Bill tried to trick Ford into opening a portal, but that doesn't mean there isn't any truth to what Bill claimed. If anything, a half-truth would be more insidious. More believable.

Dipper thinks the truth is somewhere in the middle, between the weirdness of Earth and the weirdness of other, unmapped places. And if there are more anomalies in the world (and there are), happening by statistical anomaly or seeping through whatever unknowable membrane hangs between dimensions, then what else is waiting for a chance to claw through the barrier? Dipper suddenly thinks of the infinity-sided die: 'Outlawed in nine-thousand dimensions', Ford had said. How does he know that? Who had told him?
Dipper has a hard time believing that Bill was the only demon at the threshold.

His ceiling holds no answers. The only man who does is an unknown number of miles away, doing who knows what. Dipper rolls over and looks at the clock on the nightstand. Three AM. He sighs and rolls back. At least it's a Saturday.

He nearly jumps out of his skin when his phone rattles on his desk.

He gets up assuming it's a low battery pulse because he forgot to plug it in, but his eyes widen in surprise when he sees he's received a text. Who texts at three in the morning? Unless it's not three in the morning where they are. Like on the other side of the world, maybe.

His heart skips a beat and he nearly drops his phone in his eagerness. He swipes at the screen and unlocks it, awaiting the white background and colored bubbles of text. When they appear, he immediately checks the name of the sender. His excitement wanes, replaced by confusion.

Pacifica: Are you there?

It's the first time he's heard from her. He added her number to his phone after their odd afternoon encounter but hadn't really thought she'd contact him. It had seemed more like they had traded numbers just for the sake of their shared burden, the experience they both carry. Then again, maybe he needs to give her more credit. After she'd opened the gates of the Manor to the town there was no guarantee the change would stick. But she had risked her life at his side to thwart global annihilation. She had given him a birthday present and signed a farewell card. She really had tried.

He hesitates with his fingers over the touchscreen. What can she possibly want? He types back, Yes.

She doesn't reply for a good minute and a half.

Pacifica: Can I come see you?

Dipper immediately understands that something is wrong. He starts to ask why, then erases it. He types half a paragraph about how he's not sure what she's asking for and erases that, too. In the end, he decides that if she wanted to say more in text, she would have.

Dipper doesn't know a whole lot about her. He doesn't know what her favorite foods are or what her hobbies are besides mini golf or what her opinions are beyond the ones she's been taught to parrot. The things he knows about her are the kinds of things one learns about a person under the direst circumstances. He knows the things that her family and friends and people who have had so many more interactions with her don't know, because he knows who she is when her world comes crumbling down and everything she pretends she is cannot be sustained.

Asking permission to come see him is already a sign of vulnerability that Dipper finds worrying. Pacifica's snobby facade hides very real pain and doubt, but that facade is also all she knows (and everything she has been forced to be). Even when willingly attending his birthday party she had pretended that it was beneath her. She obviously wasn't serious about it, and Dipper hadn't taken it that way, but she had still needed the pretense.

Dipper remembers the conflicted horror on her face when she saw her parents in Bill's throne. He knows there's only one right reply. He types, Sure you can.

He waits for about five minutes but never gets a response. His eyelids grow heavier as he watches his phone, the task finally providing the distraction he needs from his earlier thoughts. He gets back into bed and puts his phone on his chest, just resting his eyes for a minute.
Dipper is suddenly torn from sleep by a vibration rattling his chest.

His first instinct is to flail at it and he ends up knocking his phone to the floor. It takes him a moment to remember what happened: Pacifica had texted him, and he'd fallen asleep awaiting her reply.

Rubbing at his eyes, he reaches down and grabs his phone. It's still dark outside; the clock now tells him it's nearly five in the morning. He's slept just enough to be more tired than ever. He blinks away his blurry vision and squints at his phone. The screen is too bright to look at directly. He flops onto his stomach; for some reason, it's easier to look down at it.

**Pacifica: come outside**

What? He rubs his eyes again, looks away, and then rereads the message. Does she mean come outside to somewhere? Is she texting him on accident? He tries to complete the text in a variety of ways but can't figure it out. He's about to grab his journal and start applying some code ciphers when he realizes that maybe he should just apply Occam's Razor instead.

He clambers upward onto his knees and looks out the window.

Someone small is standing out in the dark, on the sidewalk. They're wearing a heavy coat with the hood up and are bent forward slightly, arms wrapped around their middle.

Dipper stares, his breath slowly fogging the glass. Then he pushes himself backwards until his feet hit the floor. He pulls on a pair of baggy gray sweatpants and grabs his hoodie and then slips his sneakers on without any socks, snagging Wendy's hat from a wall peg on the way out of the room. He knows which parts of the stairs creak and which are safe; he sticks to the side of the stairwell, making sure his feet rest on the sturdy edges of each step. Quietly, he turns the deadbolt and hits the latch on the screen door, catching it as it closes so the hiss of the pneumatic won't be as loud.

The night air is cold, prickling across his face and sticking in his nose. It's probably in the mid to high thirties, the sun yet to rise. His breath steams out in front of him as he crosses the walk; the frosted lawn to his left, the faint blue siding of the garage to his right. The distant sound of traffic rolls in over the nearby houses, heralding the inchoate morning rush. His bare ankles are a strip of ice compared to the downy fabric that swathes the rest of him.

When he gets close enough to the street he can see strands of golden hair hanging out of the lowered hood of the coat. It's the kind of dark fabric, large-buttoned coat that people wear on TV in the big cities, expensive cold weather fashion. But even when his footsteps are obvious, the hood doesn't raise.

He stops at the edge of the sidewalk where it meets the driveway, a study in off-white and pitted black. “Pacifica?” he says, the words made manifest by the cold, written in vapor.

“I didn't think you'd come out,” she says, still looking at the ground. Her voice sounds off. It lacks its customary edge, its volatile pride.

“Pacifica, are you okay?” he asks, even though he's pretty sure she can't be.
She raises her head. The dark circles under her eyes have become more like bruises. Her face, always sharp and slender, a perfect diagram of well-bred slopes and points, is something close to gaunt. She's lost weight. She looks like she hasn't slept since he last saw her.

She takes a step backward. “I shouldn't be here,” she says.

Dipper looks up and down the street but doesn't see a car. “How did you even get here?”

“In a taxi,” she says listlessly.

He assumes she flew into San Francisco again because he just can't see her sitting in a taxi for that many hours. Of course, prior to this moment he also couldn't see her arriving at his house basically unannounced at five in the morning looking worse than she had after surviving the first days of a localized apocalypse. He has no idea what's wrong, he has no idea why she's come, and he has no idea what she wants from him. What he does know is that she's shivering (and so is he).

He puts a hand on her shoulder and leads her towards the house. “Follow me and be really quiet.”

She complies, except for a brief moment when they're about to reach the front walk. She's looking down at his legs. “Can you not even afford socks?” she says, observing his bare ankles.

Her tone is too lacking in inflection to have her usual bite but, perversely, Dipper's worry is slightly eased just by hearing her make any kind of jab at all.

When they enter the house he briefly considers waking his parents. This seems like the sort of situation that they might need to know about, depending. But he has no idea how to explain his friendship with Pacifica, never mind what she's doing at his house at five AM (not that he even knows). And it's not like he'd made it a habit to tell adults what was happening in Gravity Falls all those times he was in very real danger, so why start now?

Besides, he doesn't really want to wake his parents up and try explaining anything. He just wonders if doing so might lessen the amount of trouble he will be in if they wake up. Like, say, right now, when Pacifica is putting her feet in all the wrong places on the stairs.

Somehow, they manage to get to his room without waking the entire house, despite her unfamiliarity with stealth. He closes his door and watches her as she takes in his room. There's a fair amount of dirty laundry scattered on the floor and he's amassed an impressive collection of soda cans on his desk (he's been burning through the Pitt that Soos brought at an alarming rate). It's slightly embarrassing, but he jams his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie obstinately and refuses to feel awkward about it. She's the one who showed up in the dark hours of the morning. She can put up with it or hire him a butler.

She sits on the edge of his unmade bed without saying anything, and that's when Dipper knows that something is definitely, seriously wrong.

He sits on his desk chair and waits.

She's sitting oddly with her shoulders slumped and her head hanging a bit low. Fatigue, would be Dipper's guess, given the time and the trip. That and whatever brought her here. It's not the way he remembers her: Private school posture, ballerina poise.

She reaches up and lowers her hood. Her blonde tresses are still perfectly coiffed, one thing that hasn't changed. “I think my parents are getting divorced,” she says.

Dipper's heart sinks in his chest. It couldn't happen to two nicer people, sure, he's got some
schadenfreude going on, but then there's Pacifica. “Oh… Geez. Man. I'm sorry, Pac—”

“I know they're bad people,” she interrupts him. “I don't even like them. I don't even like my own parents.” She pauses, her mouth in an ugly twist. “They don't like me. You don't, either.”

Dipper needs Mabel. He needs her to come in and say what Pacifica needs to hear in the way that only Mabel can, so genuine and believable. He doesn't think he can be what Pacifica needs. He has to try, but he just doesn't know what to say. “That's not true,” he says.

She just looks at him.

He knows she needs more convincing. She's clearly in a bad place, but she needs the truth, too, because she won't believe anything else from him. “I like you just fine when you're not being what your parents want you to be,” he tells her honestly. “No, I didn't like you when you were being a jerk to Mabel or stuck up about mini golf or money or whatever, but you saved both of us from the ghost and you could have died with us at the end. If I didn't like you, why would I let you in?”

She looks away. “So you like me when I'm not myself.”

“I only like you when you are yourself. Or at least that's what I think. Am I wrong?”

She wraps her arms tightly around herself. “I hope you're right.”

“You really seemed like you were trying. Is that what this is about? Did you stop?” Dipper pulls open one of the drawers on his desk. He takes out a folded letter, creased and well-worn from use. He points to her pink signature, the first T in her name dotted with a heart. “What was this, the last effort you made to not be horrible?”

“No!” she denies, her voice snapping with something approaching her usual acid spark for the first time. “And that's the problem!”

He glances worriedly towards the door, hoping her voice didn't carry. “What happened?”

“You wouldn't understand.”

He sets the letter on his desk and crosses his arms. “Try me.”

She falls silent. Dipper waits, afraid to break eye contact in case it breaks the moment, as well.

“After we lost the Manor, I thought things would be better,” Pacifica finally says, her expression distant. “Like, without that history, or, because of what happened and we saved them… It should've meant something. I don't know. How could it not mean anything? How can they just…” She huffs in frustration. “It was stupid. I was stupid. Dad didn't learn anything, he was just even worse. Mom started drinking again. They didn't want to talk about it and I wanted to, I wanted us to be… different! I wanted to be different.” Her voice lowers further, hopeless.

Dipper shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He's not sure he's cut out to be anyone's confidante for stuff like this, but he's trying. “For what it's worth, I think you are different.”

She looks up, eyes plaintive. “You really think so?”

“Come on, Pacifica. Do you think the you I met at the beginning of summer would even be here like this?”

A corner of her mouth lifts in a small smile. “Ugh, no.”
He smirks. “That's what I thought.”

Her smile fades as she looks away again. “They didn't want to talk about any of it, not even the party. They pretended it never happened. They tried to make me think it never happened. I—…” She suddenly stops and fixes him with a laser glare. “You aren't going to tell anyone about this, are you?”

“What? No!” Dipper says, affronted. “Who would I even tell?”

“Mabel.”

“Isn’t she the one person you wouldn't mind me telling?”

“…Maybe,” Pacifica says grudgingly.

“Hey, if you don't want to talk about this, you don't have to. You showed up on my sidewalk at five in the morning,” he points out.

“I know this is weird, so, like, just shut up about it!”

“Shhh!” He hushes her and looks at his door again. Grimacing, he turns back.

She looks apologetic. “This isn't easy for me, okay?” she explains tightly.

“I'm not going to tell anybody,” he sighs.

Her mouth is thin in her pale face. “Good.”

He's still not sure she really believes him and tries not to take it personally. He doesn't doubt that, in the kinds of circles she runs in, it's pretty commonplace to have anything personal used against you. It makes him appreciate how difficult it must be for her to hand him so much ammunition.

Though, if the tension in her shoulders is any indication, she's not done yet.
Pacifica's breathing is uneven. It's like she's building herself up to further divulgence, waiting until the pressure is unbearable and she has no choice but to speak.

She looks at the floor. The words spill out of her mouth with something like reluctance, but she seems unable to stop. “…When we got back, I thought I was crazy, like that Cipher guy did something to me, or I don't know what. Nothing felt real, nobody saw the sky all split like we did; my parents never said a word about it, it was like I made it up or had a nightmare or something. I had some bruises and we lost our old house and that was it. Right back to Malibu like nothing happened.”

Dipper knows exactly what she means. “I guess I should have signed a letter for you.”

“That would have been nice,” she says wistfully.

“What about your other friends, did seeing them again not help?”

Her eyes dart to his when he says 'other'; then she sneers. “What other friends? You don't make friends at the Academy, you make contacts. Same with the other families we know. I'm not supposed to associate with anyone too familiarly.”

“You've done a lot of things you're not supposed to do,” he points out.

She starts to smile at that, but her face hardens again. “Not before last summer. Dad would just use the bell if I tried.”

Dipper shivers a bit at the thought of that. He is familiar with the concept of conditioning and just the fact that anyone would do that to their own child is… Man. It’s super messed up. He opens his mouth to ask how they got the bell to work so thoroughly on her, and then thinks better of it. Their conversation is already personal and painful enough without dredging that deep, if she'd even answer.

“The kids I know aren't like you,” she continues.

“Hey, just because I don't have a lot of money doesn't mean—”

“No, I didn't mean it like that!” she cuts him off, narrowing her eyes at him for daring to interrupt. “I can't talk to them, even if they were my friends. Besides, my family came from Oregon originally, and a lot of them don't care who you are if you're not from Paris or Milan or whatever.”

Dipper sits bolt upright in his chair, eyes widening as he's struck by a sudden, hilarious realization. “Oh, man, you… You're lower class to them!”

Pacifica grits her teeth. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

“You're, like, from the wrong side of some stupid rich tracks!”

“Shut up!”
“You're a high-class hillbilly!”

“Shut up!"

Dipper can't quite stifle a snort of amusement, but then, he's always been a sucker for irony. Pacifica waits for him to settle down with red cheeks and burning blue eyes, and he doesn't really feel sorry about it because of, A, her history of looking down on people, and B, she looks more alive now than she has since she appeared on the sidewalk.

“Come on, you have to appreciate the irony a little bit.”

“No, I don't,” she snaps.

“You don't think that's karma? Not even after how different you're supposed to be?” he prods her.

She's breathing hard and looks trapped. “You want me to grovel, Pines? You want to hurt me, humiliate me, because I deserve it? Well, maybe I do deserve it!” Her voice trembles.

That soberes him up quickly. “Pacifica, I—”

“Just tell me what you really think. I don't care. Just tell me and then I'll go.” She stands, fists at her sides as if she's bracing herself for a blow.

Once again, Mabel isn't here to smooth things over. It's up to him to do it the only way he can think of: Directly. He stands up to face her and clears his throat. “Okay, then this is the truth.”

She flinches slightly but doesn't look away.

“I like you. I like who you're trying to be. I wasn't lying when I said that,” he says. “Whatever you deserved, I think you've made up for a lot already. And, I don't want to hurt your feelings and I'm sorry I laughed. But, you do understand why I did, right?”

“Because you're a dork who thinks of things like irony,” she retorts, but the tension is leaving her slim frame. “And I'm not a hillbilly.”

“But I'm a dork?”

“You keep a book in your vest. Who does that?” Slowly, she sits back on the edge of his bed.

Dipper returns to his chair and waits. She watches him for a minute and then lets out a breath of tired amusement. “You really are just going to sit there and let me pour it all out, aren't you?”

“Yep,” he says simply.

For half a second, her expression is something close to amazement. “I couldn't sleep,” she says abruptly. “I'd try and try and then I'd get nightmares, sometimes. Like, bad ones. Things would happen with the pyramid, or, you'd be all dead and wooden and I'd just... I'd just go into the panic room, and...” She trails off, unable to look at him.

“You saved everyone, you did the right thing,” Dipper reminds her.

“For once. I bet my parents won't commission a painting of that,” she says bitterly. “I wanted — I needed — like, a part of what happened, a reminder.” She sighs harshly, appearing self-conscious. “I don't know how to put it, it all sounds stupid and... weak.”

Dipper wants to make her understand just how closely he empathizes. “No, I get it. When I first
came back, I felt like an alien. I've *seen* aliens. Well, alien things, I guess. Robots, or… automatons, maybe? It can't be android, because I think an android always looks like a person…”

“You are such a nerd.”

Dipper tosses up his hands. “Yeah, okay, Pacifica. You're right, I shouldn't have tried to help or meet you halfway.”

She actually looks contrite. “Sorry. It does help.”

He's not really offended. He knows he's a nerd and has had Mabel around his whole life to note when he's being unacceptably nerdy in a social situation. “An apology from Pacifica. I should have someone commission a painting of *this,*” he teases her.

“Don't get used to it,” she snaps in something approaching her old tone, but he sees her fleeting smile.

A thought occurs to him. “Hey, what about your friends from Gravity Falls? The girl with the hair, and the other girl with the… hair,” he finishes, realizing he has no idea what their names are and only a vague memory of what they even look like. They both sort of faded behind Pacifica's presence.

“Who?” Pacifica says, appearing genuinely confused. “Oh, you must mean Tiffany and Elizabeth. My designated summer playmates,” she says scornfully, and makes it sound like ‘designated summer playmates’ should be capitalized. “More like designated Northwest minions. They're the kids of some of Dad's business contacts in the area. They did whatever I wanted and got to hang out at the Manor in return. You know, I've wondered if Dad actually paid them. …I didn't used to care,” she says more quietly, contemplative.

“Anyway, I knew you two were going back to Piedmont, so I looked you up,” she continues. “That was enough, for awhile.” She crosses her arms defensively. “I don't know why I came to see you. I had to get away from my house and I had to…”

Pacifica doesn't finish, but Dipper can fill in the blank easily enough. Mabel had brought him back to himself, given him something to cling to. His sister is a constant reminder of what happened, but in a good way, an anchor. She knows it all, she had been there. She is the only person he can be honest with who isn’t hundreds of miles away.

Pacifica has no one. And it makes him really mad to see how much she is suffering because she'd done the right thing. Maybe it was inevitable, maybe it was even necessary for her to go through if she is going to change, but, man. It still sucks.

“Sad little rich girl, right?” Pacifica says stiffly when he doesn't reply right away. “Poor Pacifica, she only has one pony and half an Olympic-sized pool, now. That's what you think.”

Dipper honestly wouldn't trade lives with her for all the money in the world. He'd found an extended family in Gravity Falls; she'd broken the dark, dysfunctional links she had with hers, and the whole thing collapsed. “I think your parents are the worst. You're being punished for trying to be a better person, and that's messed up.”

“I don't want to be this way anymore, I don't want to be this!” she bursts out, voice desperate, on edge. “I said I was going to fix our family name but they don't want to fix it.” Her hands fist in his sheets. “After I saw you, I felt better, but things just got worse. Mom and Dad don't even talk, they yell, so Dad's gone all the time and Mom just drinks and they ignore me. At least they do when they feel like it. I saw my Dad right before he left, and you know what he said? He said it was all my
I'm tired, that I betrayed the family name. Like that means anything! I can't fix it if they won't let me! They would have let you die! Just so we could keep looking special! That's not okay, that's the worst thing I...” Her eyes are wet, but her jaw is clenched in fury. “First time he even mentions it since we left, and he throws it in my face! I hate him!”

This is some heavy stuff; kids aren't supposed to say that about their parents (it felt faintly forbidden to even badmouth Pacifica's parents when he'd called them the worst). Dipper figures if anyone's earned the right and has the cause, it's Pacifica. At the same time, he's really hoping that Mabel and his mother and father are very sound asleep, because Pacifica is getting some things off her chest and they aren't the kind of things that come out quietly.

He sits there feeling awkward while she sniffs and rubs at her red eyes and gradually calms. He doesn't want to look like he's staring or anything. Pacifica's changed a lot, he's sure of that now, but she still has plenty of pride. She wipes at her eyes for the last time and then stills, focused on a random part of the wall. Dipper realizes this might have been the first time she's ever confessed anything to anyone like this. He feels compelled to say something.

“Pacifica... I just want you to know that, me and Mabel are here for you.” He winces at how corny that sounds. “I'm, I'm not trying to sound like a Wallmark card, but you were part of the team, too.”

She doesn't look at him. “You didn't think I'd want to be friends, did you.” It's not a question.

“After the Manor, I wasn't sure. When you came to our party I thought you did, but when you didn't give us any way to contact you I figured I was wrong.”

“I was afraid, okay?” she says defensively. “My parents were already angry I went to your party at all, I only got away with it because there was so much going on. I didn't want them to check my phone and see that—.” She stops and makes a noise of derision. “So dumb. Like it even mattered. They don't care anymore; they don't even want to look at me.”

“But... won't your mom be looking for you? Right now, I mean?”

“Only at the bottom of her next mimosa,” Pacifica says contemptuously.

“Oh,” Dipper says awkwardly. “I haven't seen her for a couple days, anyway,” Pacifica says wearily.

She's wilting as she speaks. She'd looked exhausted when she had arrived; now, red-eyed and spent, she looks like she's barely clinging to consciousness.

“Do you feel better?” Dipper asks her, wondering if he's done her any good.

“...Yeah,” she says after a moment, sounding sort of surprised. “I feel lighter. I guess this really does work.”

“Cool. Glad I could help,” he says, trying not to sound like a complete dork (and probably failing). She can't look at him when she says it, but the fact that she says it at all speaks volumes. “Thanks.”

He shrugs and smiles. “Sure.”

She blinks blearily and looks around as if seeing the room for the first time. “I should go,” she says sort of distantly, slumping even lower where she sits.
“Where are you going?” Dipper says.

“Back to the airport. I can call a taxi again. Ugh, they always smell weird.” But instead of making that call, she's gradually leaning over, legs stretching out on the bed. “Just give me a minute,” she mumbles.

“Uh, nobody else knows you're here, and I'm not sure—”

“I'm going to borrow this,” she says commandingly, putting her head on his pillow.

Dipper isn't unsympathetic to her condition, but he's tired, too! “Wow, help yourself. Not like I need to sleep there, or anything.”

“It's just for a minute! I can't fall asleep in a taxi; the driver will probably steal my earrings. I just need to rest my eyes, just for a…”

Dipper is fairly certain she just fell asleep mid-sentence.
Pacifica has just passed out on Dipper's bed, which is bad because he had intended to use it and is also bad because now what is he supposed to do?

He sits there a moment, wondering what he's going to do as her breathing evens out and slows. Call a cab for her? Then what, carry her out? He knows she can't stay, but after all that's been said he can't bring himself to shake her awake and kick her to the curb. He feels responsible for her. He had been there for the things that had shook her, cracking her facade and bringing out all the aspects of her self for which she is now suffering.

He remembers confronting her at the party, accusing her of lying. He'd been too angry at the time to be shocked by her apology; in retrospect it's hard to correlate the Pacifica who had given him an impulsive hug after what had seemed a successful ghost capture and the Pacifica who had snidely dismissed both himself and Mabel with sneering contempt. Maybe the cracks had already been there, and he'd been too caught up in his own immediate dismissal of her to see them. Mabel, at least, had given Pacifica an actual chance, a genuine offer of friendship or at least friendly rivalry. Dipper must admit to himself that he had filed Pacifica away as nothing but a shallow snob the moment he'd seen her. Which makes him, in his own way, just as shallow. She had gone on to justify his dislike, but only after the fact.

Now he's well past the point where he'd assumed he knew everything he needed to know about her just from her appearance. That had been the furthest thing from the truth and now, as he sits in the wreckage of her life, he is ashamed to have ever thought it. It's not like she hadn't done a lot to confirm his worst assumptions, but, still... With new context, he doesn't come out quite as morally superior as he would like. The question is, can they move forward?

If the night's conversation is any answer, then it's a definite yes. Whatever lingering resentment he might have felt for her past attitude has been wiped away in the wake of her avalanche of hidden pain and genuine remorse. And the worst part isn't that she's being punished for what she did — it's that she isn't. She's being punished for trying to be better.

Dipper remembers her, grease-stained and bruised, trying to tighten a bolt on McGucket's war machine despite her obvious lack of experience. Her expression had said the very act was beneath her. The way she kept trying said something else entirely.

He looks at her, trying to see her not as a snotty girl at a party or a self-proclaimed mini golf queen, but as she is. Her blonde tresses spread out on his pillow case and fall partially over her features, which are so much softer in sleep. Her mouth is opened slightly; each exhale sends a clump of platinum strands fluttering. It's like he's seeing an entirely new side of her, the Pacifica that exists behind all the walls of expectations and finery. The dim illumination eases the new harshness stamped into her features and hides the shadows beneath her eyes. She is peaceful and luminous in the moonlight that falls across the coat which contrasts so sharply with her porcelain skin.

Dipper is suddenly, painfully, acutely aware that there is a girl on his bed.

It's not a situation he's ever been in before because Mabel definitely doesn't count, but he instinctively knows that he's old enough now that his mom would make him keep his door open.
Which reminds him that Mom and Dad have no idea that there's a girl in his room in the dark hours of the morning. He's not sure how much trouble that represents without any prior offenses, but he has the suspicion that it's a lot.

She's tired. She's tired and going through a lot, lot of stuff right now and Dipper needs to not be weird about the fact she's in his room and on his bed. She's reaching out, and he respects that. It doesn't matter that she's really, really pretty or that she's, you know, growing up in the way that girls grow up and maybe doing it a little sooner than some other girls, and he needs to not think about the fact that both times she hugged him he could feel them (or that even at the party there was a small, stupid, traitorous portion of his brain working frantically away trying to figure out how to get a second impromptu hug so he could feel them again), and now they are bundled up in her coat and if she wasn't sleeping in her coat then what would she be sleeping in on his bed, and... and...

He needs help.

He quietly opens his door and creeps across the hall to Mabel's room, praying that she's left it unlocked. She has, and he slips inside and hurries over to her bed. She's wrapped herself in her comforter like a pig in a blanket, which is appropriate considering there is also a literal pig in her blanket. Waddles raises his head curiously as Dipper approaches.

"Mabel!" Dipper whispers, shaking her shoulder. "Wake up!"

"No. Mabel needs snooze," she mumbles, rolling away from him.

"Mabel, I'm serious, I need your help!"

She sighs copiously into her pillow, and then slowly, grudgingly rolls back over. "Dippeeerrrr... Just tell the monster to wait 'til morning."

"Pacifica's here."

Mabel's eyes shoot wide open. "Wait, what?!"

"Shhhhhhhhh!" Dipper slaps a hand over her mouth. "You're gonna wake up Mom and Dad!"

"Mmnmf-mmhm-mmhm-mm!" Mabel retorts. Dipper removes his hand, and she continues in a whisper, "Pacifica's here?"

"She just showed up, and... Mabel, she's in pretty bad shape."

Mabel goes pale. "Somebody hurt her?"

"No, not like that," he quickly reassures her. "Her family is all messed up after what happened and she's having a really hard time."

Mabel somehow manages to look sad and delighted at the same time. "I knew she meant everything! Dipper, we have to help her!"

"That's what I've been trying to do! She just fell asleep, I don't even know if she has anywhere to go. What do we do?" Dipper says helplessly.

Mabel's brow furrows in deep concentration. "...We move her into my room," she says decisively after a moment. "Mom and Dad won't be mad at me for helping a friend who's really sad. We just can't let them get all parent-y by finding her in your room."
“Good idea,” Dipper says, relieved. “Then you can tell them what happened.”

But, to his dismay, Mabel's expression turns sly. “What did happen, little brother?”

Dipper rolls his eyes. “I told you, she didn't have anywhere else to go. She's going through some stuff.”

“And she chose you to talk to about it? How interesting…”

Dipper is not amused. “It's not a big deal.”

Mabel makes circles with her fingers and then pretends to breathe on them as if they were lenses, wiping them on her shirt. “Pardon moi while I put these on…”

Dipper knocks her hands back down. “You don't need your Skepticals or Shipping Goggles or whatever you're pretending to put on now, just help me move her before we get caught!”

“Whatever you say, bro-bro,” Mabel acquiesces, but she keeps grinning in a way that tells him whatever assumptions she's making will most certainly be back to haunt him.

It doesn't help there's still that persistent corner of his brain that has asked some of the same questions.

When they enter his room, Mabel covers her mouth and releases a soft squeal at the sight of Pacifica sound asleep on his bed. “You didn't tell me she was on your bed, Dipper; you rogue!”

“Where else would she be?” Dipper immediately shuts his eyes and slaps a hand to his forehead. “That didn't come out right.”

Mabel pushes her cheeks together in delight, braces glittering in the moonbeams. “This is too adorable!”

“It's not like that, she's exhausted! Now will you help me?” Dipper hisses.

“O-T-P! O-T-P!” Mabel chants.

Dipper makes a frantic grab for her mouth, but she eludes him. “Be quiet!”

“O-t-p! o-t-p!” Mabel whisper-chants.

Dipper spends a minute or so awkwardly standing over Pacifica, trying to figure out how he's going to move her without waking her up or dropping her. Mabel solves the problem by tugging the ends of the comforter up over the other girl and creating a sort of makeshift stretcher with each of them taking an end of the blanket. Carefully, they carry the sleeping girl across the hall and deposit her on Mabel's bed. Dipper notes how light Pacifica is with concern. She has never been anything but slender, but she'd unquestionably had more definition in her golf uniform. She really has been losing weight that she doesn't need to.

Mabel piles sheets and pillows and a sleeping bag from her closet into a fluffy pile on the floor. It's not exactly a hardship to give her bed away for the night; she has no problem sleeping when rolled up in soft things no matter what the location.

“Did Mom or Dad say we were going out for breakfast today?” Dipper asks, unable to remember.

“I think Mom said something about errands. We're probably on our own,” Mabel says, flopping down onto her makeshift bedding. Waddles grunts and nudges his way into the pile.
“Maybe she'll wake up when they're gone and we won't have to worry about it,” Dipper says hopefully.

Mabel looks over at Pacifica with open concern. “She looks exhausted, Dipper. What happened?”

“A lot, it sounds like. It's all pretty bad.” Dipper sighs. “She doesn't want me to talk about it.”

“But she chose you-oooooo,” Mabel sings.

Dipper rolls his eyes. “Goodnight, stupid.”

Mabel closes her eyes, resting on her hamster-esque nest with her arms splayed out. “Goodnight, stupid.”

Dipper returns to his room and gratefully collapses on his vacated bed. He relaxes and starts to drift away for a moment before he realizes he's so comfortable because his bed has been warmed already. By Pacifica. Who was sleeping right where he is. The thought makes him feel all flushed, which he knows is dumb, he just can't seem to stop it from happening. He briefly wonders if the bed smells like her at all. He doesn't try to find out, though. His hormones may be poisoning his brain, but he has just enough dignity left that he's not going to sniff his sheets, even if he is alone. She was wearing a coat, anyway. His bed probably smells like nothing.

Then he rolls over and gets comfortable on his pillow and discovers it smells faintly of floral shampoo and some other delicate scents that he can't place but are definitely feminine and definitely not from him. He lies there stiffly, not sure how to react. It's kind of soothing but also kind of creepy and a few other, newer things he's too tired to grapple with. So he flips the pillow over and plants his face on the cool side, taking in the more familiar scent of plain cotton.

It doesn't take him long to fall asleep.
Pacifica wakes up and has no idea where she is.

It's an explosion of pink, purple and teal: Posters, glitter, stuffed animals, glitter, bulletin board photographs, glitter, a massive variety of stickers, bezazzled everything and glitter. She wonders if she's dreaming. Her parents wouldn't allow her to even look at a room this tacky, never mind sleep in it. It's like Lisa Frank's factory outlet.

Slowly, she pushes herself up, still tired. Light is coming through the window — she glances out of it but from where she's sitting she can't see anything but a gray, overcast sky. She feels kind of hot and looks down at herself. She's underneath a heavy comforter, but beneath that she's wearing her coat, and her shoes are still on.

The previous night suddenly comes flooding back to her: The flight, the drive, the agonizing waiting on the sidewalk feeling like she'd made a huge mistake but still needing something she couldn't define, a refuge that she instinctively sought. Shame spreads through her. A Northwest is supposed to be stronger than that. The same thought brings immediate anger, at war with the regret. She doesn't want to be what a Northwest is supposed to be. Did she ever? She's not sure now. She's not sure of anything. At least she finally reached out to someone. This is progress, right? This is the sort of thing she should be doing?

And all it took for her to want to make a connection is the total collapse of her life.

She buries her face in her hands and groans softly. The things she'd told Dipper... She is never going to live any of it down. He'll be holding it over her head forever. She has to get out of here. She has to make herself go back home.

She isn't sure she can.

The door to the room suddenly swings open, startling her. She hugs the comforter to herself automatically, which she just as quickly realizes is dumb because she's completely dressed. It's Mabel, shouldering her way in with a plate in each hand.

Mabel pauses when she sees Pacifica looking at her. Then her mouth spreads in a bright grin. “You're awake!” she says, bumping the door closed with her hip. “And just in time for Pizza Saturday!”

Mabel places one of the plates on the bed next to Pacifica. The pizza is covered with mini-pepperonis that have been arranged to form a crude smiley face. It looks very greasy and possibly homemade. Pacifica edges away from it.

“Am I in your room?” Pacifica asks, ignoring the food for the time being.

“How'd you know? Heh, just kidding! You knew because it's fabulous. Stuffed animal?” Mabel offers, holding out some kind of floppy cat as if she's offering a drink or a napkin.

“How am I in your room?” Pacifica says, refusing to be distracted from the point.
“Me and Dipper carried you in here like a hammock baby,” Mabel explains. “You must have been really tired.”

She had been, and she still is. “Why, what time is it?”

“Pizza time!” Mabel reiterates. “Don’t you want yours?”

It actually smells delicious, and Pacifica's stomach rumbles. Still, she knows she shouldn't touch it. “I'm not supposed to eat food for fat people.”

“Pizza is miracle food for everyone,” Mabel corrects. “Come on, aren’t you hungry?”

Is she ever. Reluctantly, she picks up the plate. “Where's the knife and fork?”

Mabel laughs as if Pacifica just told an excellent joke. “Shovel it in, sister!” She adds emphasis with an enormous bite of her own.

Pacifica cringes a little, but delicately puts her fingers under the crust and lifts the slice. She takes a tentative bite of the very tip. It's absolutely amazing, the perfect combination of bread, cheese, meat, sauce and copious amounts of grease. She imagines her arteries clogging like a California freeway even as she takes another bite. No wonder pizza is such a big deal — it's fantastic.

“This is pretty good,” Mabel comments as she decimates her own slice. “Mom gets them unfrozen at the grocery store because they're cheap. Sometimes we get real restaurant pizza for Saturday. Oh well. You'll just have to come back again!”

Pacifica swallows, squinting at Mabel in disbelief. “It gets better than this?”

“Oh, yeah. There's crunchy pizza and deep pizza and pizza with that garlicky white sauce, and my personal favorite: Dessert pizza! I put gummy worms on mine. It really brings out the flavor,” Mabel explains.

“How are you not, like, morbidly obese?”

Mabel rolls her eyes, but it's more playful than mean. “You can eat bad things sometimes, Pacifica. Eating should be fun!”

That's not what Pacifica's always been taught. But she's already broken so many rules at this point, what's one more? Besides, she hasn't been eating much of anything lately. She can afford the grease, at least for now. That's what she tells herself as she decimates her slice and is still hungry for more.

“Looks like someone's ready for seconds,” Mabel teases. “Now who's the chubby one?”

Pacifica's hands fly to her stomach as if she's suddenly developed a gut from her single serving. “Shut up, I am not!”

“No yet! Let's get some more pizza before Dipper eats it all.”

“No, I'm finished,” Pacifica says shortly.

Mabel doesn’t look convinced. She puts her hands on her hips and peers closely at the other girl. “Is Pacifica finished, or is perfect Pacifica Elise Northwest finished?” she says.

That's very incisive for someone so goofy. Pacifica suddenly feels like her mother's hand is running up her spine and has been controlling her mouth. “Get me another.”
“Get me another…?”

“…Slice of pizza? Now?”

Mabel purses her lips. “Please.”

Etiquette lessons again; except instead of learning what fork to use and who it's acceptable to offend
she's learning how to be a tolerable human being and her teacher is a brace-face in a ridiculous
sweater. Her opinion on the matter is mixed, to say the least. “May I please have another pizza,
Mabel,” she mumbles.

Mabel's smile returns full force. “You can have all the pizza you want! Unless Dipper's got into it.
Come on, I'll hold him down and you can take it from him!”

That sounds pretty fun. Pacifica stands up woozily, unsteady on her feet. Then she remembers where
she is. “Wait, aren't your parents here?”

“Nope, just us and my bro. Mom and Dad are out for the evening.” Mabel looks sympathetic. “We
didn't tell them you were here.”

Pacifica has no basis for this kind of situation. “What would happen if they knew?”

“Probably nothing,” Mabel assures her. “You're our friend from Gravity Falls. We made all kinds of
friends over the summer, they know that, sort of…” Mabel’s voice loses its certainty for a second.

“They don't know?” Pacifica says, surprised.

Mabel's expression crumples. “We didn't tell them. How can we? You know how crazy it sounds, it
was super bonkers bananas!” she says, pleading for understanding.

“You don't have to justify it. My parents won't accept it and they were there,” Pacifica says.

“Dipper said things weren't good. Do you… want to talk about it?” Mabel says, sounding almost
hopeful.

And of course she does, because this is probably just the sort of sappy nonsense she trades in with
her other weird friends. Pacifica Northwest and Mabel Pines: Total Besties. Open and honest with
their pathetic problems and gross feelings. Bonding like poor people because they don't have
anything else to do and would rather whine about it than earn their way in the world. There's a part
of Pacifica that violently rejects every single thing about where she is and what is happening.

But there's another, larger, newer and braver part of her that wants what Mabel is offering more than
she had ever wanted all the expensive clothes and accoutrements she hadn't even had to ask for. And
it's that part that keeps her moving forward deeper into this strange new paradigm, and it's that part
which fights the phantom touch of her parents' fingers at her shoulders.

Still, she's pretty sure she's already said more than enough. She opens her mouth to tell Mabel that
and instead what comes out is, “I know I said my parents were bad and didn't deserve to be stone,
but sometimes I wish we'd left them there.”

Pacifica takes a kind of sick pride in how shocked Mabel looks. “Pacifica…” Mabel says, eyes wide.

Pacifica sits back on the bed. “I hate this,” she says, and feels like she hasn't slept at all.

Mabel sits on the bed next to her. “Tell me what happened.”
And so the whole story comes out of Pacifica again, pouring from her gut like she's a broken decanter. It's different with Mabel than it was with Dipper. Mabel gasps and tears up and makes noises of disbelief or righteous anger at all the appropriate disclosures, and it's both gratifying and too much all at the same time. Pacifica never feels that Mabel is anything less than completely genuine, but that authenticity and openness is almost overwhelming, a feedback loop of emotion. Pacifica feels herself growing lighter again, but she doesn't think she could have this talk with Mabel if she hadn't talked to Dipper first. Somehow his combination of awkward reassurances and (equally awkward) stoicism had given her the space she needed to release the tide without drowning in the drama.

And that was why she had texted him in the first place, wasn't it? That hand on her shoulder in a dusty room, surrounded by the record of her family's failings. She'd needed that hand again.

She falls silent when she can't think of anything she hasn't already phrased. She feels hollow, but it's not a bad sensation. Not like a coffin, but like a rising balloon. Or something else more poetic. She doesn't know how to think like this. Self-reflection is not prized among the Northwests.

She freezes in surprise when Mabel's arms wrap around her. With her fluffy sweater, it's like getting hugged by a pillow. “Pacifica, I'm so sorry you were alone.”

Pacifica doesn't know if she's going to return the hug or not, though it's a moot point because Mabel has pinned her arms to her sides.

Mabel pulls back and looks very serious. “You did the right thing coming here.”

Pacifica still isn't sure. “Really?”

“Heck yes! I would have taken the express to crazy town if I didn't talk to anyone else who was there!” Mabel exclaims. “We all need each other, Pacifica. We're not the same anymore, Dipper told me that. I didn't want him to be right, but he is. We have to stick together.” Mabel reaches down and withdraws a phone that is so covered in plastic ornamentation that Pacifica isn't sure how it fits into a pocket. “Give me your number and all your accounts so I can follow you.”

“Social media is for the uncultured,” Pacifica says automatically.

“No, social media is so people can be friends no matter where they are,” Mabel corrects.

Pacifica still doesn't care for being corrected, even if it's over something she's not sure she actually believes anymore. “Fine, but I don't have any of that. You can have my number.”

At that point some sort of time lapse must happen in conjunction with the passing of one of those madness bubbles, because the next thing Pacifica knows she's sitting on a beanbag chair with a piece of pizza on a paper plate, trying to eat and play a video game (which are for ugly nerds with no friends) at the same time. Dipper is on her right and Mabel is on her left and she doesn't know how she feels about being in such close proximity to them. She's torn between cozy and uncomfortable. Then Dipper's shoulder brushes hers, warm and solid, and she must be nuts because she wants to lean into it, which is stupid, and she won't do it.

She's doing terribly at the game, according to the scoring system, but there's still something almost sinisterly compelling about the way her little character drives in whatever direction she pushes the joystick. It's… fun. She goes over a ramp and releases a projectile that sends the cart in front of her spinning off the road.

“Take that!” she says involuntarily, exulting in the agony of her cartoon enemy.
“You know if you like this, I've got some more games on my PC,” Dipper says as he struggles to maintain his lead.

“Pacifica, say no!” Mabel warns. She's playing upside down with her feet in the air, and still doing surprisingly well. “It's nerdy quicksand, all his games are like Dungeons, Dungeons & More Dungeons except everyone wants to talk all the time!”

“Hey, those games are as well written as any novel and have compelling characters and interesting mechanics! Not everyone wants to play nothing but baby games on the consoles, some of us appreciate complexity.”

“Great, now he's going to rant about Fellout or whatever,” Mabel sighs loudly.

Dipper stumbles over his words in his outrage. “Fellout 1 and 2 are some of the best games ever made and Fellout 3 completely went the wrong direction and had horrible writing, Betrezda only knows how to make one kind of game and they just took an amazing franchise and did their same lame schtick with a misinterpretation of a great setting—”

“I don't know what you're talking about, but you sound like a total dork,” Pacifica interrupts him.

“Hah! Nailed it!” Mabel says. “Boom!”

Dipper slumps lower in his beanbag and pulls his hat down. “You guys just don't understand good games.”

“I understand you're about to get shelled!” Mabel tells him as she releases her weapon and knocks him clear off the track.

Dipper drops his controller in his lap, disgusted. “Hurry up and win so we can do the next round.”

“Someone's a sore loser,” Mabel stage-whispers to Pacifica.

Pacifica eyes her. “How are you even doing this upside down?”

“The blood in my head makes me better,” Mabel says, her face red and her eyes slightly crossed.

They play, they eat, they drink entirely too much Pitt cola. And it feels too soon, but Pacifica finds herself in a cab with the Pines' house fading in the rearview mirror and nothing in front of her worth contemplating.

***---~**~---***

And then it's the next day. Pacifica is four-hundred miles and twenty-four hours away from the Pines and she's staring at the ceiling over her bed, wondering if she has finally lost her mind completely and it was all just a dream of a release she won't ever allow herself.

Her phone buzzes on her mattress. She picks it up and looks at the screen.

Mabel: so I just used Dipper's toothbrush because it was on the other side of the sink at the shack and I think I have bro cooties :X

Pacifica laughs, and it's the sound of an at last loosened chain slipping from her heart.
the sound of an at last loosened chain
i: gifts

i'll keep you in mind, from time to time

"Dipper!"

Dipper knows what he's going to see before he opens his eyes. It's Christmas morning, which means there's only one real possibility. So instead of giving in, he squeezes his eyes shut more tightly and tries to roll over, which proves to be impossible with Mabel pinning him down.

She starts shaking him. “Dipper-Dipper-Dipper-Dipper,” she warbles.

There's no point in getting up. It's probably five AM, at the latest, and their parents won't even consider opening presents until at least nine. Dipper already made his way downstairs just after midnight to retrieve his stocking, as was tradition, and he knows Mabel had as well because hers was already gone when he'd gotten there (she usually timed midnight down to the second, whereas he'd descended at a more leisurely 12:04). Thus, Dipper prefers to stay in bed and sleep until the allotted time rather than torture himself by camping out near presents he's not allowed to touch.

Mabel, however, has likely been kept awake for a majority of the night by a steady diet of stocking candy and Christmas excitement. And she is determined that she not suffer alone. Which leaves Dipper gritting his teeth and remaining limp as she shakes him. He manages to maintain his act right up until she begins poking his sides.

He can't contain his ticklish laughter and surges upwards, knocking her to the foot of his bed. He bundles his comforter around himself protectively. “Mabel, go back to bed,” he orders.

She yawns in a suspiciously fake manner. “Yeah, okay, I guess you're right. I'll just go back to bed, now,” she mumbles, pushing herself up onto her feet.

But Dipper knows her too well. He swiftly reaches behind his head and relocates his pillow to his front just as Mabel launches herself up and over the protective bulwark of his knees. Their tussle is silent save for the scratch of sheets and blankets; ever wary of their sleeping parents, even Mabel makes nary a sound as she tries to tickle him through his cloth armor.

Once again, Dipper's growth spurt comes in handy. He overpowers her long enough to catch her with a side swipe from his pillow that sends her tumbling off the bed. She hits the floor with a thump that reverberates throughout the house and rattles the door to the room.

Dipper's mouth drops open and he releases his pillow guiltily. “Geez, Mabel, are you okay?”

“Why are you so strong now?” she says through the hair that covers her face, and her tone of voice clearly implies that he's cheating, somehow.

It had become apparent to Dipper a while back that three months in the rough and tumble forests of Gravity Falls had done his slim physique at least a few favors. Remembering the lessons of the Manotaurs, he had been applying himself in PE for once and even made use of the school gym equipment a few times. Mostly, though, he does pushups in his room. It's less about trying to be more manly, as he'd once so desperately wanted to be, and more about keeping hold on a part of Gravity Falls that is still with him. He's changed in a lot of ways, and he doesn't want to change back in even one.
“You know, just pumping iron. Blasting my quads,” he tells her offhandedly (he has no idea what he’s even saying).

She sits straight up from her prone position, hair falling away to reveal her discontent. “Mabel no like.”

“Yeah, well, Mabel doesn't have to like. I have to maintain a monster-hunting physique,” he says a bit self-importantly. “I can't go back to Gravity Falls all noodle-armed again.”

Mabel seems to accept his reasoning for a moment, head beginning to nod. Then her braces make an appearance in a grin that immediately puts him on the defensive. “Or…” she says, drawing it out, “…Maybe there's another reason. Something else. Or should I say, someone.”

“What are you talking about?” he says warily.

“Hey, look at my big strong arms, baby, they're for punching monsters,” she says, lowering her voice in a very demeaning impression of him. “Pacifica, I just want to kiss the pillow you slept on and pretend it's your face!”

“Give me that!” he says, snatching the pillow back from her.

“Sorry. I wasn't trying to steal your girlfriend,” she says impishly.

“Ugh, Mabel. Quit being gross. I don't kiss my pillow.”

“Yeah, it doesn't look much like Pacifica. I have some yellow yarn you can borrow, if you want to kiss that.”

“I'm not kissing anything!” Dipper knows she's trying to get a rise out of him to even the score, but he can't seem to stop himself from reacting.

“You and Pacifica sure spent a lot of time alone in here…” Mabel muses.

“While she totally fell apart,” Dipper snaps.

Mabel immediately looks remorseful. “Poor Pacifica. She really was falling…”

“She was a mess.”

“…right into your arms.”

Dipper collapses back onto his bed and lets out a long breath. He's entirely used to Mabel seeking out (and often forcing) romance wherever she thinks it can be found, but it doesn't usually involve him. And after the disaster that had been his single sort-of date with Candy, he’d thought Mabel had learned her lesson. Wishful thinking, apparently. Not that he thinks she's serious about him and Pacifica. Probably. Maybe.

Actually, he has no idea.

So, he rolls over and stuffs his head beneath his pillow. “Wake me up when it's presents time.”

“Booooo!” Mabel opines. “Entertain me! I must be entertained!”

Realizing that sleep is a hopeless dream, Dipper finally gets out of bed and turns on his TV. He and Mabel are deeply embroiled in a cooperative puzzle game when they finally hear the water running in their parents’ bathroom, signaling the proper start of the day. Mabel promptly begins failing the...
game in various spectacular ways, unable to sit still or concentrate. Dipper sticks it out for a while, but he can only take so many checkpoint restarts before he just drops his controller and waits.


“Five bucks on socks,” Dipper says.

“Dipper, did you ask for socks again?” Mabel says in the same tone their mother uses when she's not mad, just disappointed.

“I don't ask for them. I just get them.”

“Dipper, did you ask for socks again?” Mabel says in the same tone their mother uses when she's not mad, just disappointed.

“I don't ask for them. I just get them.”

“Well, maybe if you didn't always ask for expensive video games, Santa would bring you a better variety.”

“Santa isn't real, Mabel. Mom and Dad buy our presents.”

Mabel raises an eyebrow at him. “Are you suuuuuure?”

After all he's seen in Gravity Falls, he can't honestly say he is. He leans back far enough in his beanbag that he can see the clock on his desk and reads it upside down. “Come on, let's go sort the presents before Mom and Dad go down.”

Mabel loves sorting the presents. She takes to the task with her usual zeal, handling each package with reverence and generally wallowing in the atmosphere. The tree is covered in lights and tinsel and innumerable ornaments, each one shiny or goofy or a keepsake, each one with a story attached to it (Mabel knows them all). She is surrounded by brightly colored paper with reflective surfaces or cute illustrations of snowmen and gingerbread houses, inundated in springy bows and stickers with glitter and carefully written names. Dipper sort of helps, but mostly he just gives her space to work. She is in her element.

When she finishes, Dipper sees that both of their piles seem a little bigger than usual. He checks the present on top of his; it's from Soos and Melody. Digging a little deeper, he finds two more boxes, both of which are unwrapped. One says it's from Grunkle Stan; the other, from Great-Uncle Stanford. Dipper grins at the deception, even as he feels a small pang of guilt. As far as his parents are concerned, the presents are from the same person. It doesn't feel fair that they don't know how their family has changed, but, at the same time, Dipper doesn't think it's his place to tell them. Maybe Grunkle Ford wants to stay unknown. It's something Dipper decides to ask in his next email.

Mabel gives him a knowing look: She's noticed, too. Whatever she feels about the situation is quickly subsumed beneath her manic Christmas cheer, however.

Dipper gets the usual assortment from his parents: A couple new video games, some more RAM for his computer, and a bunch of clothes he didn't ask for. Mabel always gets substantially more presents than him because most of what she asks for are crafting supplies, and she intentionally keeps her requests as separate as possible to maximize her present-opening opportunities. To her, receiving a present is a present in and of itself. It's tradition to take turns opening, so usually Dipper ends up waiting and wishing she'd finish up already so he can try his new games. This year, though, he's got a few more presents than typical, and he's saved them for last.

Soos' present turns out to be a shirt, which would normally be disappointing; though in this case it's a two-point-oh version of Pterodactyl Bros, and the shirt is the right size to fit. Melody has a sister who is an artist and she had taken Soos' crude rendering and turned it into a truly awesome work of art,
with Soos and Dipper side by side defying the pterodactyls menacing them from a prehistoric sky. His parents don't get it at all, other than in some kind of inside-joke, ironic sense, but Dipper immediately wears it proudly.

Mabel's eyes fill with tears even as she smiles when she opens her present from Soos. It's an entire stack of photographs of the Shack: The grounds, the museum, and the living areas, all ready to be used in a collage or whatever project she wishes. There's also a flash drive with digital versions, in case she wants to reprint any of them. She is immediately captured by them, slowly turning over each picture with a sense of nostalgia intense enough that Dipper can see his parents' confusion and the beginnings of concern.

He quickly scoots over and gives Mabel a hug, saying, “Nice, Mabel!” When he pulls away he surreptitiously pushes the pictures towards her lap, silently urging her to put them down. She takes the hint, placing the pictures back in their box as she wipes at her eyes and turns the wattage on her smile up a bit too much to be entirely genuine.

The presents from their Grunkles are next. Dipper receives a copy of Anomalous Phenomena from Ford. His present from Stan is in a heavy, locked metal box. Dipper uses the provided key, peeks inside, and then promptly closes it and exclaims how nice it was of Grunkle Stan to give him some tools of his own, since he'd gotten used to working around the Shack with Soos (it's actually the chain mace he'd once taken on his hunt to capture a Shack attraction for Mabel; the same hunt he'd ended up inadvertently trapping a Gremloblin, a creature roughly ten times more dangerous than anything he was expecting and an anecdote which he is definitely going to keep from his parents).

Mabel also gets a book from Grunkle Ford, though hers is less technical. It's a book of scientific explanations for everyday things, and it's full of informative pictures and fun experiments that could be performed with household items. Dipper can already see the next several of her 'Mabel's Guide to Whatever' forming in her head as she flips through the pages. Her present from Grunkle Stan is an entire roll of each kind of bumper sticker sold in the gift shop. Mabel promptly sticks one to her sweater and another to Dipper's toolbox.

Altogether, it's a pretty excellent haul. Dipper eats coffee cake as he surveys his bounty, pleased and eager to really dig into it. He suddenly wonders if it's snowing in Gravity Falls. Then he wonders if Pacifica's pile of presents would even fit into the room, never mind under the tree. She probably got, like, three new cars she can’t even drive yet, or something. Then he feels bad when he thinks, maybe, that isn't the kind of assumption he can make about her life anymore. Maybe she's alone. Maybe she had to buy herself something, or maybe she didn't even bother.

He goes up to his room and grabs his phone, acting on an impulse he doesn't really understand. Merry Christmas, he texts her.

Then his mother calls him back downstairs, since it's family time and he's expected to be there. He doesn't get back to his room until late afternoon, carrying an armful of his presents and ready to settle down with one of his new games for a long evening of doing nothing at all. Across the hall Mabel's door is open and he can see her spreading pictures out on every available square inch of her floor. He figures the next time he goes into her room he'll be walking into a virtual tour of the Shack. She won't have a single centimeter of empty wall left, probably.

He doesn't remember to check his phone until bedtime. He's just pulling on his sleeping shirt when the reflection of his ceiling fan light catches the screen, gaining his attention. He grabs it and unlocks it. He has one unread message.

Pacifica: merry Christmas
It's not much, but he thinks it means she's okay.

For whatever reason, he sleeps a little better that night.
“I don't know, Dip,” Mabel says, sounding worn out.

Dipper is forced to concur with the sentiment. It's the first weekend after Christmas break and Dipper managed to talk his parents into a trip to Leona Canyon, a nearby nature preserve, since the weather has turned mild. He and Mabel gave them the slip not long after arrival in the hopes of finding some forest phenomena close to home.

But Leona Canyon isn't like the forests of Gravity Falls. It's well-trodden, documented, sort of lived-in, if a forest can be said to be that way. Mabel's grappling hook has taken them to some more out of the way places, but they've come up with nothing outside of standard wildlife. Dipper has just asked if they should continue, bringing Mabel's tired response. And he doesn't know, either. He sort of wants to continue, but logically it's hard to find any motivation.

“I guess this was a bust,” he sighs, looking around what has turned out to be a very normal bunch of woods.

“There's always next time,” Mabel says sympathetically, pushing gently on his shoulder.

Dipper nods, trying not to take the failure to heart. He remembers what Great-Uncle Ford said in his letter, about anomalies being hard to find when not concentrated like they are in Gravity Falls. He can’t expect to just wander into the trees and find something weird. It's just California.

“We should find Mom and Dad before they get worried,” he says. He pulls his compass out of his vest and examines it. “We walk… back this way.”

“Walking's for chumps!” Mabel declares. She jumps onto his back, nearly knocking him down, and aims the grappling hook over his shoulder.

“Wait, Mabel—”

About half an hour later they’re in the car on the way home, nursing about a million scratches from the thorn bushes they flew through. Mom and Dad aren’t all that happy that they'd run off, but Dipper has somewhat placated them by showing them the compass he'd brought and emphasizing all the woodsman training he’d received from Grunkle Stan (he chooses not to divulge that he actually gained most of his experience through the tutelage of Manotaurs, a mysterious journal and trial and error). The incident with the thorn bushes is a bit harder to explain away. Mom and Dad don't share Grunkle Stan's unique approach to being a caretaker so Mabel has chosen to keep the grappling hook hidden for fear of having it taken away.

It's a safe impulse but it's also one more thing they have to keep from Mom and Dad, a weight that seems to grow with every passing day. Dipper’s observant enough to know that secrets create distance between people. He remembers clearly the awful hours before Grunkle Ford came out of the portal, when he’d thought that Stan was not who he seemed and never had been. Maybe his parents will pass that gulf off as kids growing up, the inevitable separation of dependency that comes with age. Even if it's ineluctable, that doesn't mean Dipper doesn't feel bad about it. But, at the same time, it's not his fault his parents weren't there. Can anyone who wasn't there ever really understand?
Perhaps someday he and Mabel can take Mom and Dad to Gravity Falls and show them. It's bound to come up. Does Grunkle Ford plan on never contacting his family? The appearance of a new uncle is going to raise some questions.

When they get home, Dipper checks his email and it's as if the thoughts of Grunkle Ford have summoned his correspondence. He eagerly opens the missive.

Dipper,

Very busy at the moment, so I'll have to keep this brief. I, too, have wondered if there's some hidden principle at work keeping weirdness out of common knowledge. Perhaps we are unusual in that we have remained relatively normal; insulated, if you will, from such influences. Gravity Falls' Law of Weirdness Magnetism only explains how so many anomalies came to be concentrated there, not how their presence or migration is so often ignored. It's certainly a subject that demands more study. You and I should investigate, when next we meet.

As for the town itself, I wouldn't worry just yet. Even after thirty years it's about as isolated as a place can be in modern America. I suspect the Law of Weirdness Magnetism is at play in more than one capacity. Does it keep normal things out as easily as it keeps weird things in? Again, something we should look into!

I'm pleased to hear you took care of a Category Two ghost. Great initiative! Somewhat surprised you found one in Piedmont, but, then again, as far as weirdness goes hauntings are one of the most common manifestations. Be sure to let me know if you find any additional apparitions. Where there's one ghost there tend to be others within a certain sphere of influence, in my experience. The weirdness that allows a spirit to linger could lead to multiple incidents in a localized area. That may not be the case but keep an eye out.

—Great-Uncle Ford

The email raises more questions than answers, but Dipper is excited by Grunkle Ford's words regarding the future. He still wants to investigate things with Dipper, to share his life's work! Dipper can see himself in the summer, side by side with his Great-Uncle, searching out the reasons behind their mutual pondering.

He sits at his desk and reads the email again and wonders if he has it in him to wait.

Later that night, he's sharing the email with Mabel. She's smiling even though Grunkle Ford's words are all of a scientific concern; the email might not have much to interest her, but it's still from her Grunkle and that seems to be enough to make her happy.

“So there's gotta be more ghosts around here somewhere,” she observes when she finishes.

“Might be difficult to find, though,” Dipper says, absently chewing on an already-broken pen.

He's already looked around the area for help in the form of other believers, but what he found isn't encouraging. Message boards are a mess of pointless feuds, false sightings and outright fabrications. There's an informal club at his school for the paranormal; the single meeting he'd attended had been
mostly taken up by movie discussions and some haphazard guessing about the nature of creatures Dipper already knows about, and knows they are nothing like what was proposed. His experience isolates him; he finds most paranormal speculation laughably off-base.

He still wonders, though, how he and Mabel had managed a ghost encounter so quickly and effortlessly. Are they just that lucky? He looks at Grunkle Ford's email again, especially the part about a 'sphere of influence'. What if…

“Mabel, hold on,” he says excitedly, rocking forward in his chair. “What if we're the ones who are weird?”

“Who, uth?” Mabel says, pausing with her tongue in a can of cake frosting.

“Just hear me out. During Weirdmageddon, who knows what we were exposed to? Alien radiation, transdimensional weirdness rays; we were basically in Bill's dimension for awhile. Or maybe it's not even that, maybe it's just the town! Maybe we're, I don't know, like weirdness magnets ourselves, now. Maybe weird things will always find us just like they do Gravity Falls!”

Instead of latching on to his excitement, Mabel looks uneasy. “Like the candy monster?”

“Sure, like the candy m—”

“…Or like the tooth-island?”

Now he understands her concern. Most of the weirdness in Gravity Falls is strange and wonderful, but he can't exactly classify it as harmless — and some of it is downright terrifying. “Well… I don't think there's anything like that in Piedmont. We only found a Category Two ghost. I mean, we can't find what isn't there.”

“So you don't think any giant vampire bats are going to attack Mom and Dad,” she says, making sure.

“I don't think there are any giant vampire bats around here,” he says. “But, if there are any more ghosts, we might have a better chance of finding them than anyone else.”

Mabel looks down at herself and wiggles her fingers. “If I'm radiated, shouldn't I be glowing?”

“Irradiated. And it doesn't work like that.”

“Like you know how weirdness rays work,” she scoffs.

Dipper scowls at her and picks up his journal. “It's just a theory,” he grumbles defensively.

“If I'm going to be irradiated, I want superpowers,” Mabel declares. “Gravity Girl! No, Weird Woman!”

“You should definitely knit yourself a cape,” he says, and even though he's being sarcastic he's pretty sure she's going to do it.

He spends the next few days oscillating between homework and mentally debating whether his theory is workable. The problem is that he can't think of any way in which it is falsifiable without discovering an actual physical measurement for weirdness, like a particle. And his sample size is so limited. He can't draw any conclusions based on his and Mabel's single paranormal experience outside of Gravity Falls. His theory rests entirely on anecdote.
Wendy and Soos are still in Gravity Falls, so their experiences with the paranormal will be, for them, entirely normal, which is to say entirely weird. And Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford are actively seeking anomalies in the same way Dipper is, albeit with far superior equipment and a better starting point (in retrospect, he really wishes he had asked Grunkle Ford for some of the stuff from one of the labs before leaving). What he needs is someone else who was exposed to Weirdmageddon, but is no longer in the Falls. He knows one person who fits that criteria.

He shoots Pacifica a quick text: **Hey let me know if you see anything weird okay**

She responds a few minutes later, **You mean besides you?**

Dipper isn't sure what he'd expected, but it really should have been that.

**I mean Weird with a capital,** he retorts, guessing she'll understand.

She texts back, **Why what's happening,** and then, before he can even start to respond, **is he back?**

Oops. He hadn't been trying to panic her, but he can see now why there's cause for concern. He quickly assuages her fears: **No nothing like that, just working on a theory**

It takes her almost ten minutes to get back to him. At the eight-minute mark he slumps in his seat and winces. She's probably mad at him.

**Dork,** she finally replies. And then: **Don't ever do that again**

“**I wasn't trying to,**” he mutters out loud, then texts her a short apology.

But the next day, the thought is still bugging him. And he knows he needs to stop thinking about it because there's nothing he can do about it except keep looking for anomalies in Piedmont. Whatever luck led him and Mabel to that ghost has yet to come through again. He thinks the ghost lends some vague credence to his theory, but what if it was just a fluke?

Maybe California just doesn't have enough anomalies that he's likely to find another. It's a big state, sure; perhaps that's part of the problem.

He won't give up, though. He knows there's an anomaly out there, somewhere, waiting to be found. He refuses to let go of what he's learned; he can't just settle back into his old patterns and pretend nothing's changed. He can't let go of his old life, either, though (Mabel showed him that). So, he goes to school and does his extracurriculars and plays his games and it's not that he isn't engaged or never enjoys himself.

It's just that he's also waiting.

***---~**~---***

It's the middle of an unusually wet February. Rain streaks down Dipper's window as he taps a pencil eraser absently against his teeth, debating his homework answers.

His phone begins to vibrate on his desk. He sighs and swings his legs off his bed and goes over to retrieve it. He checks the caller: It's Pacifica.
It's not quite the surprise it would have once been. He answers it. “Hello?”

Her voice comes through, a sharpened valley girl drawl. “I need your help.”
“Okay, so can you describe what it looks like, exactly?” Dipper says. He's got his stupid journal out with a pen at the ready, face all serious like he's some sort of scholar-slash-warrior, ready to do battle after he charts all his enemy's weaknesses.

It's actually not a bad look for him. And Pacifica has developed a respect for what he can do with a book and a little courage. He's a nerd, but, maybe that's kind of a good thing?

Ugh. What has she become?

_A better person_, a voice in the back of her head savagely informs her. Mabel is standing right behind Dipper, ready to fully support him in whatever he plans to do, and Pacifica remembers every spiteful, cruddy thing she's said to the other girl and she wants to shrivel up and disappear. And she greatly resents being made to feel that way. Even though it's not Mabel's fault. It's her own fault. But she still hates it, and it makes her want to say something mean again.

It's become a very familiar cycle. Her thoughts run in circles; she looks in the mirror and wonders who's even looking back anymore. She avoids her mother and father as much as she possibly can because she feels like one scathing remark or one ring of the bell will bring her old self crashing back to the forefront, and she _hates_ that person. Even though that person is still there, in bits and pieces and a poisoned tongue. She's afraid to test her new resolve. She's afraid to find out how weak she really is.

Changing is hard.

But she looks at Dipper and Mabel, who got on a plane and came four hundred miles from their home, sacrificing their weekend for no other reason than she asked them to, and she thinks that changing might just be worth it.

“I only saw it for a second,” she tells Dipper. “It's, like, some kind of crab thing.”

“What did it do?”

“I don't know… It scuttled?” she says, crossing her arms. “I threw my shoe at it and ran. That shoe was a Donna Ray. I want it back.”

Dipper continues making notes in his journal while also making short noises of interest and she kind of wants to strangle him. It'd be a little harder now that he's taller than her, but still possible. What is he even doing? Making sure the part about the shoe gets written down?

“So, do you know what this thing is?” she prompts him.

“I have no idea!” he says, except instead of sounding worried or uncertain or anything sane like that he sounds positively thrilled.

“What's the plan?” Mabel asks, looking equally unconcerned.

“Step one is to make contact,” Dipper says, tucking his journal back in his jacket rather dramatically.
He's all business again, standing straight with one foot forward, about an inch away from striking a pose. Pacifica sort of wants to laugh, but, at the same time, he's pulling it off surprisingly well. It's either the confidence or the new inches in height. On one hand, it's nice to see that she isn't the only one who's changed a little. On the other hand, it's really throwing her off to see him in such a different light. Except, she isn't really, is she? He's acting now pretty much like he had when he'd come to the party; this isn't really new. Something else is different. She just doesn't know what, yet.

Then he takes a step and the tip of his foot catches on the hardwood, making a squeak and tripping him up. He recovers quickly and laughs awkwardly at himself. It's so reminiscent of his walking into the pillar incident that it both makes her laugh and makes her feel a little more centered.

Then she thinks about what he just said. “Wait, you're going to talk to it?”

“A lot of magical creatures are actually sentient,” he explains. “It might just be lost or stuck or something. Never hurts to ask.”

She thinks it could very easily hurt to ask. “No, you didn't see this thing, it has big claws.”

He frowns. “That doesn't mean it can't talk.”

“Yeah, but if it gets mad it'll mean you can't,” she says, and it sounded cutting and witty in her head, but it comes out more concerned than anything.

Dipper straightens his cap, as if the flimsy thing is suitable armor. “I'll be careful. It's right down here?” He reaches out for the doorknob to the basement.

Pacifica braces herself. “That's it.”

She had been home alone when the encounter had occurred. Her mother had been gone for at least two days and Pacifica didn't know where to; if she'd been told, she hadn't been listening. She'd been watching the rain bead on the sliding glass doors to the balcony that overlooked the beach, listless and unenthused by the prospect of yet another weekend alone with whatever distractions she could immerse herself in. At least at school there were other people to observe and drama to witness, even if Pacifica herself was increasingly on the fringes of the happenings there. The dissolution of her family, the loss of their ancestral grounds and the spreading rumors regarding the source of the Northwests' sudden near-insolvency (none of which were even close to being true, but all of which were damaging) had made her a pariah so quickly that she would have been shocked if she hadn't seen it happen to others before. She's taken part in it happening to others before.

It makes her wonder who is enjoying her swift decline. The old her would have already known and would have been prepping some form of revenge. The new her watches rain gather on the glass and struggles to care about much of anything. Sometimes she thinks about the Shack, the torn sky and the fighting that followed, and she's puzzled how moments so terrifying could have made her feel so alive.

She'd been pondering that when she'd heard a rumbling crash somewhere in the house below her. Assuming a shelf had fallen over, she'd gone downstairs to make sure none of her old things had been ruined. But instead of finding a mess of boxes, there had been a dark, crumbled hole on the far side of the room, where the concrete wall met the floor. The sounds of water echoed faintly from it. Pacifica stood on the stairs and gazed at the sinkhole, thinking, I can't deal with this right now.

Then something brown and chitinous had clambered out of the hole, clicking and chirring. Pacifica had screamed bloody murder, thrown the closest thing at hand (her shoe) and ran back up the stairs as fast as her feet could take her.
At first, she'd feared the horrible thing would smash down the door and come for her. She'd run out into the rain and stood on the front lawn, paralyzed by terror and indecision. Eventually, she'd gathered the courage to go back inside and retrieve her phone. She'd called the only person she could think of who might deal with something like a crab-monster. The cops wouldn't believe her (not that the Northwests could ever countenance police invading their residence — what would the neighbors think?) and she assumed animal control would not be up to the task. She'd spent the night in a nearby hotel, wondering if she was crazy for calling a boy she knew instead of the National Guard.

Maybe it's not entirely rational, but she thinks that Dipper and Mabel are the only people she can trust with something like this.

And now Dipper is going to get decapitated because of that.

Pacifica's hand shoots out and grips his shoulder just before he opens the door. “Seriously, be careful.”

“Hey, this isn't my first rodeo,” he tells her, his expression indicating he thinks that's a pretty cool thing to say. “Besides, Mabel's got my back.”

“I'll rake its face off!” Mabel says, brandishing a rake she'd taken from the landscaper's shed. She pauses. “…Does it have a face?”

“Here we go,” Dipper says.

He turns the knob and slowly pushes the door open. Mabel moves to the other side and leans in to see. Pacifica is behind Dipper trying to look down the stairs and his shoulder has become just the right height for her to rest her chin on, which is an odd thought to have and she doesn't know why that just occurred to her.

The lights are still on, Pacifica having left them that way in her haste to flee. She half expects the monster to be camped on the steps waiting to strike, but the stairs are empty. The sound of water is louder through the opened door. The stairs run down the rightmost wall of the basement and it opens out to the left. Whatever is down there remains out of sight.

“Hello?” Dipper calls out. “Is anyone down there?”

There's no reply, nor any of the awful noises Pacifica had previously heard.

“Maybe it doesn't speak English,” Mabel suggests. “HOLA! MI NOMBRE ES MABEL!”

Dipper and Pacifica both wince at the sound, amplified by the narrow stairwell. “Maybe it doesn't speak anything,” Dipper muses. He makes a fist and raps three times against the drywall on the left side of the stairs. He waits, and then raps three times again. Then again.

After the fourth time, Pacifica is getting impatient. “Maybe it went away,” she says.

Dipper looks disappointed by the thought. “Man, I hope not. Okay, I'm going to take a quick look.”

Mabel readies her rake again, like it's any kind of weapon against a big horrible armored thing. Pacifica is starting to wonder if she should have just called animal control after all. At least they probably have stun guns or something. And she'd care less if they got eaten.

Dipper probably intends to go down alone but both girls stick to him like glue as he carefully descends the steps. Halfway down the drywall ends and a railing begins, revealing the rest of the basement. Dipper reaches that point and freezes.
“What?” Pacifica whispers near his ear. When he doesn't answer she presses closer to him and slides around his back until she can see, too.

The far side of the basement is dark. She can see what looks like a couple inches of water on the floor, shimmering with the wavering reflections of the light from the stairs. There, next to the collapsed hole, something big is sitting in the blackness, folded up into itself like a turtle with its legs in its shell. It's roughly the size of a bear, she thinks, and what little can be seen is unnerving in what it suggests: Two huge lobster claws, a bumpy, barnacle-speckled shell and beady black eyes glittering behind the shield of its limbs.

“What?” Mabel whispers, eyes wide.

“Some… sort of Kraken, maybe, or…” Dipper is clearly at a loss. His eyes are as wide as Mabel’s, but his hands are already groping for his journal.

“This thing's pretty scary, huh,” Mabel says in a slightly wavering tone.

One of the monster's claws snaps shut with a clack that makes all of them jump.

Slowly, Dipper begins moving back up the steps. Pacifica and Mabel move with him, and as soon as they are cloaked behind the wall section they break out into a run, stampeding back into the evening light and slamming the door behind them.
Returning upstairs is a relief, though Pacifica keeps looking over her shoulder, afraid the thing is following them. It didn't follow when she was alone, so it probably won't now that she has support, but it's not like there are any guarantees. She's perfectly willing to abandon the house if need be. She contemplated extended stays in various hotels long before a horrendous lobster-thing burrowed its way into her basement. A horrendous lobster-thing is really just one more reason to want to leave.

Dipper shrugs his shoulders up and winces, and Pacifica realizes she'd been digging her nails into him when he had ended up being her accidental human shield. Once again, she's struck by the fact he's tall enough for her to hide behind. Doesn't mean he's a worthy opponent for a huge lobster monster, though. She thinks even the goons who hang out at the Skull Fracture wouldn't be a match for it.

“Wow, that thing is horrifying!” Dipper enthuses, beginning to sketch it in his journal. “I don't know what it is. There wasn't anything like it in the journals.”

“I think we should call it 'Super-Pinchy',” Mabel says, leaning over his journal as he draws. “No, the Mega-Lobster! No, the Boss-Claw!”

“I like 'Boss-Lobster',” Dipper says absently, shading in one of its claws.

“What are we going to do about it?” Pacifica wants to know.

“I don't think it's intelligent. It's probably a bottom feeder like a normal lobster, a scavenger. It looks like it's been eating your boxes; must like the taste of cardboard,” Dipper says, making a note of that.

Pacifica does not like the idea of a stupid Boss-Lobster eating her things. “Then make it stop!”

“I intend to,” Dipper says, tucking his journal away again. “I think it doesn't like light very much, it's been staying away from the stairs. Do you have any spotlights or UV flares?”

“Sure, let me check my closet,” Pacifica says sarcastically.

Dipper snaps his fingers. “Fire! A Boss-Lobster has to be some kind of water-affinity, I bet we could scare it with fire.”

“I call flamethrower,” Mabel says.

“You can't use a flamethrower in my house!” Pacifica exclaims.

Mabel shrugs. “That's okay, we don't actually have one. We should definitely get one, though.”

“Or, maybe something a little more plausible,” Dipper says, scribbling in his journal again.

They spend most of an hour scouring the house for every flashlight and flammable liquid they can find, which ultimately doesn't amount to much. Pacifica's Malibu home is both ultra-modern and ultra-austere, containing few objects besides artfully arranged furniture and decorations. A service cleans the house and takes care of the yard, leaving little in the way of common household items. It's
only now as she moves around the place with Dipper and Mabel, seeing it through their eyes, that she realizes how big and empty it is. It must seem like incredible luxury to them, given what she saw of their very common suburban home. But it's a hollow place, in more ways than one.

They reconvene in the kitchen, having secured about five flashlights of varying sizes (most of them taken from the shed) and a pile of unused kitchen rags. They wrap long cloth strips around the legs of a disassembled chair they'd found in a closet and soak them in engine oil from the speedboat in the garage. It all makes a mess that Pacifica kind of enjoys, in the same way she'd enjoyed getting mud all over the carpet at the mansion. She likes ruining her parents' stuff. It's petty, but cathartic.

“So how do we scare a Boss-Lobster?” Mabel says as she surveys their handiwork.

“If it doesn't like light, it really won't like fire. We'll surround it and force it back into the tunnel and then drop the torches in after it to keep it in there,” Dipper says. “Then we can replace the light bulbs in the basement, and maybe put a lamp or two near the hole, and you can just leave the lights on all the time until you get the hole filled,” he says to Pacifica.

Pacifica doesn't care for the idea of that thing still being out there, somewhere, maybe waiting to dig its way in again. “Can't we, like, kill it?”

“Sure. Get me a harpoon gun, a winch and a flatbed truck,” Dipper says dryly.

Pacifica blows out an irritated breath upwards, ruffling her bangs. “Fine. We'll try it your way.”

The torches are visibly staining the ceiling of the stairwell; Pacifica decides to worry about that later. They all stop again at the halfway mark, searching the darkness as oily smoke pours off their torches and rolls across the ceiling (they've disabled the smoke detector in the stairwell). The Boss-Lobster doesn't appear to have moved at all in their absence, though Pacifica thinks there's more cardboard bits strewn around than before. Perhaps it takes the same defensive position when it hears them approach and forages in the meantime. She spots the partially-chewed head of one of her old (and very expensive) dolls and her resolve hardens.

“Okay, all at once,” Dipper whispers. “Herd it towards the hole.”

The creature's torso bobs slightly, interlocking plates sliding against each other with a hissing sigh. The way it moves is like the worst aspects of spiders and crustaceans put together: Jerky and unnatural but also spindly and indelicate. It makes Pacifica shudder just to see its eye-stalks slowly extend and retract.

“Now!” Dipper shouts, and they all turn on their flashlights and spread out in a half-circle.

At first the Boss-Lobster reacts to the sudden onslaught of illumination by folding into itself even more, clicking shut like an ugly transforming toy. But when the lit torches get near and the heat rises accordingly it comes alive, plates separating and claws rising like the blooming of a hideous, slimy-shelled flower. Its shell, splotchy brown and sickly off-white, becomes mottled with red.

“Uh, I think it's angry, maybe—” Dipper starts to say.

The Boss-Lobster screeches. It sounds like a giant cicada filtered through a buzzsaw. Pacifica nearly drops her torch.

It surges forward.

“Dipper!” Mabel shouts in alarm as the Boss-Lobster charges him.
Dipper, displaying a ridiculous disregard for personal safety, neither runs nor dodges. He stands his ground and swings his torch out in an arc in front of him, yelling back at the monster. The Boss-Lobster skids to an ungainly, clicking halt, claws flinching back from the fire, eyes bobbing wildly on their stalks. It snaps its pincers in the air, dancing backwards, hissing in warning and fear.

“Force it back!” Dipper shouts, stabbing his torch at the thing. It recoils again, snapping a claw within inches of Dipper's face.

Pacifica thinks her heart might stop from sheer terror. The torches float in the dark, leaving glowing retinal imprints as they streak back and forth. Their light and the beams of the flashlights cast bizarre layered shadows, leaping and careening across the walls and ceiling, cutting through the dark in short-lived patches and bright patterned swathes. It's like fighting in a strobe light, harsh white LEDs clashing with warm torch tones while something scuttling and horrific bobs and weaves in the dark spaces between the flashes. Pacifica's light catches on the disgusting, dimpled, glistening carapace and her mouth is dry. This is insane. Someone is going to get killed.

But, somehow, she finds herself stepping forward and swinging her torch, screaming nonsense at the top of her lungs. It's the exact same feeling as when she'd stepped into the launching tube, or when she'd parachuted into the halls of fear itself. Something else takes her over. She's terrified, but not beyond reason. The Boss-Lobster is an awful, subaqueous monster, but it's not the first terrible thing she's faced.

It's actually working. The Boss-Lobster slowly retreats, giving ground as it rages against their tightening circle of fire, snapping its claws and swiveling towards each of them in turn on its crab-like lower half. Its spidery legs pop up and down, clicking against the concrete as it grudgingly rocks back and forth, withdrawing by inches.

Dipper, emboldened, jumps forward and slashes at the monster with his torch. It must be close enough for the creature to acutely feel the heat, because it rears back on half of its legs like some abominable, crab-limbed horse and flails wildly with its claws. One of the pincers catches on a nearby shelf and sends it tipping towards the floor; Dipper sees it and quickly sidesteps out of the way. The shelf hits the floor with a bang, scattering boxes and Christmas lights. But Dipper doesn't realize he's now slightly too close to the Boss-Lobster until it's already too late.

Pacifica watches the claw sweep in an arc as if it's happening in slow motion. She wants to scream, she wants to warn him, but by the time she can articulate the thought it's already over. The tip of the claw catches him at the hip and spins him around like a top. His torch goes flying, clattering to the floor and rolling back towards the stairs. He hits the ground hard with a wet smack, knocking the wind out of him.

The Boss-Lobster surges forward and lowers its opened claw towards Dipper's head.

Pacifica's mind goes blank and frantic. She can't witness the actuality of her earlier thought. *God no I didn't mean it—*

Mabel's torch comes flying out of the dark. It bounces off the Boss-Lobster's armored chest with a shower of sparks and smoke and the creature shrieks and shakes, scuttling backwards.

Pacifica doesn't know what she's doing. She's not thinking; she feels nothing but terror, sees nothing in her mind but Dipper's neck below the razor edge of the monster's claw. She's running. She jumps, feet and hands catching on the segmented shelves of the Boss-Lobster's back. It bucks beneath her weight, starting to pivot. Her left hand closes around the lip of the armored collar that surmounts what serves as the thing's head; the tips of her fingers touch the white, pulpy flesh that pulses below the shell, warm and slick. Eye stalks turn to look at her, reflecting her flickering light. It's the last
thing one of them sees as she grinds the flaming rag-wrapped end of her torch into the black marble of an eyeball. It bursts and melts where it catches between her torch and the shell.

The Boss-Lobster shrieks again, this time in a different, higher tone. It squirms wildly beneath her; the rubber edges of her shoes get caught in its shell as segments retract and squeeze together defensively. The monster thrashes in pain and fear. The next thing Pacifica knows, she's falling. She hits a pile of boxes and sinks into the cardboard, dazed.

There's a couple short squeaks and quivering, piercing squeals that seem to fade with distance, and then silence.
i: win

at the window of vulnerability

Is that it? Is it gone? Pacifica regains her senses and starts fighting her way free of the cardboard, panicked at the thought of the Boss-Lobster snipping off her legs where they lie unprotected. It had seemed eager enough to cut Dipper's head off, so she doubts it'll turn its nose up (does it have a nose?) at her legs. Then a light falls on her, followed by the sound of friendly footsteps. Hands reach down and help her up.

“Pwa-thifi-cwa!” Mabel says, flashlight held between her teeth as she helps the other girl to her feet. She pops the flashlight out of her mouth and smiles exuberantly, braces gleaming in the torchlight. “That was AMAZING.”

The rush of blood to Pacifica's head when she rises sends her teetering sideways to rest on the nearby shelf. She looks down at her feet, seeing she's crushed a box or two and probably the fragile contents inside. Oh, well. Better the box's contents than her contents.

Pacifica still isn't sure what just happened. “What? Where did…” But Mabel has already turned away and rushed to Dipper's side. He's still on the floor, slowly pushing himself into a sitting position. “Dipper!” Pacifica says, the sight of him taking a hit rushing back all at once.

“I'm okay!” Dipper says, managing to sit up. Then he freezes and presses a hand to his side. “Mostly okay. Give me just a…” He takes a deep breath.

“…Ow.”

Pacifica is still somewhat dizzy, but she manages to stagger over to his side and shine her flashlight down, searching for injury. She pales and feels even dizzier when she sees the blood soaking through the top edge of his jeans and side of his shirt. The widening circle is thin at the edges and directly at his hip the cloth is soaked to saturation, dark and glistening red, ready to drip. She sort of wants to gag.

“Okay, bro-bro, easy does it,” Mabel says, ducking beneath his arm.

“Wait, we have to get the lights on so it won't come back,” Dipper says. He groans as Mabel lifts him to his feet.

“You're hurt!” Pacifica says almost accusingly, and she finds herself inexplicably angry at him for being dumb enough to get hit.

“Flesh wound. Occupational hazard,” Dipper says with an attempt at nonchalance that's seriously undermined by the slowly spreading red stain beneath his palm. “Mabel, I can stand. We need the light bulbs and the lamps.” He shrugs out of Mabel's support and limps towards the stairs.

“On it,” Mabel asserts. Pacifica finds herself rather rudely shoved towards Dipper, nearly knocking into him. “Pacifica, you're on doctor duty, stat!”

Like Pacifica knows anything about first aid. She's only an expert if Dipper broke a nail. Still, she ducks beneath Dipper's arm despite his slight protestations. He's warm, and heavier than he looks. He also reeks of burnt oil, though she supposes she does, too. Along with the entire basement. There's also a very fishy, raw seafood sort of smell underneath the smokiness. It's not pleasant. She helps Dipper sit on the lowest stair and then pauses, hands hovering uncertainly near his wound.
“It's okay, it's just a cut across my hip, it's not a big deal,” Dipper assures her.

“If it's not a big deal, then why are you still bleeding?” she retorts, unimpressed by his stoicism.

He laughs awkwardly. “Well, you got me there.”

She raises an eyebrow, waiting.

“Pressure. It needs more pressure, that's what you're supposed to do to make it stop,” he explains. “And probably something cleaner than my shirt.”

Pacifica stands up and looks around. There's a pile of boxes in the corner and behind them is an old disassembled flag pole. She opens the box in front of it and digs through a pile of folded flags. There's several American flags and the Northwest Family Crest. She pulls out the Northwest family's logo and unfurls it. The sight of the flag, which she is used to seeing fly during soirees and elegant outdoor parties, inspires some very mixed feelings. She once looked forward to the occasions when it would wave in the wind. Now she doesn't know if that will ever be the case again. She's not sure she cares.

She wads it up and brings it over to Dipper. “Okay, let me see it.”

Dipper grimaces and slowly pulls his shirt away from the wound. It makes a very unpleasant noise as it peels off his blood-sticky skin. Then he shifts and tugs the side of his jeans down until the wound is fully exposed. Pacifica wrinkles her nose at the sight of it, but it actually doesn't bother her as much as she thought it would. Weirdmageddon strengthened her stomach, if nothing else. She presses the flag to the deep cut and Dipper makes a noise of pain; Pacifica immediately lets up.

“No, keep pressing,” Dipper says, grimacing. “I'm okay.”

She increases the pressure again. “How long do I have to do this?”

“Until it stops, I guess,” Dipper says, voice tight. He looks down at the flag she's holding against him. “This is very symbolic.”

“Don't be a dork about it,” she tells him.

He shrugs, forehead beaded with sweat. “Thought that's what I was?”

“You can stop. Sometimes,” she says.

“Seriously, though, Pacifica; that was crazy awesome, what you did.” He smiles up at her, and something swoops strangely in her chest.

She's having a hard time looking directly at him. “I just wanted that gross thing gone,” she says, but can't quite seem to get the dismissive tone she's aiming for.

“I should have known the eyes were the weak point.” Dipper shakes his head. “Always go for the eyes. That was quick thinking, really good work.”

She is horrified to realize that she's blushing. “I think you're not bleeding as much,” she says abruptly.

The hand that falls on her shoulder stills her. She is hyper-aware of where his thumb is brushing the edge of her shirt collar, touching the bare skin of her neck. “Pacifica, I mean it. You saved us again,” he says.
She wants to knock his stupid, warm hand off her shoulder. She wants to hug him. She wants to take pride in her monster-fighting. She wants to never think about it or how he was going to die again. She's leaning over him and her elbow is sunk into the plush of his vest. His breath flutters against her shirt, just over her heart. His dumb, messy boy-hair is parted to reveal a portion of his birthmark, framing the top of his deep brown eyes. There's a small scrape on his chin and his mouth is smudged with soot and she looks at it and she wants to… to…

Oh my God. What is she thinking? Stop.

“Thanks,” she says, looking back to the flag she has pressed against his side. “You weren't so bad, either.”

“Oh, why did I step that close? It was going so well…” he sighs, leaning back on the steps. Then his eyes brighten. “But, man, what a monster! Did you see the claws on that thing? Holy cow! I don't think Grunkle Ford ever encountered a Boss-Lobster. I can't wait to tell him.”

Pacifica isn't sure if she's about to laugh or cry. She's giddy with adrenaline and suffused with fading horror. “Y-you can tell him Pacifica Northwest kicked its butt,” she says, voice unexpectedly shaking.

Dipper grins. “I will. He'll totally be impressed.”

The lights in the other half of the basement suddenly flicker to life. Mabel jumps off the step ladder and surveys her handiwork. All of the bulbs in the ceiling are brightly glowing and there are two standing lamps on either side of the hole in the floor (smoke is still rising from it, the torches at the bottom giving it the flickering ambiance of a fire pit). With visibility restored, Pacifica takes in the water, the scorch marks, the wads of partially chewed cardboard, the toppled shelves and the weird slime left where the Boss-Lobster rubbed against the wall. It's an unholy mess. And she knows exactly who's going to take the blame for it.

“This is bad,” she says, slumping down on the step next to Dipper.

“Look at it this way: Would your parents rather have this, or a Boss-Lobster roommate?” Dipper says.

“It doesn't matter. It'll be my fault that idiot lobster was here to begin with.”

“Well, if my theory is correct, it's as much your parents' fault as it is yours,” Dipper says. When she glares at him, he hurries to add, “I mean, it's not anybody's fault, not like that. Just from a standpoint of causality.”

She hugs her knees, already picturing the confrontation. “Then you try telling them that.”

“I will if you want me to.”

She blinks and looks up. “What?”

“Hey, it's our mess, too,” he says, pointing a thumb towards himself and tilting it in Mabel's direction. “You don't have to do it alone.”

She knows he's not just talking about the mess, and that makes her feel… too much. She doesn't know how to parse the day or the aftermath or what Dipper and Mabel are to her, now, or what she is to them. There's so much offered and so little demanded. The shrieking of the Boss-Lobster is still ringing in her head. She needs time, she can't think. She wants to tell him how much it means that the twins came to help her at all, that they will keep helping, but she doesn't know what words to use.
Dipper nearly died because she had a monster in her basement. What would she have done if he had? Does he not think about things like that? Does Mabel?

Dipper's knee is touching hers. She doesn't think he even notices, but the heat at the point of contact seems to be spreading to her very bones until she thinks it might be the only thing keeping her upright. They're both sweaty and oily and soaked and so, so gross, and she shouldn't want to be close to him, but she does. She sees Mabel's ridiculous sweater out of the corner of her eye and somehow that's a comfort, too.

And this, she realizes, is how people become important to each other.

She's afraid if she opens her mouth what comes out will either be too personal or too inadequate. Instead she smiles at Dipper, heartfelt and grateful. She hopes it says what she can't, yet.

She helps Dipper limp up the stairs. It's a labored, clomping affair; he can't use one of his legs without widening his wound and she's too small to be much of a support. His ragged breathing echoes in the stairwell.

He can move on his own once he gets to even ground. Using one hand for leverage he makes his way into the kitchen and she ignores the smudges of blood and soot he's leaving on the spotless walls. She's well past the point of no return when it comes to making a mess.

He sinks into a chair with a sigh of relief, no doubt staining it in the process.

“Now what?” she wants to know, waiting to assist.

“Uh…” He seems uncertain, which isn't comforting. “I can figure something out. Probably.”

She looks at him dubiously. “You're sure?”

“Yeah. Just need a minute to catch my breath,” he says with a tired grin.

That expression of his is making her feel confusing things again so she leaves him there in the kitchen, delicately dabbing at his wound with a wet paper towel. Then she goes back downstairs to make sure Mabel has everything under control — she absolutely cannot have that monster coming back.
The basement stairs are stained with the clear outlines of wet shoes and the drywall along the sides and overhead has black streaks and a generally more greyish pallor, thanks to the torches. Pacifica will worry about it later, if she even does. There's no possible way for her to sweep this under the rug. Even if she somehow manages to clean up every other trace of the Boss-Lobster's incursion there's still a big hole in the floor downstairs.

She descends back into the basement and finds Mabel at work with a push broom (she has no idea where the other girl found it), sweeping the water and soggy cardboard down into the hole. It improves things a little, though not nearly enough.

“I had to sweep at the Shack sometimes,” Mabel explains as she sends another small wave of filthy water running over the jagged concrete edge of the hole. “One time I spilled my cereal and a whole gallon of milk and I swept it like this into a crack in the floor. Grunkle Ford found it in his study later.”

Pacifica watches another lump of cardboard go floating over the edge and is struck by an idea. “Maybe if we put all the cardboard down there, it'll just take it to eat and won't try to come back up.”

Mabel rolls her eyes with a grin. “Boss-Lobster's so stupid it thinks cardboard is tasty. Even Gompers didn't like cardboard.” She picks up an empty box and throws it into the pit. “Take your cardboard, you stupid Boss-Lobster! I hope you choke on it!”

Pacifica tosses her own box in with vindictive anger. “Yeah! Choke on it!”

Then the two girls are laughing and throwing every bit of cardboard they can get their hands on into the hole. And if their laughter has a slightly hysterical edge and the act of shouting at their retreated foe is more about catharsis than anger, it goes unremarked upon. Before long they have expended their ammunition and stand, tired and satisfied, back from the hole with its twin warding lights.

Pacifica looks down at herself for the first time. Her clothes are ruined, and, thanks to the dumb monster's shell, her shoes look like something's been chewing on them. Still, she's unharmed. Dipper isn't. She begins to worry that she might have dragged her only friends down with her.

“What are your parents going to say about Dipper?” Pacifica asks Mabel.

Mabel suddenly looks nervous. “Well, the funny thing about that is... they don't know we're here. Hooray, secrets…”

Pacifica stares at her. “What?”

“We called the driver you sent and met him at the park and told our parents we were going to the mall,” Mabel says in rush.

“What are you going to tell them when you get back after midnight?”

“We lost track of time?”
Pacifica already has a very uncomfortable feeling worming its way through her gut; she got it when Dipper was hurt. Now it's worsening. She knows what the feeling is. She'd felt it when confronted with a painted record of the Northwests' true history. She'd felt it when Dipper had accused her of lying, of being another link in the world's worst chain. She'd felt it when Mabel had offered a sweater despite all that had been said and done between them.

It is guilt. And Pacifica does not care for the feeling, not one bit.

She knows what to do to forestall the looming punishment ahead. It was that Pines boy, she can tell her parents. He'd shown up and summoned a monster to get revenge or something. She'd tried to stop him, but he knew magic and hated the Northwests for being better than him. His ridiculous sister was with him; they'd overpowered her! It isn't her fault. She'd tried to defend the family name. She is still their perfect daughter. She is trying to make amends.

Once, she probably could have pulled it off. Now, the thought of claiming she had tried to defend her family name makes her chest tight with an unnamable combination of anxiety, fury and despair.

And the idea of betraying Dipper and Mabel brings bile to the back of her throat.

“You weren't supposed to get in trouble,” she says, nails digging into the palms of her hands.

Infuriatingly, Mabel shrugs it off. “This was more important than not getting grounded. Besides, we're worried about you. Are you going to be okay?”

Pacifica is too tired and emotionally raw to downplay it. “I don't know. They're going to be really mad.” She shivers at the thought. It's going to be the aftermath of the party all over again, except this time it's strike two. Maybe three, if they count the accumulation of all the small ways she has defied them over the past months.

“But will you be okay?” Mabel presses.

Pacifica has no idea what the fallout of all this is going to be. The Mansion ghost had estranged her from her parents, Weirdmageddon had torn the family apart and now a bizarre lobster-thing has ripped up the basement and eaten some boxes. She has no basis for this stuff. She's spent her entire life being what her parents wanted her to be. It wasn't until she got older that she'd even had any doubts about what being a Northwest meant. The moment she had opened the gates at the party had been about Dipper and all the other people turned to wood, sure, but it had also been the culmination of so many little moments: Discovering her family name was based on fraud; seeing how much more accepting Mabel's friends were, even when she'd failed; just sharing a taco in a car because it turned out that wasn't a big deal to most people.

And it wasn't just the summer, and it wasn't just the Pines. She'd been getting older and gradually realizing that nobody else she knew had been trained to obey a bell. And that had brought about another nagging thought, one that had been festering for years: Who is she, really, if everything she is, is everything she's been made to be?

The ghost had just forced the issue. And now here she is in the midst of trying to be a better person, a path that has led her to be covered in filth in a wrecked basement with a girl she had once despised, not so long ago, because that was what she'd been expected to do.

So, if nothing else, not doing what she's supposed to is definitely the more interesting way to go.

Mabel is still looking at her expectantly. Pacifica's been lost in her own head so much recently that she is just sick and tired of it. How do nerds like Dipper think so much all the time? Introspection
sucks. She thinks and thinks and just runs around her head in circles.

Pacifica kicks one last chunk of cardboard towards the hole and feels a little better. “Yeah. I guess we'll both be grounded,” she says.

Mabel looks at the Boss-Lobster-free basement with satisfaction. “Totally worth it.”

At least for the moment, Pacifica shares the feeling of accomplishment. “Let's go, it smells down here.” She turns to leave and then recoils a step when she finds Mabel directly in her way with a wide, knowing smile.

“In a hurry, Pacifica?” Mabel says.

“Yes, it's gross in here,” Pacifica reiterates, confused.

“Or are you just in a hurry to help Dipper again, Dr. Northwest?” Mabel says, rocking on her heels gleefully.

“Um, yeah, I did that after you shoved me at him, weirdo,” Pacifica retorts.

“You were getting a little personal with your patient, doc! Though, I didn't see him complaining about your bedside manner…”

Pacifica crosses her arms. “Shut up, Mabel.”

Mabel's finger comes up and points straight at her. “You like him!” she crows.

“Shut up, I do not!”

“You like him a lot!”

“What is your damage—”

“Love lingers in the air, like the musk of a Boss-Lobster,” Mabel narrates, clasping her hands to her chest. “The beautiful doctor, her handsome young charge. She saves him from the evil claws of the basement monster, and then holds him close to her ample bosom as she tenderly cares for his wound… Their hands entwined, their hearts in sync, their lips—”

“Oh my God, Mabel, shut up!”

Mabel drops the narrative but remains excited. “Pacifica, not to brag, but I'm kind of a love expert. And I was catching some serious vibes when you two were over there.”

“The only thing you're catching is Boss-Lobster diseases,” Pacifica says sourly. Then, unable to get past Mabel's impromptu dip into torrid romance fiction, she adds, “And I did not hold him against my 'bosom'!”

“Okay, I made that part up,” Mabel allows.

“Duh.”

“But you wanted to!”

Pacifica spins on her heel and stalks away. “You're crazy, and I'm done with this.”

“But you'll be thinking about it laaaaaaater,” Mabel sings as she follows.
Pacifica rolls her eyes as she ascends the steps. “Yeah, right. Because I lay awake at night thinking about him,” she sneers sarcastically.

***---~**~---***

It's sometime after midnight and Pacifica is beneath her sheets. She's finally, mercifully clean and the stench of the monster has slowly faded from her nostrils until all she smells is the faint hint of lavender that permeates her room. She's exhausted. She should already be asleep.

She wonders how Dipper and Mabel are doing. Their trip home might be finished. She hopes they aren't in too much trouble. They'd managed to clean Dipper's wound fairly well and bandage it crudely but effectively. Still, with only a single pair of clothes on his person, his only chance is to get into his room and change before he has to see his parents. And then do his own laundry. Even if the blood somehow escapes notice the fishy reek of the Boss-Lobster probably won't.

His relative insouciance towards the injury itself makes Pacifica wonder how often he's been hurt during his adventures in Gravity Falls. Not that she's really worried about him or anything. No matter what Mabel says Pacifica isn't going to be thinking about him like that; or any other way, for that matter. She can just let it drop and has no need to contemplate the image of him beneath the monster's claw or the terror that had driven her to attack it, or the moment they'd shared in the aftermath that had been a warmer echo of an exchange in a room hidden behind a painting. She isn't going to think about that. She is going to go to sleep.

She closes her eyes, and the image that fills her mind is his, again, on the stair. He's holding the flag to his side and she's sitting next to him, knee pressed to his. He tells her he's there for her. He tells her how awesome she was to drive off the monster, how amazing he thinks she is. And then she presses her thumb to his upper lip and wipes away the soot streaked there, and his brown eyes are so adorably confused, and the gap between them is narrow enough that she barely has to lean forward to—

Pacifica opens her eyes and stares at the canopy over her bed.

“Uh oh.”
Dipper has always, in the back of his mind, known that this moment would arrive. He knows too much about probability to expect otherwise. He and Mabel have done their best. They have lied a little, but mostly omitted, and it's worked better than they have any right to expect. Still, the tension has remained; that something would give was inevitable.

Now his old life is colliding with his new life (though he feels that maybe it's not his life that's changed so much as him). And he still can't tell the truth.

In retrospect, he really wishes that he'd planned the excursion better. Yes, it had been a surprise to get the call from Pacifica and it had been a very spur of the moment kind of thing (she'd sounded so desperate), but he still could have prepared for the aftermath. He and Mabel could have brought a change of clothes, maybe had Pacifica rent a hotel room for them in San Francisco so they could clean up before returning, thought of an excuse at least somewhat plausible. They'd gotten lost; they'd taken the wrong bus and ended up deep in Oakland somewhere and their phones had died. They were sorry, it wouldn't happen again, it was an accident.

Instead, Dipper is standing in the middle of the living room in the dead of night, frozen in place. Mabel stands beside him, equally still. He has a towel tied around his waist, beneath his shirt, under which is a wad of gauze and a lot of triple antibiotic ointment. They are both disheveled and filthy. There's blood beneath his fingernails and on his shirt and pants and he smells like a package of fake crab meat left out in the sun.

His mother is sitting on the couch. Her phone is in her hand, her face is pale, her mouth is pinched, and her eyes are furious.

Dipper's heart is resting somewhere around his shoes. His brain is running full speed ahead, trying to find an exit, but his gut is telling him that the words which can defuse the situation don't exist.

Mabel gamely tries anyway. “So, the craziest thing happened—”

“Where were you?” Their mother's voice snaps like a whip, and they both jump.

Dipper's mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. He's not ready to answer, he needs more time, he needs a better excuse—

“Your father is out looking for you right now. We called the police,” Mom says, her voice shaking. “You didn't call home, you didn't answer your phones, where were you?”

Mabel's hand is gripping the back of Dipper's shirt ever tighter. He can feel her eyes darting to his, searching for backup, something for her to work off of. “W-we were, um—” Mabel begins to stutter.

“Mabel Pines, don't you dare lie to me.”

Mabel's gaze falls to the floor, unable to hold their mother's.

Dipper realizes, then, what he has to do.
“Your father and I have been worried sick. Do you have any idea how worried we were? Did you think about that at all? We had no idea what happened to you!” Mom says, her voice rising. “Now you had better tell me where you were and why you are both such a mess, and it had better be the truth, or you can—”

“We went to help a friend!” Dipper interjects, cutting Mom's fear-based rage short. When her gaze zeroes in on him, he sighs and hangs his head. “We went to help a friend of ours. She needed help,” he mumbles.

Mabel's hand tugs at his shirt. She's clearly wondering just what he thinks he's doing. He wishes he could tell her to trust him, but he can't.

“What friend?” Mom says immediately.

“Her name’s Pacifica. We met her in Gravity Falls, but she lives in Malibu now.” Dipper shifts uncomfortably, aware of the needle he's about to thread. “She has, this… Her home isn't good. I mean with her parents, they're not… They're not like you and Dad.”

Mom doesn't look convinced, not yet, but he can see her softening slightly at the thought of a friend with an abusive family. “They hurt her?” she says, her voice more level.

Dipper rubs the back of his neck uncomfortably. “Yeah,” he says, and it's the truth but not in the way Mom is taking it (he hopes).

Mom raises a hand and drops it against her thigh in disbelief. “And you flew to Malibu? I know when you left, Dipper.”

“We flew there.”

“You flew?”

“They have a lot of money,” Mabel offers.

Mom stares at them. “Your friend got you a ride to the airport and flew you to Malibu, and then back, to see her.”

“Yes,” Dipper confirms. When Mom says nothing, he tries to explain further. “She was desperate. Things have been really bad lately. I didn't want to say no.”

Their mother takes a second to mull that over, and every passing moment makes Dipper sweat a little more. “And why, Dipper, didn't you tell us?” she says pointedly.

“Because she didn't want anyone to know. And I didn't think you'd let us go alone,” Dipper says, and it's also the truth.

Mom turns her laser gaze on Mabel. “Mabel, is this true?”

Mabel hates lying. She's accepted the necessity so far, but that doesn't change how she feels about it. Dipper is momentarily terrified that she'll be unable to lie to Mom directly.

Instead of answering, though, Mabel sticks her hand into her pocket and pulls out their plane tickets. She holds them out to their mother.

Mom briefly looks them over. “So you flew to Malibu, alone, without telling us.”
“We were worried about her,” Mabel almost whispers.

“Then you know how I feel!” their mother shouts, and the hint of tears in her eyes makes Dipper cringe and want to disappear. Mom takes a deep breath, settles again. “So you went to Malibu — without telling us — and then what? What's all this, why are you so dirty?”

Dipper has been letting his arm hang in front of his wounded side, hoping his mother won't see the blood in the dim light of the corner lamp. “She— her parents are still mad at her because they lost their house in Gravity Falls. And it wasn’t her fault!” he hastens to add. “…But, they blame her for it. There was something wrong with the basement at her new house and we helped her try to clean up so she wouldn't get in trouble again.” It sounds at least moderately preposterous to him as he says it, even though it's a good portion of the facts. “I know that doesn't sound like a big deal to you, but it was to her. We couldn't say no. We just couldn't.”

“She needed us!” Mabel chimes in. She looks to be on the verge of tears, and, although the sight is painful to Dipper, the most manipulative corner of his brain (the part he needs right now) knows her emotional anguish is a very useful display.

Their mother stands in silence for a long moment, a quiet that leaves the twins squirming internally. Finally, she says, “I'm glad you want to help your friends, but I am very disappointed you didn't explain this to me before you disappeared for an entire day. Now, we are not done discussing this, and you are both going to sit down with your father and I tomorrow and we'll decide what's going to happen. Understood?”

“Yes,” Dipper and Mabel both murmur, eyes downcast.

“Go get cleaned up, and go to bed. It's late.”

The twins rush upstairs.

Dipper suppresses his instinct to limp until he's safely out of sight. He ducks into the bathroom while Mabel starts to head to their parents' room to use the shower there. Before she gets out of reach, he grabs her wrist.

“Mabel, Mom didn't see the,” he bobs his head downward towards his injury. “I need a plastic bag or something, do you have anything?”

Mabel quickly runs into her room and then emerges a second later with an empty plastic bag from the hobby store. Dipper partially closes the door and then strips, stuffing his bloodied clothing and makeshift bandage into the bag and tying it shut. “Hide this somewhere!” he tells her, passing it back.

He showers with the best combination of speed and thoroughness that he's probably ever achieved in his life, gritting his teeth as the water runs over his open wound. He thinks it's probably bleeding again, at least a little. When he steps out of the steam he raids the bathroom cabinets for more antibiotic. There's no gauze that he can find, so he grabs the entire box of the biggest adhesive bandages, the square kind for skinned knees. He keeps his towel wrapped tightly around his waist and hurries to his room before anything can seep through the white cloth. Downstairs, he can hear his mother talking to his father. He practically sprints through his door in his haste not to draw attention.

As he'd suspected, the towel is now stained with red. One more thing to hide. He smears ointment on the wound again and then places a series of the square band-aids on it, overlapping them. Then he ties an old t-shirt around his waist, maintaining some pressure. It's not an ideal solution, and he
knows he's going to have one heck of a scar if he doesn't get stitches. He presses his hand to the wad of cloth and band-aids and holds it there, hoping it's all enough that he won't bleed on his sheets. It stings something fierce, but it really is just a flesh wound, like he'd told Pacifica. No major damage to muscle or bone. Probably. He's not a doctor.

Slowly, his mind begins to clear. He's sitting on his bed, shirtless, surrounded by band-aid wrappers, his heart pounding in his ears. His side hurts. He can't calm down. He's in so much trouble.

Mabel took his phone out of the pocket of his soiled jeans and tossed it into his room during her frantic rush to the other shower, and it's lying there on the floor. Painfully, he bends down and grabs it. He almost fumbles it; he hadn't been aware, but his hands are shaking.

He's not thinking clearly when he scrolls through his list of contacts and hits dial. But if anyone would know what to do, it's her, and she might be awake.

The phone rings and rings. He lets it, heart rate gradually declining as he awaits the voice mail.

Then there's a change in background noise. Rustling, and the intake of breath. “Hello?”

“Wendy?” Dipper says. “Are you awake? I mean, of course you were sleeping, I'm so sorry, I— I didn't know who call and I just—”

“Whoa, slow down, man,” Wendy says, voice husky with sleep.

“Sorry. I'm sorry.” Dipper is appalled to hear how thick his voice is. He's choking up, he's embarrassing himself. “I shouldn't have called.”

“Dipper, dude: It's totally cool.” More rustling, maybe as she sits up in her sheets. “You don't sound good. What's up?”

“I… I don't know where to start. It's been a really, really weird day,” he says, taking a deep breath.

“Hey, we've had some weird days together,” she reminds him. “What happened?”

Dipper falls back onto his pillow and the whole story pours out of him. “…And now my parents are probably going to ground me for a hundred years, and I just… I had to lie again. I don't know, did I do the right thing?” He sighs and rubs at his eyes. “I honestly don't even know if I should have left Pacifica. I'd be in even more trouble and she said I should go, but her parents are just the worst and what's she going to do?” He falls silent, one hand against his forehead.

Wendy has let him talk without interruption. He hears her shift again, and then she says, “That's pretty heavy, man. And that Boss-Lobster sounds like a serious monster. I wish I had been there so I could have tangled with it, too.”

Dipper smiles. “Really?”

“Dude, of course. I miss you guys every day. I can't say I've missed Pacifica, but, then again, I sort of knew her before she turned it around. But that's really cool she's still trying. Total respect for that.”

Dipper makes a small sound of frustration. “I just wish I could have helped more.”

“You fought a huge lobster for her, man; that is friendship. For real, though, you want my advice?”

“Yeah, always.”

“I can't say much on the parent front except keep your head down, like, all the way; run silent, run
I've never met your mom and dad, so you'd know better than me, but this sounds like one of those times you just gotta lay low. I guess I'm lucky that my whole family already knows all that weird junk. The fact that you and Mabel had to go back to where nobody knows that junk is like, mind-blowing to me. I think I'd go crazy in a week, tops.”

“Maybe we should have just stayed,” Dipper says, and it's hardly the first time he's had the thought.

“And I would have been so for that, but, your mom and dad, probably not so much. I can't tell you how to fix that, but I can tell you that you gotta take better care of that cut.”

Dipper looks down at his makeshift dressing. “Yeah, I guess it's probably not the best.”

“You gotta stitch that bad boy. If you can get the stuff, I can walk you through it.”

Dipper pales. “Can't I just let it scar?”

“You'll have a friggin' sweet scar anyway, man. At this point, it's just about healing right. If you're gonna be out there fighting monsters — and, dude, I know you're all about that — then this is part of it. You have to take care of yourself, Dipper. I can't have you coming back this summer all gangrenous.”

Dipper is still stuck on the part about doing his own stitches. “You really think I can do the stitches?”

“Hey, you're the toughest technically-a-teen ever. Although, Mabel is already crazy good with a needle, so maybe you should ask her.”

Dipper sighs and resigns himself to the future pain. “Okay, Wendy. I'll call you back when I get a chance and you can tell us what to do.”

“It's not that bad, I promise,” she says, and he can practically hear her crossing her fingers. “You went through the apocalypse. You're a straight boss: Don't forget it.”

Phrased like that, his day doesn't seem that weird by comparison. “Wendy, don't ever stop being the coolest.”

“Hah, no way. That's just how I roll, boiii!”

He lets her get back to bed and discovers that the conversation has calmed him enough that sleep seems attainable. Gradually, the aching of his side fades until he drifts away.
Being grounded is the worst.

It's almost March, and Mabel has been grounded for nearly two weeks. The restrictions are making her crazy. Wake up, go to school, go home, go to sleep. Wake up, go to school, go home, go to sleep. It's not that she doesn't have things to do at home or doesn't usually spend that much time there; she spends plenty of time working on crafts or homework in her room or playing games in Dipper's. But when all her activities outside the house are stripped away, it suddenly feels like too much time.

Really, it still wouldn't be that bad if it wasn't for two things: The regulations that are also on her at-home activities, and the atmosphere. Dipper's video game consoles have had their power cords confiscated and he has to leave his door open if he's on his computer to ensure he's doing homework. Still, Mabel could easily turn her room into a blanket fort or have a pillow fight with Dipper or start filming Mabel's Guide to Being Grounded, but both the twins know the more they visibly suffer, the quicker the punishment will be lifted. Running around having makeshift fun like they did so often at the Shack (although the Shack does offer so much more as a starting ground for the homemade kind of entertainment) isn't going to do their sentence any favors.

The first week after their trip to Pacifica's was especially tense. Mabel is pretty sure that Mom had used the internet to verify Pacifica's existence, though fortunately she hadn't made any attempt to contact the elder Northwests (if she'd succeeded, it could have only been a disaster). The twins are bearing the brunt of Mom and Dad's fear translated fully into anger.

The second week has been going slightly better. Mabel figures at this rate she will only have to mope around, appropriately penitent, for a few more days. And she is sorry, for real. But only that she's made her parents worry so much. She's not sorry at all that she and Dipper went in the first place (she keeps that to herself).

Actually, there is one thing worse than being grounded: Pacifica's sudden silence.

Mabel sort of knows where her parents are coming from because she is intensely worried for her friend. Dipper hasn't heard from her either, not a single text or phone call or email. Mabel doesn't want to think there's anything ominous about it as contact from Pacifica is generally sporadic anyway, but the timing is hard to ignore. It's not like they're just waiting to hear from her. Their texts have gone unanswered.

Which is why they're discussing it just before bedtime. Dipper is brushing his teeth while Mabel sits on the edge of the bathtub, the bathmat fluffy beneath her bare feet. She digs her toes into it, relishing the sensation. All carpet should be so long and soft, in her opinion.

“Maybe she got grounded like we did, but from her phone, too,” Mabel says. It's not the first time the suggestion has been made, but it bears repeating because it's the least worrying possibility.

Dipper spits into the sink and pauses before using his toothbrush again. “I don't know, Mabel. I bet she’s never had her phone taken away this long before.”
“I bet she's never disobeyed so much before,” Mabel counters.

“Yeah, that's why we're worried,” Dipper mumbles around the plastic handle of his toothbrush.

Maybe it's her frustration talking, but Mabel feels like things were simpler in summer. If she hadn't known what to do then Dipper probably had, and vice versa. The weirdness of the town was like a counterbalance to their youth; they had faced their own problems and conquered whatever the world had thrown at them. There had been no safety net, but it had been sort of freeing; they had risen to the occasion. Everyone had been equals in the face of the apocalypse. In Gravity Falls, being twelve hadn't seemed like much of a handicap. The dangers had been no less real for them than any adult.

Now they're back in the land of grownups, where they can get grounded and can't go where they want or make decisions that are taken seriously. Being technically a teen doesn't count for much in Piedmont, and Mabel doesn't know how to help Pacifica when she can't even reach the other girl.

Well, at least Mabel can address a problem closer at hand. She stands and walks past Dipper to peek out into the hallway. Assured that both her parents are nowhere nearby, she turns back around and tugs at the hem of Dipper's shirt.

“Let's check on my masterpiece,” she says.

Dipper obligingly raises his arm. He's been diligent about doing his laundry lately, partially as a means of ameliorating Mom and Dad's wrath and also to ensure he doesn't have to fall back on any of his older, smaller shirts. He's taken to wearing two at all times, tucking his undershirt into his pants. No one has commented on it because it's not new: He'd started the two-shirt habit on returning from Gravity Falls to hide the marks of Weirdmageddon (Mabel's usual taste in clothing had already been camouflage enough for her). He's had to explain away some things; most notably the oddly even dotted scars on his forearm, which he'd told their parents were from a run in with an old fence. Mabel knows they are actually from silverware.

She lifts his sleeping shirt to reveal the long, red and rainbow gash along his hip. It's rainbow because she had refused to use boring old black thread (Dipper still isn't thrilled about it). Mabel has stitched many a varied thing in her time, but she'd never stitched a person before. Wendy had walked her through the suture process and taught her how to make surgical knots. It hadn't been that hard, at least on Mabel's end: By the time they were finished Dipper had been pretty pale. He is stuck with over-the-counter painkillers, though.

“Some of my finest work,” Mabel says, observing the healing wound. “You should've let me monogram it.”

Dipper pulls his shirt back down. “You're not stitching your name into my side,” he tells her.

“Not with that attitude. I think it's a little better,” she says optimistically. They've been disinfecting it every night, just to be sure.

“Great,” Dipper says, sounding relieved. “Good thing Wendy knows all this stuff.”

“You weren't too happy about it then,” Mabel recalls.

Dipper jams his toothbrush back into his mouth with determination, no doubt staving off memories of the day they'd treated his injury. “I'd like to see you sit still through that,” he grumbles through a mouthful of foam.

Before Mabel sutured the wound closed Wendy had told her to sterilize the inside and make sure there wasn't any debris about to be sealed in. Mabel had examined the interior of Dipper's hip with a
q-tip and a flashlight while he'd sweated and clenched his jaw until his teeth ached. It hadn't been the best experience, but their diligence is paying off. The edges of the cut are turning a healthier pink.

Mabel lets Dipper's shirt go and trots back to the bathtub, reclaiming her perch. There still hasn't been any decisions made about the other business at hand. “What if we sent her a letter?” Mabel suggests.

“If she's not allowed to talk to us, she's probably not allowed to write to us,” Dipper reasons.

“So let's be sneaky!”

They spend the next day after school devising a complicated subterfuge in which they put an envelope with their actual return address inside another envelope from a fake Piedmont business and send it to Pacifica in the hopes she'll know anything she gets from Piedmont is from them. Success mostly hinges on her having access to her own mail, but it's the only thing they've thought of that might work short of the twins going to Malibu in person (which would by necessity involve stealing a credit card or two from their parents, representing a level of Trouble with a capital T that leaves both of them fearful of even imagined repercussions). All in all, Mabel must admit it's a long shot. She brainstorms a few fake company names with Dipper (they settle on Tyrone-Wompers Manufacturing Concern) and then goes to bed planning to filch a few envelopes from a kitchen cabinet when she gets home from school tomorrow.

Fortunately, it all becomes unnecessary the next morning.

Mabel awakens to find a text message on her phone, received late the previous night. It's from Pacifica.

**Pacifica: My parents took my phone my mom just left again and I found it in her room**

Mabel texts back a quick reply asking if Pacifica is okay and then rushes to tell Dipper. He has the same message, worded slightly differently. Mabel watches her phone diligently during the bus ride to school and checks it on break between classes. Her anxiety ratchets up a little notch every time she sees there's no answering message.

Just after lunch she's sitting in Biology, scribbling down notes and some drawings of Waddles driving a race car when her phone begins to vibrate in her pocket. She reaches under her desk and slides it out just enough to see the caller name: Pacifica. She shoves it back into her pocket and sticks her arm up into the air, waving it wildly enough to garner the teacher's attention.

“Mr. Broich, can I use the restroom?” she asks the second he turns towards her.

“I should hope so, otherwise you'll turn yellow and die,” he says with amusement, which is always his groan-worthy response whenever someone asks if they 'can' go to the bathroom instead of if they 'may' go to the bathroom. Normally Mabel will play along enough to laugh or exclaim 'oh no!', but this time she takes his implied acquiescence and runs with it, practically sprinting out of the classroom.

She's too late to answer the phone call by the time she reaches the shelter of the bathroom, so she locks herself into a stall and calls back. She paces in a very small circle while it rings.

Finally, an answer. “Mabel?”

“Pacifica!” Mabel says, relieved. “Are you okay?”

Pacifica sounds tired, but there's also some sharp anger buoying up her words. “No, I'm not okay! My stupid parents took my phone away. Isn't that, like, child abuse?”
Mabel should want to laugh and agree that yeah, it's totally messed up and a girl needs her phone, but it's hard to take amusement out of it when Pacifica is outraged about being grounded from her phone but hadn't thought much about being conditioned to fear a bell. Sometimes things just aren't funny in a different context. Mabel attempts a halfhearted giggle, but it feels wrong. It's like she's laughing at Pacifica.

“I looked in my mom's room until I found it, she's not very good at hiding things,” Pacifica is saying.

“So you got grounded,” Mabel assumes.

“I guess. They found out you guys were here. I think they went through my phone!” Pacifica sounds like she can't believe anyone would do that. “Won't they let me have anything for myself? Ugh! I had to tell them about the whole Boss-Lobster crud.”

Mabel winces sympathetically. “Uh oh. How'd it go?”

“Horribly. First, Dad was all, 'that Pines boy brought it here', which is a total load. I tried to tell them that you guys just came to get rid of it, but they weren't even listening to me. Mom told Dad that the monster came because he'd sided with Bill and started that whole argument up again. I just sat there while they screamed at each other about the same stupid junk. It's always the same,” Pacifica says tiredly.

She sounds so sad and lifeless that Mabel's heart aches in empathy. “Did they say how long you're grounded for?”

“I bet Mom doesn't even remember she took my phone away. I don't know. They wouldn't stop fighting so I just left.”

“So… maybe you're not grounded?” Mabel says, attempting to put a hopeful spin on things.

“I think they know I went to Piedmont. They didn't say anything about it, but I think they do.”

Mabel is trying very hard to find an upside to any of this. “Tell you what: Me and Dipper will probably be ungrounded pretty soon. Could we come see you?”

“Mabel, you got grounded for coming to see me,” Pacifica says with an unspoken 'duh'.

“Only because it was a secret! Mom and Dad can be reasonable people,” Mabel says confidently.

Pacifica sighs. “Well, mine can't.”

“Okay… compromise! What if you fly us to Portland? I've always wanted to go to Portland!”

“Maybe I should just do what they want. Be a perfect Northwest again,” Pacifica says quietly.

Mabel slumps against the side of the stall, disappointed. “Come on, Pacifica. Don't give up,” she pleads.

Pacifica huffs out a short, unamused laugh. “After what happened last summer, I don't think I can change back all the way even if I want to.”

“We'll figure something out,” Mabel pledges. “Just stay in touch, okay? Don't forget about your friends!”

Pacifica's breath audibly hitches. “Okay.”
Mabel wants nothing more than to stay and keep Pacifica on the line, but she knows she's out of time. “Darn it, I have to get back to class.” Which brings her up short for a moment, because it's a school day, so, “Wait, Pacifica, where are you?”

“I didn't go to school,” Pacifica admits.

Mabel gasps. “Did you actually get lobster cooties?”

“No. I just don't feel like going.”

“But, what about your grades?”

“Oh, sorry, Dipper. I thought I was talking to Mabel.”

Mabel has plenty of arguments to make about that (including the end-all argument of the horror that is summer school), but she really does have to get back to class before she gets in trouble. “You'll be hearing from him about it, believe me. You'll be hearing from both of us, about everything, all the time! Keep your phone on! Don't get grounded! Text me if you see any more Boss-Lobsters!”

“Later, weirdo,” Pacifica drawls, but Mabel is happy to know her well enough now that the valley girl edge that comes back into her voice is actually a comfort.
As the calendar rolls over into the first weeks of March, Dipper is relieved to no longer be grounded. The catch is that he's also wary of embracing that relief too much because he feels like it's probably just a matter of time until he's grounded again.

He's been thinking about that a lot, lately. His theory concerning how anyone at Weirmdageddon ground zero had possibly been affected has gained some circumstantial evidence in the form of a Boss-Lobster, but two events don't constitute a pattern. Regardless, it's his own patterns that he feels will drive him to once again incur his parents' wrath. Even if he can't find any anomalies to pursue, there's still Pacifica.

One night, during a video game session, Mabel had expressed her thoughts on how in Gravity Falls they had been free in a way they aren’t in Piedmont. She had a hard time articulating exactly what she meant and at first he’d thought she was just talking about the lack of a real bedtime, or their ability to wander off into the woods whenever they’d pleased (both of which had more to do with Grunkle Stan than the town itself). But when he thinks about Pacifica, he understands what Mabel had been getting at. What would they have done about her situation if they were all still in Gravity Falls? Probably go to Northwest Manor at night, grappling hook up to her window and break her out. Grunkle Stan would have given them a ride if it meant he got to participate in some light B&E.

Gravity Falls is a world unto itself. Consequence is different there; actions are abstracted. Quentin Trembley had kept himself alive in peanut brittle stasis for a hundred and fifty years — Dipper is certain that wouldn't have worked anywhere else in the world. Weirdness permeates everything, shifting expectations, making the abnormal mundane. It's part of the reason why he thinks Bill was telling at least a partial truth when he’d fooled Ford into building a portal. The abnormalities of Gravity Falls go beyond the attraction of oddities.

Now Pacifica is hundreds of miles away and stuck with her parents, just like every other thirteen-year-old. Dipper has no power anymore, no Journal 3, no tricks up his sleeve. He can't buy his way into Pacifica's circles with an exorcism. He's just another helpless kid with a friend in a bad home situation. Gnomes and ghosts seem simple by comparison.

It frustrates him. Even now, he can't quite put into words precisely how things were different in Gravity Falls. But they were. And he can't help but think he'd have the means to help Pacifica if only they could all go back.

Man. He just can't concentrate on Journal A. He's finished his homework for the night and is trying to make some additions to his rendering of the Boss-Lobster (he's not the artist that Grunkle Ford is) but his mind is stuck on Pacifica. And he had thought life back in Piedmont would be boring, gray and stress-free. Well, it's boring sometimes (mostly thanks to school) and gray in comparison to the local color of Gravity Falls, but it's been anything but stress-free. His new life and his old one aren't sitting together comfortably. They clash and grind where the seams meet.

His phone buzzes against his desk, breaking him from his thoughts. He sets down his journal and hops off his bed, hoping it's Pacifica, or Mabel with news from Pacifica (something good for once, maybe). Instead, it's an unknown number. He frowns at it dubiously for a moment and then decides he might as well answer it, even though it's probably an automated sales call.
He picks up the phone. “Hello?” he says, expecting a pause and then a woman's voice telling him he's won something that doesn't exist.

The voice that comes through is fuzzy and distant, but its gruff timbre is instantly recognizable. “Dipper? That you, kid?” Grunkle Stan says.

“Grunkle Stan!” Dipper's heart leaps in his chest. He begins excitedly pacing without realizing it. “How is this— where are you calling from? Are you back in the States?”

“Nah, not yet. My nerdy brother rigged up some satellite connection for us. Still can't get HBO, though. Go figure.”

“That's awesome! Oh, man, I have so much to tell you, you won't believe what happened!”

“This have anything to do with some kind of freaky—” a short pause, “—Boss… Lobster? Ford's going through your emails right now. What the heck is a Boss-Lobster? That a new seafood chain? Just so long as it's not a rebranded Rouge Lobster. I'm not allowed in those anymore.”

In the background, Dipper can hear snatches of Grunkle Ford talking excitedly. “—a sort of anomalous crustacean, perhaps a small Kraken variant! Ask Dipper about its features, how large was it exactly—”

“Hey, wait your turn, Sixer! I'm talking to the kid right now. And speaking of which, what did I tell you about being careful?”

“We took precautions!” Dipper protests.

“Yeah? And how much did you leave out of that email?”

Dipper avoids the question. “It's not like the other times when I went hunting, this anomaly found us. It was in Pacifica's basement and we had to get rid of it.”

“Pacifica? The Northwest kid?” Grunkle Stan sounds surprised. “I could have told you she was bad news. Did you at least have the decency to wreck her place like you wrecked mine every time you found something 'anomalous’?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Dipper admits. “But she's not bad, Grunkle Stan. She's been having a really hard time. Her parents are all messed up after what happened.”

“Hold on, give me a sec to dry my tears. Oh, wait — I'm not crying, I'm laughing! Ha ha ha haaaa!”

“Stanley,” Grunkle Ford says warningly.

“Give me a break, Ford. You only met them for what, a minute, tops? Believe me, they deserve everything they get.”

“Yeah, well, Pacifica doesn't!” Dipper says loudly.

“Whoa, Dipper. Take it easy, I can hear you,” Grunkle Stan says. “I know you and Mabel sorted some stuff out with the Northwest kid, but since when were you guys all buddy-buddy?”

“She lives in Malibu now, and she came to see us a couple times and she needed our help, and it's kind of a whole big thing,” Dipper says. “But we're friends. And she's really tried to change, but her parents are the worst and they're breaking up or whatever and taking it out on her. We've been trying to help her, but we don't really know what to do.”
“My advice: Stay out of it."

Dipper clenches his free hand. “So we're just supposed to ignore her? Weren't you listening, she's our friend!”

“I didn't say you had to ignore her. But what are you going to do? Mess things up with her parents even more, help her run away or something? Dipper, take it from someone who knows: It's better to stick around where you get three squares a day, even if it's with a mom or pop who don't like you much, than to try to make it on your own.”

“She's not on her own. She has us,” Dipper argues.

“Okay, tell your mom and dad that she's staying with you from now on. See how that goes over.” Grunkle Stan sighs. “You're still a kid, kid. There's only so much you can do. You know what happens if she leaves or gets kicked out now, right? The state will stick her in foster care because that's the law. How do you think Ms. Ponies and Peacocks will deal with that?”

Dipper thinks of Pacifica, smoke-streaked and terrified, surmounting the Boss-Lobster and driving her torch into one of its beady eyes and says, “She'd do better than you think.”

Grunkle Stan makes a sound of exasperation. “Sometimes I don't know why I try to get through to you.”

“Sounds extremely familiar,” Grunkle Ford says in the distance.

“Heh. Yeah, I guess it does,” Grunkle Stan says with barely concealed fondness in his tone. “Anyway, where's your sister at?”

“Hold on! That means it's my turn,” Grunkle Ford quickly interjects. There's the sound of the satellite phone changing hands, and then Ford's voice comes through much more clearly. “Dipper! I just finished reading your email. What a find!”

“I know!” Dipper says excitedly. “I couldn't believe it when I saw it! You've never seen one before?”

“No, never! Gravity Falls has freshwater anomalies, but nothing like what you described. Perhaps I should have ventured to the ocean sooner. Stanley and I have seen a few interesting creatures near anomaly zones so far, but most of them have been cephalopods. 'Boss-Lobster' — interesting nomenclature. Brings to mind King Crab, or perhaps even Tyrannosaurus Rex.”

“It was really Mabel who named it,” Dipper says.

“I'll be sure to tell her I approve. Now, your missive said that you directly confronted the creature?”

Dipper runs through the story, doing his best not to embellish anything (in the name of scientific accuracy). Although, when he gets to the part about nearly getting his head snipped off he does gloss it over a little bit. No need to underline that little failure.

“Your hip injury; it's not serious?” Ford interrupts to ask.

“Mabel stitched it up. We called Wendy, she told us how to take care of it.”

“She's a truly self-sufficient young woman. And remarkably talented with an axe; I could have used her assistance a time or two in my earlier years. Almost flattened myself, once, while attempting to build a lean-to. Anyway, glad to hear you weren't badly hurt.”
Dipper finishes his tale with Pacifica's dramatic attack, emphasizing her courage over the fact she'd had to do such a thing because Dipper had been an idiot. He isn't sure if he's getting away with it, though. Grunkle Ford is astute enough to read between the lines.

“A shame the creature had to be wounded to drive it off,” Ford muses once Dipper finishes. “Still, it was what had to be done. And this is the same girl you were talking to Stanley about, correct?”

“Right, Pacifica. She got in a big trouble because of the Boss-Lobster, though,” Dipper says.

“Sheer nonsense. She can hardly be blamed for the feeding habits of anomalous beasts,” Ford scoffs.

“Her parents… aren't the best.”

“Yes, I gathered from what I heard before. I remember them vaguely; they were there during our ill-fated attempt to utilize the prophecy. They did strike me as rather unpleasant people, even at the time. It's good to hear you've befriended their daughter, especially if she's trying to better herself.”

“She is, but her parents aren't making it easy,” Dipper says.

“Then she's lucky to have friends like you and Mabel. I'm certain you've already helped her more than you realize.”

Dipper doesn't really know whether to believe that or not, even if he wants to. Instead, he shifts the conversation towards an easier topic. “So, I had an idea why the Boss-Lobster might have been there to begin with.”

“Oh?” Grunkle Ford says with interest.

Dipper lays out the vague framework of his inchoate theory, from the initial exposure to weirdness to the effects they might be carrying with them. He knows his evidence is sparse and stresses that he's not drawing any conclusions.

“An interesting concept,” Grunkle Ford says when Dipper is finished. “You may be on to something. I'm sure you remember my little demonstration of the Law of Weirdness Magnetism. Do you recall what I told you about Bill?”

“Yeah, you said that he told you the weirdness came from another dimension, like a leak. But you said he was just tricking you into making the portal for him,” Dipper says.

“And so I believed at the time. However, after Weirdmageddon I must admit that I'm beginning to doubt that assumption. Many of the anomalies I'm seeking appeared as a direct result of the breach, but, if I'm reading the data correctly, I don't see any reason why such dimensional tears couldn't be naturally occurring on a smaller scale.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about it a lot,” Dipper says excitedly. “I know Bill would have said anything to get you to build the portal, but if his lie was that believable after all the research you did, then…”

“Then why would he lie at all, if the truth served just as well?” Ford concludes. “I suspect there was an element of truth to a great deal of what he told me. Certainly, the portal worked just as he claimed it would: He simply refrained from describing the destination! His realm exists in the dividing spaces of the multiverse, a sort of unstable dimensional crawlspace. Now that we've directly connected to it once, I can't help but wonder if the dividers are that much more permeable.”

“So it's, like, both. Gravity Falls attracts all the anomalies from here, but can also bring in stuff from… outside, I guess.”
“The more I study these anomalies, the more I think it is indeed some combination of the two. I can think of a few tests we could do to try and get some better confirmation. As far as your Theory of Personal Weirdness goes, we'd have to alter my current equipment; at the moment I'm using it to locate large-area dimensional anomalies, primarily through measurements of minor gravitational and magnetic distortions. It's not sensitive enough to be used on a single person, but, perhaps it could be… Something to consider. If a town can anchor a weak spot in the dimensional membrane, or be a lodestone of Weirdness Magnetism, then why not an individual?”

“Well, I mean, there may be a lot of reasons why not,” Dipper says uncertainly.

“Of course, of course. Nothing is concrete. But science starts with an idea, Dipper. What's left to us now, is to test it! What's that?” Grunkle Ford must be talking to Grunkle Stan; he goes momentarily muffled. “Ah, yes. As much as I'd love to continue in this vein, Dipper, my brother and I would like to talk to Mabel while we have the chance.”

Dipper is slightly disappointed, but he won't deny Mabel the opportunity to talk to her Grunkles. “Okay, hold on.”

He opens his door and steps across the hall. Mabel's door isn't fully closed so when he knocks it slowly swings open. She's on the floor with Waddles; all around her are the pictures of the Shack from Christmas. Judging from the ones laid out on the paper she's making a project based on their attic room. She looks up curiously when Dipper enters.

He holds out his phone. “It's Grunkle Ford.”

Mabel leaps to her feet in a shower of fluttering pictures and snatches the phone from his hand. “Grunkle Ford!” she says euphorically before the phone is even in place. “Sooooo, how's the monster hunt?”

Dipper can dimly hear Ford chuckling as Mabel twirls away. “We've found a few things; though nothing as bad as a unicorn!”

“You find any sea-unicorns, you sock 'em one for Mabel!”

Dipper reaches down and picks up Waddles so the pig can't chew on any of the pictures while Mabel is distracted. He settles on the edge of the bed and watches Mabel's very animated half of the conversation. He only wishes she could be having it in person.
It's Thursday evening and Mabel is wringing every last possible second out of her conversation with Grunkle Stan.

“So then what happened?” she presses.

Grunkle Stan’s stories are almost always deliberately vague and at least partially fabricated (no doubt the legacy of a life spent in questionably legal pursuits). She had begun her summer in Gravity Falls pretending to be interested in them, humoring her strange old relative. Now she’s milking him for every anecdote he's got, just to earn one more minute of his voice coming across the miles of separation.

“Well, brainiac over here was telling me that we had to get up on the iceberg, but it's a freakin' iceberg!”

“Come on, Grunkle Stan: You're a great climber!”

“Maybe when you kids don't give me a choice,” he grunts, but she can tell he's amused. “Climbing a scaffold is a little different than climbing a chunk of floating ice.”

“Sounds like a job for a grappling hook!” she says, imagining herself being there to save the day with her grappling skills.

“Yeah, if only some little gremlin hadn't taken mine.”

“I'm an adorable gremlin, and you weren't even using it! You said I could take whatever I wanted. It's not my fault I'm great at picking out gifts.” She rolls over on her bed and props her feet up on the headboard. “Where did you get it from?” she asks, having found another avenue of conversation.

“That old thing? It was, uh… Huh.” Grunkle Stan goes silent.

The smile is instantly wiped from Mabel's face. Even before Grunkle Ford had discreetly made mention of it she had started to suspect that Grunkle Stan's recovered memory isn’t as complete as it might have been. He's never misremembered anything from the previous summer: From the moment the twins arrived to the moment they left, he's recalled every major event and plenty of little things, too. The years just prior to their arrival also seem mostly filled in. But the decade-plus between leaving New Jersey and arriving in Gravity Falls is patchy, at best.

Stan has spent the majority of his life alone, without any close family or confidantes, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly what he's missing. The summer can be easily corroborated, an extremely memorable three months for all involved. The thirty years managing the Shack is probably full of forgettable repetition and gaps anyway, regardless of the erasure; Soos can help with roughly a third of that time, and some of the locals with major town events (and the Shack itself is crammed with a million bits of memorabilia). For his childhood, he has Ford. But the years Stan spent on the road, alone and on the run? Much of it is lost, and they'll never be able to know just how much.

Mabel immediately regrets steering him towards that hole in his past. At the same time, there's a
hopeful part of her that wonders if it might make him remember something. “ Doesn’t matter — it’s mine now!” she says with forced cheer.

“If there’s one thing you two are good at, it’s helping yourselves to my stuff,” Grunkle Stan says, shaking off his momentary lapse easily enough.

“But you have all the best stuff!” she counters. “You have a dinosaur skull for a cup holder. That is so cool and so ominous!”

“Heh. Yeah, I’m pretty hip for an old man.”

Somewhere in the background, Mabel can hear Grunkle Ford. “The kids don’t say ‘hip’ anymore, Stanley. Even I know that.”

“Can it, Ford!” Grunkle Stan pauses for a moment. “Alright, looks like we’re ready to move again.”

“Wait! Let’s talk some more about your stuff! Don’t you want to tell me all about how your back hurts again? How do you feel about the current political climate? What’s your opinions on today’s youth fashions?!” she says desperately.

“You know me too well, Mabel, but I gotta go. I’ll call you later, pumpkin.”

“Byeeeeeeeee——” she says, holding the note until the phone goes dead.

She goes limp and lies there, arms extended and feet propped on the headboard. It’s always hard to hang up (which is why she lets her Grunkles do it). She’s not really despondent or anything; they’ll call again soon. But she planned her entire after-school day around that call and now that it’s over, she has to think of something else to do. And it’s not going to be homework because it’s Thursday and she doesn’t have anything due until the middle of next week.

She lifts her phone up and scrolls through her messages, just in case she’s missed something. She’s been extra diligent with her texts lately; she doesn’t want anything from Pacifica to go unseen and she makes sure to reply quickly. Pacifica hasn’t been very forthcoming about her situation recently. Her texts are either brief and lacking in detail or only interested in what Mabel and Dipper have been doing. Mabel knows Pacifica must be lonely, but she hopes that the worst problem Pacifica faces besides that is boredom.

Which is definitely what Mabel is facing, at the moment.

She groans loudly and slowly slides off her bed, approaching the floor by a centimeter at a time until her legs finally succumb to gravity and crash to the carpet with a thud.

“Mabel? Was that you?” Dipper calls out from his bedroom.

She groans even louder by way of response.

Her door swings open as Dipper peeks in. “Are you actually hurt, or are you just being dumb?”

“So bored,” she says piteously. “Will to live… leaving.”

Dipper sighs and walks over to her desk chair, which he slouches into. “Grunkle Stan had to go, huh.”

Mabel knows she isn’t really bored, not in the technical sense. There’s a million things she could be doing, and she’s always been great at providing her own entertainment. But what she wants to do is
talk to her Grunkles some more. And she can't. Hence, boredom.

Dipper takes off his hat and runs a hand through his hair. “I actually have something we need to talk about.”

His tone indicates that the topic, whatever it may be, will not bring the fun. Still, it's better than nothing. “Go on,” Mabel says into the carpet.

“Great-Uncle Ford was asking about Mom and Dad. He said he'd like to come see them with Grunkle Stan, especially since he's never met Mom.” Dipper pauses. “Hey, do you remember Grandpa?”

Mabel thinks about it for a second. “No, not really,” she says.

“Yeah, me neither. Grunkle Ford didn't say much when I told him that, but I thought he sounded disappointed.”

With a jolt, Mabel suddenly realizes that she's never thought about Grandpa and Grunkle Ford. Grandpa had passed away when she'd been too young to even remember what he looked like, beyond the pictures of him she's seen. Grunkle Ford has been gone for so long that he's come back to find himself a brother short. Had they been close? Mabel doesn't think so from what she knows, but, then again, what she knows mostly relates to Grunkle Stan. Stan had been estranged from pretty much everyone in his family save for Mabel's father — although, by the time Dipper and Mabel were in elementary school their father was just about the only family Stan had left. Even then, the twins hadn't gotten to know Stan well until they were twelve.

Vacations and holidays have always been nuclear-family affairs. Mom is the only child of a single mother and Grandma lives in Florida, so the twins don't see her very often. Grandpa Shermie had been divorced twice and neither of his wives had been the mother of Mabel's father, which is information that Mabel has mostly pieced together from overhearing things, as neither Mom or Dad seem willing to explain just how Grandpa had come to have Dad (Shoot! Mabel should have remembered to ask Grunkle Stan — he would have told her even if it was sketchy adult stuff!). The Pines don't have much in the way of extended family. Mabel doesn't have a single cousin, at least not any that she knows about. It's never bothered her, though, because she's always had Dipper.

“Dad has another uncle and we haven't told him,” Mabel laments, pillowing her face on her arms. “We're the worst.”

“We kind of are,” Dipper unhelpfully agrees.

Mabel doesn't want to be the worst. “How do we tell them, Dipper? Use your smartness!”

Dipper's brain fails to rise to the occasion. “I don't know. There's no good way to do this; if we make something up, we'd have to talk to Grunkle Ford about it first, anyway. Our stories have to match.”

“I thought we could stop lying,” Mabel says.

“Well, even if we don't lie, maybe Grunkle Ford won't want us to talk about the portal. Maybe it's better that nobody knows about it but us. It's just too much, Mabel. Remember when I first found Journal 3? Even you thought I was nuts until Jeff tried to grab you! Gravity Falls, just…” Dipper shakes his head helplessly. “It just doesn't make sense. Not anywhere else. Only there.”

Mabel turns her head until her cheek is on her elbow. From her position on the floor, her eyes are close enough to the carpet that it stretches away like a great beige plain, half out of focus, the door looming in the distance as a dark-grained horizon. Each little individual carpet piece is detailed,
unique; fuzzy, frayed cylindrical grass. Dipper's socks are knitted white hills. She is a giant looking through the vision of someone smaller, a microscope reversed. Up close, the familiar is suddenly alien and new. It makes her think about perspective.

Dipper is right about the portal: They have to talk to Grunkle Ford before they even think about mentioning that to anyone. As for other, more miscellaneous aspects of weirdness, they aren't entirely without evidence.

“We could prove some of it,” Mabel says, rolling over until she can see her closet, where her scrapbook is safely stored away. “I've got pictures of Octavia and the Shack robot and we still have the tapes from your guides, right?”

Dipper's face gets very apprehensive. “Do you really want Mom and Dad to watch us almost get eaten by the tooth-island?”

“Okay, so not that tape,” Mabel allows. “Although that will be denying them some hiii-larious Bear-O hijinks!”

“So it's a win-win.”

Dipper just isn't capable of appreciating Bear-O's sophisticated appeal. “We could show them the little naked man,” Mabel says, ignoring him. “He wasn't dangerous. Unless you were made of candy.”

Dipper makes a face. “No, but he was naked. I don't know if that's what we want to lead with.”

“Then what do we want to lead with?” Mabel says, raising her arms and letting them drop with a thud. She made the suggestion and she isn't even sure it's a good idea at all.

“Well… Grunkle Ford already said he wants to see Mom and Dad…” Dipper says hesitantly. “Maybe we should just let him do it?”

Mabel knows that would be dodging any responsibility, but she is still relieved at the thought of leaving it all up to the grownups. “It was his portal…” she muses.

“And he knows what he wants to say and what he doesn't. We just have to follow his lead,” Dipper rationalizes.

“Yeah! Good ol' Grunkle Ford, being a hero.” Mabel relaxes for a moment, and then sits upright and turns to Dipper. “We aren't still being the worst, are we?”

“Not the worst,” Dipper says immediately. Then he slumps in his seat a little. “…But definitely not the best.”

Mabel collapses again. “We're dumb jerk-faces with butts for hearts.”

“I never thought about any of this when we were there. I was so caught up in everything…”

Mabel thinks of her unsent letter, lost in the tumult that destroyed the Shack. She's always thought it was a good thing she never had the chance to mail it, but maybe it would have at least forced a conversation. She doubts the results would have been positive, though. She's just not sure if it's better to maintain a lie and live with the guilt or reveal the truth and suffer the consequences.

The consequences, however, could easily involve not being allowed to return to Gravity Falls. And she can't have that, the weight of her guilt be damned.
“We'll wait and see,” Dipper says into the silence, sounding like he's trying to convince himself as much as her.

“Okay,” Mabel sighs.

It's not like they aren't already used to waiting.
Dipper can't sleep.

It's Friday night so it's not a huge deal, but he's tired and really wants to sleep. He's lying on his back and trying not to think about the constant, low-level sting emanating from his side. It's keeping him from moving or getting comfortable and it won't die down enough for him to ignore it. Plus, it also itches like crazy; so he's got that going for him, too. Fantastic.

Mabel removed his stitches a couple hours prior with a pair of nail clippers and a lot of patience. It wasn't the most pleasant experience, though it's still a distant second to getting the stitches. Still, the wound is oozing slightly and bothering him all over again. It had taken a bit, but eventually the stitches had only hurt much if he accidentally bent the wrong way, tugging at them. He'd become used to standing with straighter posture and avoiding leaning to the side. Now the stupid things are gone, but it's not an improvement. He's got a sock taped to his hip to keep any pus from spotting his sheets. It's soft, clean cotton and it's still unbearably abrasive against the irritated skin. He wants to tear it off and knows he shouldn't. So, he doesn't, and just thinks about it instead of sleeping.

He sighs. It's going to be a long night.

Then he squeezes his eyes shut in frustration when his phone begins buzzing against his desk.

"Really?" he mutters.

He grits his teeth and slowly pushes himself up, swinging his legs off the bed. He would have been inclined not to answer it if he didn't have two Grunkles in a very different time zone. He manages to get to the phone just in time and grabs it without looking at the screen.

"Hello?" he says. He makes a fist with his free hand on the desk to avoid trying to scratch his injury through the sock bandage.

At first, there's no voice. He can hear what sounds like the rush of cars on a nearby road. Then he hears someone's breath; it's wavering, unsteady. He pulls the phone away from his ear just long enough to glance at the screen. It's Pacifica.

"Pacifica?" he says slowly.

"It's me," she says, her voice thick and trembling. She is clearly distraught.

Dipper gets a sinking feeling in his chest. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't answer right away. Her breath comes slower, as if she's trying to calm herself. "I, um," she begins tremulously. "I d-don't know what to do." She is audibly suppressing tears.

He hears what he thinks is a passing truck. "Pacifica, where are you?"

"I don't know." She sniffs. "It's by a hotel. I don't know, I've been walking for hours, I think."

Oh, man. This sounds serious. "What happened?"
She doesn't answer for long enough that Dipper begins to fear she's going to hang up. When she finally speaks, he notices how hoarse she is. “My dad came back today. He and Mom got into this big fight about something stupid that doesn't even matter.” She swallows and makes the short intake gasp of someone who can't breathe through their nose. “I tried to ignore them but I, like, sorta lost it. I tried to make them stop and they…”

Dipper's blood runs cold. “They… Did they hurt—”

“No. No,” she denies. “But he brought the bell out. He kept ringing it and ringing it and it was so hard, but I wouldn't. I wouldn't,” she says, and it comes out like a sob but there is still anger in every word.

“I know. You beat it before,” he says. Though he had been literally petrified at the time, he still knows roughly what had happened.

She takes a deep breath. “…I grabbed it from him,” she says, half triumphant, half disbelieving.

Dipper says nothing, but his gut is roiling with tension. That can't be how the story ends.

“And then I threw it. And broke a vase.”

He isn't sure whether to congratulate or sympathize.

“He was so mad. Mom just stood there with this look on her face. Like she had no idea who I was.” Pacifica sniffs again. Her voice has slowly been losing power over the course of the conversation and Dipper now must strain to understand her. “Dad said 'if you won't obey me then you won't live under this roof'. He was… still yelling but that's all I r-remember. I just ran. And then I walked forever and I didn't know where to go and I called you because I d-don't—” her voice breaks.

Sympathize, definitely. “Okay.” He just breathes for a moment, not actually sure what to say after that. “…Okay. Where are you right now, are you safe?”

“I'm at a bus stop by a motel. On the bench.”

Dipper carefully seats himself in his desk chair and boots up his computer. “Can you see the address for the motel?”

“It's by the highway.” There's some rustling, probably as she looks around. “Yeah, I see it.”

She tells him the address and he plugs it into an online map database. “Okay, I found the place.”

“I can't go back! I just can't,” she interrupts before he can offer directions back to her house.

“Pacifica…”

“I'm not going back.”

Dipper takes a moment to consider the dilemma. He knows the rational, adult thing to do is advise her to go back to her place now that her parents have probably cooled off. The problem with this is twofold: He's not sure her parents are going to cool off, and if it had taken her that long to walk to where she is, it will take equally long to walk back and it's already late. The second 'adult' option is to have her call the cops. But what will that accomplish? They'll either take her back home or child services will get involved. Dipper might not have cared to hear Grunkle Stan's advice concerning Pacifica, but that doesn't mean the old man hadn't been right in a lot of ways. Dipper isn't sure invoking the authorities will result in any desirable outcomes. More to the point, he doubts he can get
Pacifica to call the cops in the first place (or forgive him if he does).

Alright, alright. One thing at a time. He needs to address one problem at a time.

First problem: Pacifica is out alone at night.

“Do you have a credit card?” He’d feel stupid asking that of pretty much any other kid he knows.

“All I have is my phone,” she says. “I told you, I just ran.”

“Darn it. Okay, um…” Dipper wracks his brain. “I’m gonna try to help you, but I'll have to call you back. Okay? Just stay right where you are, don't leave the bus stop.”

“I don't have anywhere to go, that's the entire deal!” she snaps.

“I know, I'm just saying. I'll call you right back, I promise.”

Her short burst of temper fades in the face of his imminent disconnection. “You promise,” she says shakily.

“Yes, I promise. I have to call someone else, I'll try to hurry.”

When he hangs up he sits there for a moment, trying to wrap his head around what's happening and what he's trying to accomplish. It's not like he has a lot of favors to call in or anything. He thinks of his mom’s purse, downstairs on the kitchen counter, and the credit cards contained therein. Oof. He'd be grounded forever. Those are his last resort. Instead, he looks at the clock. It's a little past midnight, which means it's probably sometime in the early morning wherever his Grunkles are. He's always waited for them to call him, per Grunkle Ford's request. But this is an emergency.

He dials the number and waits for the lengthy connection process. He's relieved when it begins to ring; he wasn't sure it would work.

A click from the other end, then what sounds like an engine running. “Yes? Is this Mabel or Dipper?” Grunkle Ford says, raising his voice over the noise.

Dipper's tension eases slightly; he's reached the right Grunkle (Grunkle Stan would help, eventually, but Grunkle Ford is less likely to argue about it). “Grunkle Ford! It's Dipper.”

“Dipper? Hold on a moment. I'm below deck, it's hard to hear you.” Gradually, the engine noise fades and then dims further with the sound of a shutting door. “Are you still there?”

“Yes, I'm here! Grunkle Ford, I—”

“Shouldn't you be sleeping? Hah! Not that I can talk, eh, Dipper? Quite a pair of night owls, we are,” Grunkle Ford is already saying before Dipper can continue. “You caught me at a good time, actually. I was just checking the oil levels before I prepare for the day. Something on your mind?”

“Yes, I— I actually need your help, and I know you said it would be better if you called us, but this is sort of an emergency.”

Ford's voice turns serious. “An emergency? You aren't injured, are you?”

“No, it's not me, it's Pacifica. Pacifica Northwest, me and Mabel's friend?”

“Of course, I remember. What seems to be the problem? More Boss-Lobsters?”
“I wish. No, I actually need you to rent a motel room for me. I mean, not for me, for her.”

“A motel room… Ah. This has to do with her parents, I take it,” Grunkle Ford says grimly.

“Yes, and I'll totally explain everything later but I promised I'd call her back as soon as I could. Can you do it? Please? I'll try to pay you back when I can, I don't know when—”

“Dipper, it's alright. Say no more,” Grunkle Ford says gently. “I trust that this is important. Let me grab my personal computer and you can walk me through it. The last time I rented a motel room you had to do it in person, or at least have a phone book handy.”

“Thank you so much, Grunkle Ford,” Dipper says with utter relief.

“You're quite welcome. I'll be interested to hear the outcome of all this later. Now, how do we use the internet to acquire a motel room?”

“Okay, you'll need the address and just searching for that should get you to the site. What we need is a confirmation code, like a customer number, that I can text to her so she can show it at the check in.”

“Seems this has become a more complicated transaction since I've been gone,” Ford observes.

It takes a little longer than Dipper would like to get it all done over satellite connection, but at last he has confirmation of the room rental in his inbox. He forwards it to Pacifica.

“Okay, I've got it all,” he tells his great-uncle. “You're the best, Grunkle Ford.”

“I'll tell Stanley you said that,” Ford chuckles. “Just be sure to let me know what happens. And tell Pacifica to stay safe.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

When Dipper hangs up the sudden silence is deafening. It's like he's been all over the place, just sitting in his room. The stillness is unreal when he knows that Pacifica is out there somewhere, in the night, alone and desperate. She's in the same state and yet so far away. All he has is his phone and his words to help her. No journals, no crossbows, no grappling hooks. A monster would have been easier. What's wrong right now isn't something that can be defeated, just… handled. Coped with.

He rubs at his eyes, trying to shake off the sensation that he's treading water. Has he really helped Pacifica at all? Things have only become worse. It's out of his control, he knows that. It's just so frustrating to admit this is something he can't solve.

At least he can tell her she won't have to sleep on a bench tonight. He picks up his phone to call her back.
When Dipper dials Pacifica's number she answers on the first ring.

“Dipper?” she says.

“Okay, I think it's all set,” he tells her. “Check your email, there's a room rented for you and I sent you the receipt.”


“It's nothing,” he says awkwardly. “You should get some sleep.”

“Wait, don't go!” she says quickly. “Or, I'll call you when I get to the room.”

Dipper still needs to figure out what the next step is. “Um, how about I call you in a bit? I have to make some more calls.”

“What are you doing?” she says apprehensively. She has to know that a one-night rental is a very temporary solution.

Dipper has absolutely no idea what he's doing. But he doesn't think it'll help her state of mind to hear that. “I'm figuring some stuff out.”

“I still won't want to go back in the morning, if you're thinking that,” she informs him.

He sighs. “Pacifica… You know you're going to have to go back sometime.”

“Well it won't be tomorrow,” she says stubbornly.

Dipper doesn't want to argue with her. He knows she's not trying to be ungrateful (she doesn't really have to try; she's been trained to be ungrateful by default). But she's exhausted and scared and angry and all of that is in her every word, though he's sure she's doing her best to hide it on her face.

“I'll call you back,” he tells her.

“You'd better. …Please,” she says shakily. “Okay, I'm going to go inside.”

“You'll be fine. Just show the guy the stuff from the email.”

As soon as she's off the line any pretense of confidence falls away. Dipper is in over his head. Grunkle Ford was the only card he had to play. What now? Convince Pacifica to go home in the morning? It seems like the smart thing to do. It also seems like a really cruddy thing to do.

The truth is, Dipper doesn't want Pacifica to have to go home. It sounds to him like she needs to get out of her house, if only for awhile. But how? Even if her parents don't object (and it seems like they actually won't, at least for the foreseeable future), and even if she had a place to stay, there's still school to consider. What can he do?

He's tired. He can't think. He's used up all his moves. He needs… some second opinions.
He finds himself dialing Wendy as if on autopilot.

She answers quickly and it's apparent she hadn't been asleep. “Dude, are you ever gonna call me at a decent hour?” she says teasingly.

“I know, my timing sucks,” Dipper says with a tired laugh. Somehow, just hearing Wendy's voice grounds him, brings him back to center. She's so unshakeable that it steadies him, too.

“Don't worry about it, I'm just watching some lame movies. Kinda wish you were here to dump on them with me. It's just not the same by myself; I need my movie bro.”

“If only we got Gravity Falls Public Access down here. Terrible as it is, I miss it.” Dipper rubs at his cheek. “Actually, Wendy, I called because I've got another problem.”

“Yeah, I figured it was something like that,” Wendy says nonchalantly. “Lay it on me.”

Dipper runs through the sad state of affairs, from the first call to now. He sketches Pacifica's situation lightly, knowing that she won't like him talking about it; Wendy can fill it in easily enough. “So now she's in a motel room all alone and she won't go back to her parents. And, honestly, I can't really blame her.”

“No doubt. Thing is, Ford's cool and all, but even he's not gonna spring for a Malibu hotel every night.”

“I know. She has to go back, or... She has to leave, somehow. Maybe I could get her a cab? Mom and Dad might let her stay at least a few nights, there's still school to worry about, but—”

“One thing at a time,” Wendy advises.

“Yeah, that's what I told myself. The motel was the first thing. Now, I just want to... I don't want to leave her there, Wendy. I know it's crazy, but I just can't stop thinking that she's my friend but also, part of the crew, you know? Agh...” Dipper digs the heel of his hand into his left eye. “Does that even make sense?”

“No soldier left behind, man,” Wendy says sagely.

“Yes! Exactly.”

“So, what you're saying is,” Wendy says slowly, “you want to mount an Epic Rescue Mission.”

When she puts it that way, Dipper realizes that's precisely what he wants, even though it's completely insane. “Against all logic... yes.”

Wendy scoffs into the receiver. “Logic is overrated. I say, use your gut, man. Or your heart. Or your heart-guts.”

“My heart-guts are telling me this is messed up,” Dipper says.

“Truth. But you remember what I said right before you left?”

Dipper thinks back to the bus stop and that moment so bittersweet he can still make himself shiver with the memory. “…That I mean a lot to you?”

“That's right. You mean a lot to me; and if Pacifica means a lot to you, then all this messed up biz means a lot to me, too. So do you trust me?”
“Of course,” he says, confused.

“Cool, ’cause I got a plan. I'll get back to you in the morning.”

“Uh, okay. Yeah, I'll be here,” he says.

“Just hang tight, okay?”

Dipper stares down at his phone for a second after the call ends, wondering what Wendy has in mind. He hopes her plan works out, whatever it is, because he just doesn’t have one. And he doesn't want to call Pacifica back and tell her that. But he did promise.

This time, Pacifica picks up before it even has a chance to ring on his end. He can imagine her sitting there, staring at her phone in a strange motel room, waiting for the only anchor she has. “Hey,” he says. “How’s the room?”

“It's okay, I guess,” she says, which is more diplomatic than he was expecting from her. Then she continues, “It's not really dirty or anything. Whoever chose this wall pattern should be fired, though. And the bedspreads are so tacky. Can I tell the servants to change them? Maybe something in cerulean…”

Dipper rolls his eyes. “It's a motel room, Pacifica. You're lucky it's nice at all.”

“I didn't say it was nice.”

He knows she's had a horrible day, but she's not an easy person to be patient with. “It's better than a bus stop bench, isn't it?”

“It is better,” she says with a note of apology in her voice.

Dipper is really tired and is pretty sure he can sleep, now, regardless of his hip. But Pacifica has never stayed in a hotel that isn’t as nice as one of her houses, so Dipper ends up walking her through some of the basics. She reluctantly fills a bucket with ice (“Ew, the ice goes in this trash can?”) and asks at the desk for some miniature bottles of shampoo and a toothbrush. Eventually, Dipper is silently nodding off while she critiques every inch of her temporary residence. After she repeats herself a few times and then starts talking about aspects of the room that are actually acceptable he realizes that she's just trying to keep him on the phone. She's upset and lost and alone in a motel room, and he has become her only connection.

“Dipper? Dipper!”

He jolts back from the edge of sleep, fumbling his phone. “Yeah, I'm here.”

“You're not even listening!” she accuses.

He closes his eyes again; it's too hard to keep them open. “Pacifica, it's late. You need to try to sleep.”

“…What if I can't?”

“You walked a really long way today; I bet if you lay down you'll fall asleep.”

He can hear her climbing into bed, sheets rustling and mattress squeaking. “But you'll call me in the morning, right?”

It suddenly strikes him as strange that he's listening to her get into bed while he's also in bed. Talking
late on the phone is one thing. This feels… intimate? It's like the staging for a movie scene Mabel would love. He feels like he should stand up while he's talking to her, as if she'll know or that will somehow be more appropriate. Ugh. He's being weird again. It's just like before: She's all messed up and needs his help and he needs to not be weird about it. It's just a phone conversation. It's not like they're in the same bed or anything, even though they sort of are in a vicarious sense… (no they aren't and he needs to cut it out).

He just can't shake the thought that there's some kind of line being crossed, even if he can't define it.

“I'll call you before check out time,” he tells her, “and we'll figure out what to do next.”

There's a sort of settling sound, soft and muffled, and when she speaks again her voice is closer to the speaker, lower and breathy. He thinks she's lying on her side, phone cradled between her head and pillow. “You've already done a lot,” she says.

He knows what she's thinking, and as useful as her guilt has been to drive her changing of self, he's not going to let it turn him away. “You're not going to get me to stop, so don't go all Northwest on me. If you didn't want to have friends, you should have changed your mind sooner 'cause now you're stuck with me.”

“So this really is the worst,” she says, and she's aiming for snark but she's too close to tears.

“You remember when we suited up and went in the Gobblewonker tubes?” he says.

“You think I can forget?” she says incredulously.

“Yeah, it was nuts; but we were a team. Pacifica, it doesn't have to end there, that doesn't have to be it. Things may not be as weird out here, give or take a Boss-Lobster, but they're still really hard sometimes. So why not… stay what we were? Why should we have to let go of each other, just because we have to be far away? That's stupid. I don't want to. Do you?”

“No,” she states, voice shaking with suppressed emotion.

Just hearing her so close to the edge is making his eyes prickle. He swallows hard and digs his fingernails into his palms until he thinks his voice will be steady. “Then we won't. And tomorrow, I'll talk to Mabel and we'll call you and we'll make it work.”

It's not as elegant as it sounded in his head, but he thinks he got the point across. They had, all together, built something amazing in Gravity Falls (and not just figuratively), and he doesn't think it's fair to just let it go. He won't without a fight.

Her breath shudders over the line. “Okay.” Then, before he can say anything more, “Can you not hang up, just, not. Just stay?”

He puts the phone on speaker and sets it on his chest. “Get some sleep, Pacifica.”

She doesn't answer, but her breathing gradually steadies and then slows. Dipper can feel himself sinking in time to each exhale, until he floats away.
Dipper is still approximately between sixty and eighty percent asleep. But there's an absolutely maddening noise that keeps bringing that number down, jolting him upwards towards consciousness every time he starts to sink again. He's so tired that he tries to ignore it, his subconscious dragging its feet on the inevitable climb to waking.

The sound persists.

Finally, he opens his eyes. He's lying on his back in his bedroom; his feet are cold, his hip itches at a nearly unbearable level and something is loudly pinging off the glass of his window. He doesn't know what to address first and would much rather go back to sleep, all things considered. Then something hits the glass that's big enough to rattle the entire pane. That wakes him up fully, adrenaline spiking.

He sits up, wincing as his hip twinges, and gets on his knees to look out the window. Just as his head is level with it a rock flies upward and bounces off, making him flinch. There are little white patches of dust all over the glass from multiple impacts. He peers down at the driveway.

Wendy is backing away from the garage. Her hand is cupped around what is no doubt another rock, foraged from the decorative planters that flank the garage door. Behind her, Soos' new truck is parked at the end of the driveway.

Dipper rubs at his eyes to make sure he's not still asleep. But, nope, there's Wendy. And she's about to break his window. He waves his arms frantically until she sees him. She extends her thumb and pinky in the sign for phone and then spreads her arms in a 'what the heck' manner.

Dipper turns back around to get his phone from his desk, but it's not there. Belatedly, he remembers that he'd fallen asleep with it on his chest. He finds it tucked in the folds of his sheets:

Unsurprisingly, the battery is dead. No wonder Wendy is chucking rocks. Who knows how many times she's tried to call him already.

He goes back to the window and holds up a finger; Wendy nods her understanding. He hurries out into the hallway and tries Mabel's door. It's unlocked; Mabel is wrapped in a cylindrical pile of sheets like a brown-haired burrito. Rather than waste precious time trying to wake her, Dipper grabs her phone from her desk and returns to his room.

Mabel's phone is set on vibrate and she has four missed calls, all from Wendy. Dipper dials Wendy's number and watches through the window as she answers. “What up?” she says, gazing upwards at him.

“What's going on?” he says.


He has so many questions. “But, how did you— why—”

“Dude, I'll totally explain, but we gotta roll. Get Mabel and get your butt down here so we can jet.”
“I—…” Dipper swallows his confusion and decides that it's easier to just go along with it. Besides, is he really going to argue against a road trip with Wendy and Mabel? An illegal road trip, since Wendy can only have a learner's permit, if that? …Actually, that's something he needs to address. “You didn't drive down here on a learner's permit, did you, because you could really get in—”

“Dipper!” She cuts him off exasperatedly. “Come on, man, just trust me! Let's goooooo!”

“Okay, okay! But I gotta get Mabel and tell my parents and brush my teeth.”

“Skip the teeth, I got like ten liters of Pitt in the back.”

Dipper jumps off the bed and opens his closet, throwing together an outfit as quickly as possible. He pauses just before leaving the room and then doubles back. He takes his vest off the back of his computer chair and tucks Journal A into it. Maybe it's just nostalgia, but he thinks that if he's going anywhere with Mabel and Wendy then he should have his journal.

He grabs his phone charger, hoping Soos' truck is compatible with it, and then goes back to Mabel's room. He doesn't have the time to wait for Mabel to be her usual recalcitrant, sleepy self, so he puts his hands on the bundle in which she is ensconced and shakes her until she starts to protest.

“Go away. I'm a snore-ritto,” she groans.

Dipper knows that will last right up until he finishes his sentence. “Wendy's outside right now and we're going to Malibu to help Pacifica.”

For about two seconds, Mabel is completely still. Then she springs out of her wrapping, sheets and pillows flying in every direction. She sits on her knees, hair wild and eyes wide. “Are you kidding?”

“No, now get ready!”

Mabel raises a pillow threateningly. “If you're messing with me I'll bop you into last week!”

“Go look out my window if you don't believe me! Get dressed, Wendy's waiting!”

He leaves her in the midst of a whirlwind of clothing and goes down the hall. He stops in front of his parents' door and steels himself. He knows that lying would be the easiest thing to do, but he's hoping honesty will earn him some points, especially as he was grounded not that long ago. Besides, it's not like he has a convincing lie. He thinks the truth might be better than anything he could come up with, considering it's such short notice.

He slowly opens the door and peeks inside. His parents are still asleep, of course. He debates his best course of action, then whispers, “Mom?” When that gains no response, he goes slightly louder. “Mom?”

Dad doesn't stir in the slightest (he's always been a heavy sleeper; if any parent is going to wake up and get the twins in trouble, it's always Mom). Mom shifts in her bedding, rolling onto her back. “Dipper?” she says groggily and rises onto her elbows. It's always kind of weird to see her with tousled hair and no makeup. It's like she's more vulnerable, somehow; less of a Mom with a capital M and more of a person.

“Hey, um, so me and Mabel are going to be gone today,” he says, not really holding out any hope that Mom's sleepy enough to just accept it.

“You're what?”
“We're going to be gone today. It's this whole thing and we're kind of in a hurry—” he says, inching the door shut.

“What do you think you're doing?” She's awake now. She throws off her sheets and grabs her robe from the chair next to the bed.

Dipper considers fleeing for about half a second. If Wendy left the truck running… Sanity prevails, and he steps away from the door to wait in the hall.

Mom comes out bundled up in her robe. He's momentarily disoriented when he realizes she isn't glaring down at him anymore, and when did that happen?

“What do you mean, gone today?” she says, one eyebrow arched in question.

Dipper is acutely aware that Wendy is waiting. He tries to explain quickly. “It's Pacifica. She's… in trouble, and she called me last night and I told her I'd try to help. Wendy drove down here and we're going to Malibu to make sure Pacifica is okay.”

“Oh, really, you're going to Malibu again,” Mom says sharply. “Who is Wendy?”

“Another friend we made in Gravity Falls,” Dipper says. Such an inadequate descriptor. A 'friend'. What do you call someone who would have died by your side?

Mom crosses her arms. “Dipper, I don't understand. What are you going to do in Malibu?”

“I… It's complicated.” He tries to explain, but he really doesn't know how. It only makes sense when he thinks about Pacifica, not when he thinks about the situation. “She called me after her parents kicked her out or something and she needs us. I can’t…” He wants to punch himself in the chest until the words come out right. What can he possibly say? How does he justify an impulse he doesn't really understand but knows in his heart is what's right? “I can't let her be alone. I can't just stay up here and pretend that she's going to be okay, I need to do something.”

“She bought you another plane ticket?” Mom asks.

“No, Wendy is driving us down to Malibu.”

“And when do you think you're coming back?” Mom says sternly.

“Tonight? Probably?”

Mom stares at him for agonizing moment of silence, and he can't tell what she's thinking. “I want to talk to Wendy before you go anywhere,” she says at last.

“But, she said we had to—”

“You can wait five minutes for me to get dressed. Now go brush your teeth and change that shirt, it's obvious you slept in it.”

Dipper can see the plan crumbling right before his eyes: Specifically, the moment Mom meets Wendy and realizes that the older teen has illegally driven six hours on a learner's permit. Ignoring the order to change his shirt, he rushes downstairs and out the front door. The morning air is cool and damp and the sun is almost blinding after the dim indoors. Wendy is leaning against the side of the truck. When she sees him, she grins.

“Hey, there he is! Long time no see,” she says, arms open for a hug.
“My mom's coming out to talk to you and you drove here illegally and we're screwed!” he stammers.

Her arms drop exasperatedly. “Dude, I told you to trust me.”

“I do! My mom, not so much, maybe…” He winces. “Not after this.”

Wendy rolls her eyes. She takes a few steps to the side and then opens the smaller door in the back of the cab, revealing a blanket-shrouded lump. Dipper doesn't know what he's looking at until he realizes the lump is A: Breathing, and B: Wearing a baseball cap.

“Oh, it's Soos,” Dipper says when recognition sets in. Then his eyes widen. “Of course! Then you could dr— Wendy! I never should have doubted you.”

Wendy twists her lips sheepishly. “Okay, full disclosure: I actually went to the Shack just to borrow his ride, but he wouldn't let me go without him.”

“Well, sure, you had to have an adult with you.”

“Yeah, I don't think he knew that.” She shrugs, and then opens her arms again. “Come on, man: Don't leave me hangin’.”

Dipper accepts the hug, wrapping his arms tightly around Wendy. He almost expects the old thrill to come surging back at the shock of contact, but he finds it muted, pushed aside by a deeper fondness. It's not that he no longer finds her attractive: Wendy is awesome and gorgeous and always will be. It's just that it doesn't matter the way it used to. The necessity, the desperation, the unarticulated urges; he's left them somewhere behind, littering the ground of months past. That's not what he needs from her, anymore. Friendship is all she's ever offered, and he's come to understand how priceless that is. It's more important to him that she just be important to him.

His eyes are now even with her shoulder, which is kind of weird. She seems to think so, too, because she pushes him back and looks him over.

“Dude, someone got beat with the puberty stick,” she notes.

He backs awkwardly away, not sure if that's a compliment. “Lucky I'm so used to beating. To taking a beating! Uh…” He slaps his hand against his face. “Can we just, pretend I didn't say that…?”

It's entirely too late for that, of course — Wendy is already laughing uproariously at his Freudian slip. And that has to be how his mom finds them, with Dipper's ears turning red and Wendy leaning against the van, cackling.
So, now Wendy is still trying to stop laughing and Mom is approaching and this definitely isn't the first impression Dipper had wanted to make when it comes to Wendy.

And that's partly because he knows he made a mistake with Soos. Soos showed up out of nowhere and the twins had run off with him and Mom and Dad hadn't known what to make of it. Dipper and Mabel hadn't offered much in the way of explanation. And some of that was their secrets, but some of it was also because, to them, it is self-evident. They take it for granted, now, that Soos is an integral part of their lives and always will be. Mom and Dad don't know that. How can they? How can they know that Wendy, too, is someone that Dipper considers to be such a cornerstone?

Dipper wants to make it a little clearer, as much as that's even possible, what Wendy means to him. It's important to him that Mom knows Wendy is… well, important to him. And this surprise encounter in the driveway isn't the controlled circumstance he desires. It's just started and it's already out of his hands and he's already messing up his words (nothing Wendy isn't used to, at least).

So… yeah. He'd hoped for a more crafted introduction. But this is what he gets instead, and he has to roll with it. If only he was as good as Wendy at rolling with things. Driving all night on a moment's notice to help someone who, to Wendy, is barely an acquaintance just because Dipper wants to isn't something an ordinary, temporary summer friend would do.

Mom looks at Dipper's blush and then glances towards Wendy, who straightens up and is doing her best to stop laughing. “You must be Wendy,” she says with a slightly arched eyebrow, and Dipper hopes she isn't drawing any incorrect conclusions about the two of them.

“Hi, Mrs. Pines,” Wendy says, holding out her hand. “Yeah, I'm Wendy Corduroy.”

Mom takes the offered hand lightly. “So,” she says, expression neutral but her tone a bit stern, “Dipper says that you're driving to Malibu?”

“Oh, no, not me,” Wendy denies. She jerks a thumb in the direction of Soos' slumbering form. “Soos is gonna drive the rest of the way.”

Mom relaxes slightly at the sight of the man, probably glad there's going to be some actual adult supervision (which makes Dipper thankful that Mom doesn't really know Soos). She hands Wendy a piece of paper that's been torn from the notepad by the kitchen phone. “This is our home number and our cell numbers. You can call us if there's a problem.”

“Will do, Mrs. Pines,” Wendy agrees, pocketing the note.

Mom turns to Dipper. “I want you to be careful, and I want you to behave yourself for Wendy and Soos and watch out for your sister.”

Dipper can see Wendy grinning widely behind his mother; she's clearly tickled by the idea that between her and Dipper, he's the one who needs to be told to behave. Dipper can't correct Mom without shooting himself in the foot, so he keeps his mouth shut. If Mom thinks Wendy and Soos can
be responsible, he's not going to disabuse her of the notion.

“Okay, I will,” he says.

Mom tugs his cap backwards a bit, so she can see his face more clearly. She puts her hands on his shoulders, then moves one to cup the side of his jaw. “I don't know what you got up to last summer, but I know you're growing up. I wish you’d talk to me about it. But I'm glad you made such good friends, and I'm glad you're trying so hard to help them. And I'm proud of you. Don't you know that?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Dipper says around the lump in his throat.

Mom squeezes his shoulder and then kisses him firmly on the cheek, making him blush even more (in front of Wendy? Aw, man…). Then she releases him and says, “I thought I told you to change your shirt.”

Mabel comes tearing around the corner of the house at full speed. She skids to an ungainly halt when she sees Mom in the driveway with Dipper and Wendy. She's probably thinking their trip was just canceled courtesy of parental supervision, because she looks crestfallen.

Mom turns and beckons. “Give me a hug before you go,” she says to Mabel. “Be good and watch out for your brother.”

Mabel doesn't question it. She throws her arms around her mother and squeezes hard before scampering towards the truck. Dipper notices she's wearing the same purple sweater with the repeating outlines of pine trees that she wore on Grunkle Stan's ill-conceived revenge road trip. He hopes their current expedition won't follow a similar path. He doubts there are any spider-people in Malibu (they probably can't afford to live there). As long as they don't encounter more Boss-Lobsters, all should be well.

“Try to be back before tomorrow,” their mom says. “Don't you have time to pack anything else?”

Dipper has nothing on him but his phone charger, his dead phone and the clothes he's wearing. Mabel has one of her many cloth purses, but it looks like she's filled it with cookies and snack cakes.

“It's cool, Mrs. Pines,” Wendy says. “We've got food and junk in the truck. Better wake Soos up,” she says to Mabel, indicating the rear seat.

Mabel gets a running start and leaps onto Soos' slumbering form. “ROAD DOGS!” she howls.

“Mabel!” Mom yelps, appalled by what appears to be an assault on a sleeping innocent. “What on earth—”

“It's fine: She did this all the time when he fell asleep on the porch couch,” Wendy explains as Soos comes to life with a startled shout.

“Still,” Mom says, watching as Soos curls into a protective ball, snorting with laughter as Mabel pokes at him, “she can't just jump on people, she could have hurt him.”

Which she accidentally had on a couple occasions, as Dipper recalls, though Soos isn't one for grudges.

“Alright, road dogs!” Soos says, raising both hands for a double high five with Mabel still crouched on his stomach. “Yes!”
“Soos, you're up, man,” Wendy says, rapping her hand against the edge of his shoe. “I'm gonna sack out. Cool?”

“On it, dude.” Soos awkwardly scoots out of the truck on his back until he's able to rock forward and set Mabel back on the asphalt. “I could really go for a breakfast burrito. What about you dudes?” he says as he rubs sleep from his eyes and walks around to the driver seat.

“I was a breakfast burrito!” Mabel tells him as she climbs into the cab. “See, I wrapped myself in all my sheets—”

Dipper tunes them out when Wendy speaks to him. “I'm gonna be all laid out in the back. You think you can cram into the front or do you want to be my footstool?”

There had been a time, not so long ago, that Dipper would have jumped at the chance to be her footstool. Now, he's content to let her sleep. “I was in front when Soos came to visit before, we all fit pretty well. You can have the back to yourself.”

“Sweet. Wake me up for food and rest stops or if there's something really cool; like, if they're filming a movie or whatever.”

“What if it's a lame movie?” Dipper says.

“Okay, only if you see a helicopter or a car crash or pyrotechnics,” Wendy amends.

“Got it.”

Dipper is the last one into the truck. He closes the door with a bang and waves to his mom who's standing at the edge of the garage, still in her robe and slippers. She waves back. It's nice to have the approval, but it also sort of feels like the end of something. For most of his life, Dipper wasn't waving goodbye to anyone on road trips. It was him and Dad and Mom and Mabel. There was no one standing on the walk, watching them leave. But this time he's with a different sort of family, off to help another new friend. Everything changes, he supposes.

He watches as Mom disappears around the corner of the house and knows she'll be there when he gets back. So, maybe not everything.

For the first hour or so of the trip they keep it down so Wendy can get some sleep after driving all night. But after a few incidental moments of loudness (not to mention Soos accidentally hitting the horn) fail to stir her, it becomes apparent that Wendy is as unflappable in sleep as she is in waking. They still don't go crazy but feel freer to converse.

The GPS stuck to the dashboard drones out directions for a while as they're leaving Oakland. Soon, though, the robotic female voice falls silent; they're on the highway headed south and it's pretty much a straight shot to Malibu.

Mabel and Soos don't have difficulty passing the time. “Soos: You're alone on a desert island and you can only have three kinds of ice cream from an infinity ice cream pond. What are they?” Mabel says.

Soos sweats like he's on the witness stand. “Only three? Oh, man… Man, I don't, I don't know…”

“Soos! You're dying of ice cream deficiency!!”

“Okay, okay! Uh, um, definitely cookies and cream, gotta stick with the classics. And then brownie batter, for when I get sad. And the third one… I can’t do it, I can’t choose! Who could ask this of
any man?"

Dipper, for his part, tries to write in his journal. He's still in the process of transcribing the photocopied pages of Journal 3 and has been adding a lot of his own notations to them based on his experiences during Weirdmageddon. Grunkle Ford had been thorough, but also unable to field test some of his assumptions. In the wake of the dimensional rift, much of his guesswork has been either confirmed or debunked. Dipper has a number of new observations regarding Eye-Bats and their previously unseen larger form.

He puts his pen to the page and jots down a few words, carefully considered. It's slow going, for two reasons. The first is that he's getting more carsick by the second and it's just a matter of time before he'll have to roll his window down and let his head loll out. And the second reason is that his mind is very much preoccupied with Pacifica.

He checks his phone as soon as he plugs it into the truck, but she hasn't sent him any messages. When he calls, it goes straight to voicemail. Maybe her phone is dead, too. As much as she may have needed the comfort of another presence — no matter how distant — the night before, it hadn't been the smartest move to leave their phones on. He can't bring himself to regret it, though. Not if it helped her.


He presses his forehead to the glass and then cracks the window, hoping the thundering of the wind won't wake Wendy. He's still worried about Pacifica, but for the moment he'll concentrate on not painting the inside of Soos' truck with whatever's left of yesterday's dinner.
Pacifica is floating. Above, there is a riot of color clashing in the split seams of a sundered sky. Below, there is an ocean, so dark and terribly deep; and yet, she knows there is something in the water, something that wriggles and clacks and pulses with hunger. She is caught between the two horizons, gliding on the edge of a knife. If she closes her eyes, she falls. If she opens them, she rises. She is neither awake nor asleep. There is no decision she can make which will save her. Somewhere behind, a triangle is laughing, and she feels the tips of her fingers begin to go numb.

She turns her head to look. Her fingernails are gray. It isn't until the pallor reaches her wrists that she realizes she is turning to stone. As she twists her neck, her trajectory twists as well. She spins out of control, growing heavier. Her heart stops beating. She falls and falls and the waves rise up to meet her, and in the foam she sees a single glinting claw—

She thrusts her arms out, gasping. Her pillows tumble to the floor as she fights against her tangled sheets, panting in desperation. She has no idea where she is. She freezes, searching for movement in the corners of her eyes.

Gradually, her vision adjusts. She's in a strange room, on a bed that isn't hers. A motel, her mind foggily supplies. Dipper helped her. She's safe.

For how long remains to be seen. Not that she's in any danger, so to speak. Not physically, anyway. Technically, she hasn't been kicked out: She ran away. Maybe before she had been ejected from the household, but, still, it had been her decision. If she can even call that a decision. She has difficulty recreating the pattern of her thoughts in that moment, the force that drove her from the room and out into the city. 'Distraught', would probably be the word. It's fitting, to be sure.

And her dream; that bizarre imagery, the wild immediacy of it, the utter terror. Some of it makes sense, bits and pieces of her life scattered in the seething swells of her fevered imagination. There was a part of her that knew she was dreaming, even as it happened. She can remember being faintly aware of her surroundings, but their unfamiliarity only seemed to feed the unease suffusing her sleep. The pillow was raspy against her cheek; the sheets brushed against her ankles, fluttering lightly over her skin in the wafting air of the ceiling fan. Her mind stayed elsewhere, deep inside herself, battered by the nightmare that kept her careening through the tempest of her unconscious.

She still feels trapped. She can hear cars and trucks passing on the highway; the sound of the fan is different from the one at home. It's lower pitched, slower spinning. The whole room smells like cleaning products, sterile and slightly acrid. This isn't home. But, where is? A mostly empty house on the beachfront? A historic mansion in the middle of a vast forest? One is hollow, the other is out of reach.

What's left, really?

She nearly jumps out of her skin when there's a rapid series of knocks at the door.

Her parents? No. No, it can't be. Not that they even would. The staff, probably. Don’t they know not to disturb their guests? She supposes she shouldn't expect anything else from such a middling establishment. They'd better not be looking for any tips (she has literally no money, anyway, not that
they need to know that).

More knocking. She pulls her jeans on irritably, still shaky from her nightmare, and makes her
unsteady way over to the door. She opens it, hoping to get rid of whoever it is in as short amount of
time as possible.

Before she can even register the view something excited and brightly colored flies into her. She
raises her arms in self-defense, but it's too late: Mabel has her caught up in a tight hug.

“Pacifica! You're okay!” Mabel says.

Dipper is standing out in the hallway, hands jammed awkwardly in his pockets. “Geez, Mabel, you
didn't even look. You could have hugged a stranger.”

“And it would have been a great start to their day,” Mabel says, finally stepping back.

Pacifica is stunned. She had been prepared to brush off the help, not be confronted by the Pines. “M-
Mabel? Dipper? What is going on?”

“We came to rescue you!” Mabel says. “Come on! Wait—” She sidesteps Pacifica and grabs all of
the extra plastic ice bags off the dresser. “I'll get the new ice for the cooler. Pacifica, get dressed.
Dipper, don't watch.” With that, she tears off down the hallway.

“Shut up, Mabel,” Dipper mutters after his sister, shoulders hunching in embarrassment. He rubs the
back of his neck and looks at Pacifica. “Sorry. She's been drinking soda the whole way down. So,
uh, are you alright? I saw you didn't text me.”

“My phone died,” Pacifica says, feeling a bit chagrined. It had died because she had been so weak,
afraid to spend the night alone in an unfamiliar place.

“Yeah, mine too,” Dipper says, patting his pocket. “Guess we could have planned that better. You
slept through your checkout time.”

“My what?”

“Your checkout time. Like, when you're supposed to leave? Grunkle Ford is going to get charged for
a second night,” he says.

Great, now she's even more in someone's debt. Like she needs something else to be embarrassed
about. “How was I supposed to know that?” she snaps.

“Because they told you?” Dipper supposes. “Or, you know, the sign right here.” He points to a small
plaque on the wall stating the checkout time, which she hadn't paid any attention the previous night.

She can feel herself flush. Stupid complexion, betraying her. “Fine, I'll pay him back. I just need to
get my purse.” She pauses, considering what's required. “It's in my room. Just…”

She falls silent because she knows that she has absolutely no plan whatsoever to address her
situation. The previous night it had been easier to take everything one minute at a time and accept the
temporary shelter Dipper had managed to wrangle for her. She'd known that the next day she would
be right back in the same mess, but she had been so tired and scared and emptied out by everything
that had occurred. Falling asleep had been an alternative to thinking about it, and it was an alternative
she had pursued with a little help from Dipper's presence over the phone. Ugh. She can't think about
that right now. It raises too many feelings that she doesn't have the space to handle.
“We need to talk about the next step,” Dipper says.

“What are you even doing here?” Pacifica says, needing an answer to that before anything else.

“I just—… We, just couldn't leave you here like this. I know that going back to your parents is the easiest thing to do, but…” Dipper's jaw sets. “I don't want you to.”

Pacifica doesn't, either. “Then what do we do?”

“I know it's crazy and I know we could get in huge trouble again, but we drove down here to get you.” He holds out his hand, hopeful. “So, are you ready to go?”

She doesn't know if what he's offering makes sense or is even possible. She doesn't know if she's going to arrive in Piedmont and then have to find another motel when Dipper's parents tell her she can't be there. But she wants what he's offering so badly. It's a way out, even if it's just a moment, and it's a way she won't have to take alone.

She looks at his hand, and remembers it settling on her shoulder; warm, comforting. *Just because you're your parents' daughter, doesn't mean you have to be like them*, he'd said. *It's not too late.*

This is what she wants, isn't it? What she said she wanted, in the dark hours of the morning, sitting at the edge of his bed. A chance to change even more, to fulfill the promise she had made even past the pulling of a lever. If her parents won't let her be different, if they refuse to face the past or forge a new future, if they're too caught up in their own dissolving relationship to give her what she needs from them, then… shouldn't she leave? Shouldn't she take the chance, no matter how slim? She doesn't know what happens next, but maybe she doesn't need to. Maybe all she needs to know is that it's different and it's right and it's with him. A chance to get away. Even if only for a while. A chance to see if she can be someone else outside her parents' shadow.

It's not too late.

“Let's get out of here,” she says, and takes his hand. If the moment wasn't so loaded with meaning it would be absurd, because she's not sure if she's shaking it or holding it to be led.

He doesn't seem to know either, and a few seconds later Pacifica realizes she's essentially just standing there, holding hands with Dipper Pines.

She jerks her hand away so fast that Dipper takes a half-step forward. He shoves his hands back into his pockets, tips of his ears turning red. “Uh, you should get your stuff,” he stammers.

“Yeah, just a second,” she says just as quickly, almost talking over him.

When she goes back into the room she assesses her belongings, which don't amount to much: Her earrings, her socks and shoes and her phone. She'd arrived at the motel with nothing but what she carried on her person when she'd fled her home. It's lucky she has her phone at all; if she hadn't been texting Mabel so frequently, she probably would have left it to charge. She finishes dressing and stuffs her dead phone into her pocket. Then she stands in front of the bathroom mirror for a solid five minutes trying to do what she can with her hair using nothing but her hands. It's a largely futile effort.

She wrinkles her nose at her reflection. Her shirt is wrinkled, her hair is tangled and what was left of her makeup after her crying jag is mostly on the motel pillow. The best she can do is brush her teeth, but she still feels gross.

There's a part of her that cringes at the thought of being seen like this, but she supposes if it has to be anyone, at least it's Dipper. It's not like she has a lot of dignity left to lose after the conversations she's
already had with him. He's seen her in a worse state. It's a thought that should serve to increase her shame; instead it makes her feel like they share an important secret. He's been entrusted with something she wouldn't give to just anyone.

It isn't until she shuts the door behind her and follows him down to the parking lot that she realizes he couldn't have possibly driven himself, which means…

Oh, no.

Time to see how many other witnesses there are to her total humiliation.
Pacifica walks over to the motel steps with as much dignity as she can muster. She's a mess and she knows it, totally unprepared to appear in public. Dipper is one thing; he hasn't seen her before this point, but after all those phone calls and everything she had admitted he couldn't have been expecting her at her best.

She peeks over the edge of the railing. There isn't a crowd, thank goodness. There also isn't anyone who hasn't already seen her wearing a potato sack, but that doesn't actually make her feel any better.

Mabel had been unexpected, but not necessarily unwelcome; Pacifica wants to sprint to the nearest salon when she sees the Pines' servant (Seuss? Is that right? Wait, he runs the Shack now, doesn't he?) in the parking lot, along with that tall, gawky Corduroy girl (who should really layer some foundation over those freckles). So now there are two more witnesses to Pacifica Northwest's disgrace, in addition to the two there already are, thus doubling her disgrace. How wonderful.

Dipper notices her pause at the top of the stairs. He divines the reason quickly enough, following her line of sight. “Hey, at least it's just Soos and Wendy,” he says. “They were there, too. They're cool.”

Pacifica supposes that beggars can't be choosers. She's just not accustomed to being a beggar. “They'd better not tell anyone about this,” she says.

Dipper sighs. “Pacifica, you're going to have to trust us eventually.”

“I trust you just fine!” she fires back.

Dipper looks surprised by her admission. “You trusted them once before,” he points out.

Yeah, when they were all about to fight together no matter what and she didn't have a choice. Which serves to remind her that she also doesn't have a choice now, not unless she wants to try crawling back to her parents. She shuts her mouth grimly and holds her head high as she goes down the rest of the stairs. Dipper rolls his eyes at her attempt to salvage her pride and she almost abandons it to kick him in the shins.

Whatever poise she might have maintained is shattered anyway when Mabel runs up to grab her hands and pull her eagerly towards the truck. “Road dog reinforcements!” she shouts nonsensically.

Pacifica has no idea what's going on. “What?”

Wendy is looking critically at Mabel. “Maybe you should lay off the Pitt for a while, Mabel.”

Mabel laughs like Wendy just told a joke. “Yeah, okay, Wendy! I'll just stop drinking delicious soda.”

Soos opens the door of the truck. “You dudes all ready to go?” he asks.

Wendy points to the driver's seat. “Hey, you don't want to switch out?”

“Nah, I'm good,” Soos tells her.
“Cool with me. You can tag out later if you want; I'm gonna dominate some snacks. Shotgun!” Wendy calls out as she rounds the front of the truck.

“Co-shotgun!” Mabel says immediately.

Pacifica doesn't know what's happening, but she's grateful that Soos, Wendy and Mabel have seemingly decided to not directly address her situation. None of them offer any condolences or try to pry — instead, they're all really into the road trip her life-turned-disaster has prompted. She follows Dipper to the back of the truck and when she climbs in, Mabel gives her a big smile and Wendy shoots a quick thumbs up in her direction. Pacifica takes a deep breath and hopes no one can see how shaky she is and just how much their kindness and discretion is affecting her.

She's immensely grateful when Dipper settles into the seat next to her and she can focus on him again. She actually understands her relationship with him. Mostly. Partly. Some of the time.

Her late-night realization is muddying the waters, to be sure. It doesn't have to mean anything. She can be logical about it. She's getting older and her hormones are kicking in and have apparently decided to betray her in a deep and unforgivable manner by making her drawn to the biggest dork in the universe. It doesn't make any sense. Sure, he's somehow become her best friend, but the emphasis was supposed to be on 'friend'. Her brain knows that, but the rest of her isn't getting the message (and her brain isn't all that convinced, either). It is, of course, entirely his fault for having warm brown eyes and soft curly hair and limbs that have been getting leaner and longer and a jaw that gets just a bit sharper every time she sees him. All his fault.

It's also his fault for being there for her in a way no one else ever has. She can't examine the exact nature of how it makes her feel that he launched a 'rescue mission', without any real plan, just to make sure she is okay, because if she turns inward too much she's afraid she's going to hug him, right in front of everyone (or, even worse, break down again). And she doesn't have any money to give them so they'll pretend it never happened.

The truck shudders when Soos puts it in reverse. Pacifica watches as the motel slides away from her perspective. It was her port in the storm. She has no attachment to it, though; her real shelter is sitting next to her.

“Hey, Soos, let's get some grub,” Wendy says. “A girl can't live on fruit rollups alone.”

“Says you!” Mabel retorts, her cheeks stuffed with the gummy substance.

“Let's go for variety. What've we had so far?” Soos says. He reaches up and moves some of the garbage on the dash around. “Burger bag, chicken bucket…”

“We definitely had tacos, because I just found one.” Dipper holds up his prize.

“Yoink!” Wendy says, plucking it from his grasp.

“Hey!” he protests.

“Sorry, Dipper. Tacos before bros,” Wendy tells him, taking a crunchy bite.

Pacifica observes them with a sense of bemusement. It's not unlike the ride home from the mini golf ordeal. She is an island in a sea she doesn't understand, where people around her laugh without restraint and tease each other without decorum and enjoy the company without ulterior motives. She remembers getting home that night and, still shaken from her near-death at the hands of horrid little living golf balls, telling her parents that she'd won and nothing more. They never asked how she got home. At the time that hadn't seemed important, compared to the trauma. Now, she knows that if it
had been Dipper waiting for her, he would have asked. No — he would have been there to get her in the first place.

“Pacifica, what do you want to eat?” Dipper asks, breaking her from her thoughts.

“I'm not hungry,” she says automatically, and even as the words leave her mouth she realizes she is actually ravenous.

Dipper doesn't look like he believes her, but Wendy is talking again in the front seat and he turns to listen. “Soos, I need pancakes. Like, all the pancakes.”

Soos passes her the GPS. “Lead us to these promised pancakes.”

“I want waffles with extra whipped cream and hold the waffles,” Mabel says as she 'helps' Wendy by poking randomly at the touch screen.

“Mabel, you know I love you, but if you keep eating sugar I'm gonna strap you to the roof,” Wendy says, fending off Mabel with her elbow.

“Eh, I tried that one time with my cousin Reggie,” Soos says, face contemplative. “It didn’t— uh, didn't go so well.”

Wendy isn't letting it go at just that. “Dude, spill.”

Soos begins relating a tale involving some kind of bet and his grandmother's car, but Pacifica is distracted when Dipper nudges her elbow. “You really aren't hungry?” he says.

“I'm not supposed to take handouts,” she says without thinking.

Dipper's expression turns wry. “I feel like we've been over this…”

She crosses her arms and looks down at the trash-strewn floor. Can she not just admit that she's hungry? Everyone else in the truck is so close and it's so effortless for them; she's on the edge of the group, wanting to join, not knowing how. She's still not sure she can admit how she really feels about anything, no matter what Dipper tells her or what she's already said. Shouldn't it be getting easier? It's supposed to be easier. It makes her want to scream, all the walls she runs into inside her own head.

“I like pancakes,” she finally admits.

Dipper smiles at her, warm and knowing. She knows she's supposed to reject his familiarity, but she wants it. She wants him to know her.

Later, she finds herself in a booth at the sort of restaurant her parents wouldn't be caught dead in. The vinyl seats are sticky and the tabletop is a tacky, speckled linoleum that's scratched and stained. There's ketchup on the table in a cheap red plastic bottle and almost nothing on the menu is more than ten dollars. When their slightly haggard waiter takes their orders, Pacifica gets the pancakes because she already said she liked them and she doesn't trust the staff with meat or eggs.

Soos, Wendy and Mabel are across the table from her. They're all attempting to solve the same maze on their place mats, making a race of it. Mabel wins and celebrates by eating a packet of jelly. They're pretty loud about it, joking and teasing and laughing; that must have been anticipated because they've been seated in the far corner of the place, away from what few other patrons there are. They had probably looked like a rowdy group, coming in, which likely had a lot to do with the way Mabel had been on Soos' back, ordering him to 'mush!'
Pacifica knows she needs to be thinking about what comes next, considering her options, divining some way out of her current mess. But all she can think about is how her hand is resting on the plush of the booth seat and Dipper's hand is, too, an inch away. If she stretches out her pinky, she will touch him. And that's such a dumb thing to obsess over, she is fully aware. But she's been lying to herself less and less lately, about a lot of things. About her parents, about her life, about who she is (or was, hopefully). She must face one particularly unpleasant fact along with all the others: She is starting to crush hard on Dipper Pines.

And that's what it is. A crush. A stupid word for a stupid phenomenon. There's a part of her that is utterly appalled that she can feel anything but a very grudging respect for Dipper, if she must grant him something beyond disdain. She's known much better-looking boys. Boys with perfect smiles and good breeding and summer homes in the south of France. Boys who can offer her a future of travel and fine dining and continued access to the upper echelons of society. Boys that Mother and Father approve of; boys who would be welcomed into the Northwest fold as equals.

Boys who represent a continuation of the lies Pacifica can no longer tolerate.

None of them ever drove six hours just to make sure she was okay. None of them ever fought a ghost or survived an apocalypse with her. None of them ever looked at her with warm brown eyes and just listened. And maybe her crush is just all of that — she doesn't think she can trust herself to separate his physical appearance from the way she feels about him. But he's taller, and his shoulders are a bit broader, and his smile isn't completely perfect in the way that only money can provide but it's so nice and genuine and often directed at her. There’s a fledgling lankiness about him that is appealing; his fine jaw and his cute nose, lips the mirror image of Mabel’s but somehow just as attractive on a boy (it’s not fair for his eyelashes to naturally be that long). And something about the way his hair curls over his forehead makes her want to run her fingers through it. She wants to touch him. She doesn't know exactly why or even exactly how, she just… wants.

Pacifica is very used to getting what she wants.

She reaches over and places her hand on Dipper's.
Dipper is frozen in place. There's a conversation happening on the other side of the table and he's pretty sure his name has been said a couple of times, but he can't pay any attention to that.

Pacifica's hand is on his.

Did she mean to do it? Is it an accident? Does she even notice? He doesn't know what to do. Her palm is warm where it sits on top of his hand. Her fingers rest gently on his thumb. Wow, her hands are small. And warm. And feminine and holy cow there's a girl's hand on his.

He can't pull away, because he doesn't want to offend her (which sounds like a reasonable excuse and he's going to go with that). And he's afraid to do what he really wants to and turn his hand over to lace it with hers, because what if that's too much or she didn't really mean to do it or she reads into it and, while he's on the subject, what is he getting from all this? Can friends just hold hands? She is distraught, after all, it could be a comfort thing. He can't say he finds it particularly comforting, seeing as he's now sweating and it feels about twenty-degrees hotter in the room. Oh, no, what if she does take his whole hand and his palm is all wet? But why would she? They aren't like that… are they? No. No, of course not. …Are they?

What does he do? What does this mean?! He is freaking out, man.

He has to do something. Anything. Heart pounding in his chest, he slowly turns his head to look at her.

She isn't looking back at him. She's sitting in her seat with her usual abundance of cool poise, somehow delicate and regal even with no makeup and wrinkled clothes in a cheap vinyl booth. He remembers her at the Shack, wearing a potato sack like it was Versace. How is he supposed to read her when she can do that? Is she ignoring him?

Then she turns her gaze towards him and he sees the things in her face that her posture doesn't show: Fatigue, discomfort, uncertainty. She swallows, pale neck flexing uneasily. Her eyes communicate a silent query. Her mouth parts slightly, and then her fingers curve and tighten around the side of his hand.

He's not sure he understands the question. Still, he knows his answer. He's confused and awkward and doesn't know what he's doing, but he turns his hand over and threads his fingers with hers.

Pacifica’s attention turns back to the antics across the table, leaving Dipper in his sweaty limbo. This is not how he imagined his first time holding hands would go. There's been no discussion, no clear delineation. The rules of dating have not been invoked, if that's even what this is. He's afraid to demand any clarification. He doesn't want to break the moment.

Man, her skin is soft. What is that, lotion or some other girl thing? Her arm brushes his when she shifts slightly in her seat. He's completely lost track of the conversation. Pacifica is so pretty. Why is she so pretty? He'd noticed that even when he had Wendy on the brain. It hadn't meant much then, but it means a lot now. All he can focus on is every square centimeter of his skin where it meets hers.

Maybe if I cross my legs, no one will notice.
It's a darn good thing Mabel is so distracted by friendship and sucrose right now.

Then their food arrives and the moment, whatever it is, ends. Pacifica slips her hand from his loose grip to hold her plate as she cuts into her pancakes and Dipper's heartrate gradually returns to normal, even as his brain is still whirling with the implications. He eats mechanically, lost in thought, and shakes himself free of his head only long enough to give short answers whenever the conversation turns his way.

All too soon, the group is reconvened around Soos' truck. But as they pile into the vehicle, readying themselves for the long drive back home, Pacifica hangs back. She pauses next to the driver door.

“Wait,” she says to Soos. “We have to make a stop before we leave.”


The expression on Pacifica's face does not indicate anything as pleasant as frozen treats. “I have to go back home first.”

That startles Dipper out of his onset food coma. “What? I thought you said you weren't going back?”

“I'm not.” She huffs out a breath and crosses her arms. “But I need to get some of my things. ...And talk to my mom.” She looks at Dipper through the open door and her mouth thins when she sees his expression. “It'll be fine. It's not like she wants me to stay.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Dad won't be there,” she adds.

Dipper doesn't know if that's a good idea. Then again, given the possible consequences of helping Pacifica run away he's not sure the original plan has ever been a good idea, either. In the back of his mind he's always known that there is a high probability of the weekend ending with Pacifica on a flight back to Malibu. He just thinks it will be worth it for her, that's the point — that it will be worth something, if only for a couple days, or even hours. So she can breathe. Obviously, she feels the same way. But if there's any possibility that she can leave with permission, it's probably something worth pursuing. But it's not his decision.

“Oh, Pacifica. If that's what you want to do, then let's do it,” he says.

The way she twists her mouth makes it clear that 'want' isn't really where she's coming from.

She sits next to him on the short trip, stiff and silent. He briefly contemplates if he should try to hold her hand again, but it's not hard to decide against it. Up front, the others are almost equally still, commenting quietly to each other. The atmosphere has changed; they are reversed, going back into hostile territory instead of making good on their escape. Dipper notices that Wendy, especially, seems concerned. He wonders if she's ever had a friend in a similar situation, and what she did about it; if there had been anything she could do. The only reason Dipper has been able to do something, poorly conceived or not, is because of her and Grunkle Ford.

In the midst of a very affluent neighborhood they stop before the long driveway up to Pacifica's house. It's a bright and sunny day and yet it still seems forbidding, like a path into the darkest portion of the woods. Pacifica has been gradually tensing with every mile and now she might as well be a porcelain statue. Her face is pale with restrained emotion, but her blue eyes burn with determination.

“I'll make this quick,” she says, opening her door.
“You don't have to go alone,” Dipper tells her.

“No, I do,” she says, though she flicks her eyes up towards his, grateful. “Just wait a minute, okay?”

He offers her a tense, sympathetic half-smile. “We're not going anywhere.”

They all watch as she disappears into the house. Dipper almost wishes he hadn't eaten, he's so wound up. What if Mrs. Northwest won't let Pacifica back out? His mind immediately begins cobbling together half-baked plans; they could find her window and have Wendy climb up, she could fashion some sort of rope… Or Soos could break down the door and they could make a run for it. Both of which are crazy ideas. Crazy, dumb, criminal ideas. Still, given a lack of other options…

“I can't believe I'm rooting for Pacifica Northwest,” Wendy says.

“I guess things really change sometimes, huh,” Soos reflects.

Wendy smiles, though she doesn't look away from the house. “I guess they do, Mr. Mystery.”

Mabel is gnawing intently on a lock of her hair. She says nothing, which speaks just as loudly as any words.

Dipper isn't sure how long they wait. Fifteen, twenty minutes, maybe. It feels like hours. More than once he stops himself from jumping out of the truck and going in after her. He knows that will likely just make things worse. He has no idea what's happening inside the house or what kind of conversation is occurring, if any. He hopes it's a conversation. Maybe something close to civil.

He won't be able to hear the bell, if it's ringing. Ah, geez. What if it is? Can she… is she strong enough? He should go in. No, just to the door. He should stand by the door, just to hear if the bell is ringing or not. He's not jumping to conclusions or going against her wishes. He's being a good friend. If he tells himself that a few more times then maybe he'll believe that instead of the truth, which is that the mental image of her meek and downcast with cheeks pinked in shame as the bell rings over her makes him want to break something. Preferably the bell.

He clenches his jaw and doesn't move. He shouldn't worry. She's the llama. She's a warrior. She's proved it.

He still doesn't relax until he sees her walk out the door.

She's carrying a handbag and is rolling a small suitcase behind her. She's also wearing a backpack, which looks expensive. Do they even make designer backpacks? He supposes that if they do, she would have one. She moves quickly, steps long and hurried. Dipper hopes she's just eager to leave and isn't trying to outrun anything literal. No one appears in the doorway behind her. When she draws closer he can see her eyes are dry and her face has lost some of its suppressed anger.

He hops out of the truck and takes her suitcase, which is lighter than expected. He heaves it into the back and secures it with a bungee while she takes everything else into the cab. He climbs in after her, not sure if she is okay. It seems like sort of a dumb question, since she can't be, really. He is very curious to know what happened, though.

When the doors are shut again they all wait expectantly for her to speak. She lifts her chin, haughty beneath their scrutiny. Dipper takes that as a good sign, if some of her confidence has returned.

“We can leave now,” she says.

Glances are exchanged. “Er, so it's cool with your mom and everything?” Soos says.
“It's fine,” she says dismissively, clearly impatient to leave. “Can we go already?”

“Soos, get us back into our tax bracket,” Wendy says.

“You got it, dudes,” Soos replies, sounding relieved. He shifts the truck into gear and peels out of Pacifica's well-maintained concrete driveway, tires squealing.

“Yeah, gun it! Let's get the heck outta here!” Wendy says, urging him on.

“Rescue mission successful!” Mabel declares, raising both hands to the ceiling and getting a high five from Wendy. Soos swipes and misses her other hand and then leans back until he slaps her palm successfully, nearly veering into the oncoming lane in the process.

Dipper just holds onto the handle over his door and tries not to get carsick again.

Two hours later, they're cruising back up the highway in relative silence. Wendy has taken over for Soos, who is now slumped against the window, asleep. Mabel snoozes against his side, having finally bottomed out from her sugar high. The radio is on low, the quiet strains filtering to the backseat too softly to be assembled into a recognizable song. Dipper has spent most of the time watching the scenery roll past while surreptitiously keeping an eye on Pacifica, who hasn't said a word since they reached the highway.

Her mood is difficult to judge, but she doesn't seem sad. Instead, she looks contemplative. Perhaps she's considering what comes next. Dipper is wondering what the next step is, himself. He thinks he knows, but he's not looking forward to it. He's not sure how his parents are going to react or if he can be convincing enough, even with Mabel on his side. He will try, though. They've already come this far.

He looks over at Pacifica again. Her forehead is resting against the glass of her window and he can't tell if she's asleep or not.

He scoots a little closer to her. “Pacifica?” he says, trying to see her face.

She straightens up immediately, spine ratcheting back into her usual good posture. “I'm awake,” she says, as if she is reminding herself.

“What happened in there?” he asks. It's not like they aren't usually blunt with each other.

She doesn't answer right away. Maybe she's not entirely sure. “I told her I was leaving,” she says at last. “I said I was going to stay with some friends and that I needed to be away from her and dad for awhile.” Her eyebrows pull together in a slight frown. “She said okay.”

Dipper blinks, shocked. “Really?”

“Yeah. She said I should call her later so she can do whatever she needs to for school or whatever. And... she said she was sorry.” Pacifica shrugs, the motion uncomfortable. “I think she was drunk, but...”

“She thought this was best for you,” Dipper says in surprise. It's something of a revelation to say that out loud. He's spent so much time thinking of her parents in the context of the horrible people they usually are that he hasn't considered they are also... well, her parents. And that there could still be love there, somewhere, even if only by familial default.

“So, yeah, I can get a hotel or something,” Pacifica says quickly, clearly trying to push their conversation past the point of her discomfort.
Dipper doesn't know the law very well, but he imagines she won't be able to live somewhere without adult supervision. “Let me try my idea first. This might just work out.”

She looks at him, eyes hopeful. “You think so?”

“Hey, you said you didn't want to be like your parents. So maybe you need to not be around them for awhile. It doesn't have to be forever. Just long enough to figure stuff out.”

“I'll never want to go back,” she says stubbornly.

“Sure, right up until you have to clean your own room or eat at the cafeteria,” Dipper says.

She turns a dark blue glare onto him and jabs a finger at his chest. “Hey, I survived the apocalypse. I slept in a burned-up car and ate bugs!”

“You ate bugs?” Dipper says, impressed.

“I ate a bug,” she revises. When he looks at her skeptically, she huffs and says, “Okay, fine, I tried to eat it. It was really gross, all right?”

For his part, Dipper had scavenged canned food from ruined houses with limited success. By the time he'd stumbled across Wendy he'd been pretty weak with hunger. It's a little over two days of his life that he tries not to think about. He hadn't even been directly threatened that much, overall, he'd stayed hidden most of the time. But it had seemed so hopeless, and he'd been so alone. The memories carry a deep sense of despair. He does his best not to remember, unless he has to.

He knows that leaving his post-apocalyptic ordeal unexamined is not the healthiest course of action. He's just not ready to deal with it, yet.

Still, it's not so bad if it's a shared experience. “Did you see that big head with the arm coming out of it? Now that was gross.”

She makes more or less the exact face he'd once mockingly imitated. “Eugh, no.”

They talk as southern California passes by the window in flickers of sunlit green and brown below the bright blue. Every word builds something between them, even if that structure has not yet been named.
Mabel wakes up with a start as something jostles her. She blinks and rubs at her eyes, disoriented by the sensation of motion. It takes her a second to remember she's in Soos' truck. Wendy has taken the wheel and Soos is slumped against the window, hat pulled low as he gently snores. Mabel is sandwiched between them and the shared heat makes her want to drift off again.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Wendy says. Her voice has the odd, muted quality of a long car ride, when the constant droning of the engine and the road beneath the tires begins to deaden ears. "You crashed hard, man."

"Worth it," Mabel mumbles. She yawns and stretches as best she can.

Wendy shoots Mabel a sly smile. "Hey, cover your mouth and then look in the back."

"Cover my mouth?" Mabel repeats.

"So you don't squeal. I know you too well."

Mabel manages to tuck her legs underneath herself and tugs at her seat belt until it's loose enough for her to turn around. She peers over the top of the seat. Dipper and Pacifica are both asleep, which isn't unexpected. Dipper is resting against his door and Pacifica is prone in the remaining space. Pacifica isn't lying on him, or anything like that. Mabel is about to ask Wendy what the big deal is when she sees it.

Dipper's right arm is draped over the arm rest with the controls for his window, but his left drops limply down behind Pacifica's hair. It isn't until Mabel looks more closely that she realizes his arm is in her hair, draped over her neck, and his hand is by her chin. Pacifica's left arm is serving as her pillow; her right arm lies on the seat in front of her and her hand is tangled with Dipper's.

Mabel claps both of her hands over her mouth and shudders violently with the force of her unvoiced excitement.

She takes in the sight for a few seconds longer, committing it to memory, and then spins around and slides back down onto her seat with an enormous grin on her face.

"I just noticed a few minutes ago," Wendy says.

"Oh my gosh, they're so cute together!" Mabel squeaks with glee. "Where's Soos' camera? Soos!"

"Don't wake the big guy," Wendy cautions. "Dude's put in some serious driving time."

Mabel calms somewhat. Wendy has a point. Dipper won't want her to take a picture, anyway. Neither will Pacifica, for that matter. They're both selfish for not wanting to share their cuteness with the world, but that's an argument for another time.

"So, what's the deal?" Wendy asks. "I mean, I know Dipper is all about helping her out — and I'm still on board — but since when were they all cozy?"
Before answering, Mabel scrutinizes Wendy for any signs of jealousy. Sure, Wendy had gently turned Dipper down and hadn't ever reciprocated his feelings, but it might be different with another girl in the picture. Wendy isn't like that, though, as Mabel presumed; she doesn't look jealous, just curious and even excited.

Mabel is also excited. Probably too excited, given that she blurts out, “Pacifica was in his bed!”

Wendy's hands slip down the steering wheel as her eyes go huge. “Whoa-ho, Dipper! Zero to sixty, man!”

As hilarious as Wendy's reaction is, Mabel knows she needs be more specific if she ever wants Dipper to speak to her again. “She just fell asleep after they talked about serious stuff,” Mabel admits, even though it makes the story so much less interesting.

“If it was anyone but Dipper I probably wouldn't buy it,” Wendy muses. “Lee tried that on his mom one time when he got caught with his girlfriend. You can guess how that went over.”

Mabel leans towards the other girl conspiratorially. “Okay, so maybe they weren't up to anything like that, but Dipper was pretty awkward and sweaty for someone just trying to help a 'friend'.”

Wendy rolls her eyes. “Heh, come on, goof. When is he not?” She looks in the rearview mirror again. “Still… There's gotta be something going on there if they're holding hands. Unless you guys forgot to tell me we have a buddy system.”

Mabel immediately grabs Wendy's right hand off the steering wheel. “Buddy check!”

Wendy laughs and tugs her hand away. “I need that to drive, bud.” She sobers slightly. “Mabel, I know you've got, like, cartoon hearts for eyes right now, but you might want to lay off your bro. Whatever's going on with him and Pacifica, that's kinda their biz.”

“What?! Pffffffttt!” Mabel blows a raspberry loud enough to cause Soos to snort in his sleep. “Wendy, it's Dipper. He needs my expertness, he's hopeless with girls.”

Wendy shrugs easily and glances at the rearview mirror again. “Looks like he's doing alright to me. I'm just sayin', go easy on the guy.”

“You don't go easy on Dipper. You gently push him until, like a majestic snowball, he rolls on his own.”

“Mabel—”

“Majestic.”

“Mabel,” Wendy begins again, looking skeptical, “I know you were pushing him to talk to me. I'm not blind and deaf.”

“He got it off his chest and everyone felt better,” Mabel says airily, hoping to move past that little misadventure.

“Dude, you locked us in with a shapeshifter just so he'd fess up,” Wendy says, not moving past it at all. “How is that 'gentle’?”

“I thought it was a closet!” Mabel defends herself.

“That's not the point. You literally pushed him,” Wendy sighs. “It's not just you. I know I could have
handled that better. I thought that he'd get over it, you know, take a hint when I hooked up with Robbie. I think I did okay when it came down to it, which is great because I was so bummed out thinking that he might be weird the rest of the summer, but... Really, I put it all on him. He was afraid of getting rejected, but I was afraid of screwing up this awesome friendship that came out of nowhere. Man, I wish you guys had come to Gravity Falls years ago. Maybe we could have met before puberty got all up in our junk.”

Mabel's always loved her summers, but in retrospect it's true that she can't help but think of every previous summer as a wasted opportunity.

Wendy continues, “It all worked out and that's awesome, but at the same time, it's like, did 'pushing' him ever make it easier? I'm not saying you don't want what's best for him because I know you do, but did you ever really think he had a chance with me?”

Mabel is a hopeless romantic, but she's not an idiot. “Not really. I just wanted him to stop making himself all crazy about it.”

“Well, it looks to me,” Wendy says, jerking a thumb over her shoulder, “that he actually might have a chance this time. Who knows.” She shrugs again. “I don't. They probably don't, either. But Pacifica isn't me, like, at all. If you lock her in a closet with him, she'll, I don't know, strangle him or something.”

Mabel purses her lips contemplatively. “So you would suggest a different approach…”

Wendy rolls her eyes and laughs with more than a bit of exasperation. “At least I can tell Dipper I tried. You’re Mabel: You won't stop until you're bridesmaid.”

“Well, I get what you're saying. And I am so sorry you almost ended up shapeshifter chow because I wanted Dipper to stop being a butt. But may I point out that Dipper still wouldn't admit it even when you were about to become shapeshifter chow?” Mabel counters.

Wendy shudders slightly. “Dude wouldn't 'fess until he thought I was dead. Okay, point taken.”

Soos suddenly shifts in place against the window and then sits up with a yawn. He takes off his cap and runs a hand through his hair, blinking against the sunlight. “Wow. Where are we?”

“Morgan Hill?” Wendy says uncertainly, peering at nearby signs.

“It's not too much further to San Jose and then we'll be back in the Bay Area,” Mabel says. She's not exactly a geography expert, but she knows the area around Piedmont fairly well from family trips.

“You wanna tag out?” Soos asks Wendy, holding out a hand.

“Nah, I'm good. Stay fresh for the second leg back,” Wendy tells him.

That makes Mabel remember that Wendy and Soos will be leaving again all too soon, and that's not something she wants to consider. Instead, she ponders what will be awaiting them back in Piedmont.

It's not that she hasn't given it any thought at all. She had just been so swept up in the momentum of Dipper's sudden rescue mission, a grand gesture of friendship that took them six hours away and into the unknown. It's a worthwhile pursuit even without concrete outcomes. It's adventurous. It's like summer again. Wendy and Soos are here and there's nothing but the open road ahead. Mabel honestly hasn't cared much what the end game might be. They were going to get Pacifica and spend time together in the process, and that was all the plan she'd needed.
Still, the question had bounced around the back of her brain a few times, most notably once they had found Pacifica. And now that they're on their way, Pacifica safely ensconced in the back seat with Dipper (so cute so cute so cute), the question has become immediate. Now what? What's the next step? What's going to happen?

She needs to talk to Dipper. He always has a plan, or, if he doesn't, they can work one out together. She's spent considerable effort intentionally wrecking some of his plans just to get him to loosen up and embrace spontaneity, but not this time. This time she could use some of that old fashioned, obsessive Dipper list-making.

They're in over their heads. Which seems like such an absurd thought because, what, they weren't in over their heads when wax statues were coming to life or they were a bazillion years in the future competing for a time wish? But that was before. Now they are in the land of adults. There's no use for a grappling hook or a journal of the supernatural. These are problems that can't be beheaded with a fake candle or overcome with a little ingenuity and cheating in D&D&MD.

Mabel can fix a torn sweater or a ripped sock, but she can't fix someone's life.

Doesn't mean she's going to stop trying. Because — and this is a new thought, one she's just beginning to poke at — maybe that idea, the 'land of adults', is partially an excuse. Maybe now that she's back home and under her parents' wing, she's letting go of her summer momentum. Maybe she was proactive and capable in Gravity Falls because Grunkle Stan let her live in such a loose orbit. Things were different there, obviously, she's not stupid. The world outside of the summer isn't the same. But accepting that shouldn't mean feeling helpless.

“So, is Pacifica going to crash with you guys? 'Cause there's room at the Shack, but that's like, way far away,” Soos says. He's just thinking out loud, but sometimes Soos has a way of illuminating things in his own inimitable fashion.

“I think that's kind of up in the air,” Wendy is saying.

Mabel jumps in. “Of course that's what's happening! In fact, you should all spend the night!” She wraps her right arm around Soos' neck and flails her left around until it lands on Wendy's shoulder. “SHACK CREW SLEEPOVER!”

“Yes!” Soos instantly exults. “I'm gonna eat so many s'mores!”

Wendy is more hesitant. “Uh, is that gonna fly with your folks?”

“Wendy, Wendy — come on. This girl knows how to get a sleepover going,” Mabel casually assures her.

Wendy casts a quick glance her way, warm and knowing. “Hey, if it's happening, you know I'm down.”

“Oh, it's happening,” Mabel states.

And it definitely is, because she is extremely motivated. She will do whatever it takes to stretch out every possible second with Soos and Wendy, and if that means utilizing every trick in her sleepover-getting arsenal, then that's what is going to happen. She's talked her parents into allowing sleepovers with far less on the line. She's not failing now.

Besides, it gets Pacifica's foot in the door. Mabel doesn't know what Dipper has in mind, but she'll do her part.
There's a strange, hollow rapping noise that is echoing above Dipper's left ear. He blinks, rising into the waking world. His right ear is pressed to the rigid plastic of the door and begins to ache when he lifts his head. Groggily, he looks around.

He's still in Soos' truck, where he'd fallen asleep against the window. At some point, or gradually over the course of the trip, he slid down from his sitting position until his head is skewed at an awkward angle, right side on the arm rest with its window controls and chin dipped towards the seat. From where he's lying, he can see the driver's seat is unoccupied. The rumble of the engine is absent. Either they've arrived or stopped for gas.

The bonging noise rings out again. Confused and still half-asleep, he twists his head up and around until he can look out the window.

His mother is standing there, hand lowering from where she's been knocking on the glass. She has the strangest expression on her face: Concerned, maybe disapproving, slightly amused. Dipper has no idea why until he realizes how warm he is. His eyes go wide, and he looks down.

Pacifica has burrowed herself partially beneath him, using his legs as a makeshift space heater against the chill of the constant air conditioning (Soos tends to keep his truck somewhere in the ambient range of a refrigerator). The back of her head is only an inch away from his chest and his left arm is draped loosely over her, threaded through her hair. He thinks he remembers their hands being joined at some point, but maybe he dreamed that.

Oh, geez. Oh, man. And Mom is right there. She probably doesn't care whether they're holding hands or not. He begins to blush, which he knows is exactly what he needs to not do.

He jerks away from Pacifica's sleeping form as if she is a live wire. “U-Uh, Pacifica, wake up,” he stammers, patting her shoulder.

She comes awake with a start, eyes fluttering open. “What?” she mumbles, trying to roll over onto her back and only succeeding in trapping him even more.

Dipper gives up and lets his head drop against the back of the seat, resigned. “We're here. Hi, Mom. Thanks for nothing, Mabel.” Not a word of warning, no attempt whatsoever to wake him up for arrival. He knows it was deliberate.

Mom says something through the glass, but he can't understand her.

Pacifica drowsily pushes herself back onto her side of the seat. “We're here?”

Dipper unbuckles his seat belt and grabs the door handle. “Apparently the others thought we needed our sleep.” He hesitates. “Hey, give me a minute to talk to my mom. There's… Well, it's complicated.”

Pacifica's expression is grave. “It's okay if I have to go,” she says, but the tension in her shoulders and the apprehension in her eyes tell a different story.
“Nobody’s kicking you out of anywhere. We’re not like that,” he tells her firmly. “It’ll be fine, I promise.”

She shows him a hesitant, hopeful smile, and it makes his heart swell in a way he can't explain. All he knows is that he won't let her down. He'll find her a place to stay even if he has to hitchhike with her back to the Shack.

He pops the door open and scrambles out of the truck, not looking at his mother but also trying to look like he’s doing it because he needs to watch his footing and not because he's purposefully avoiding eye contact. He doubts he pulls it off. Mabel, Soos and Wendy are nowhere to be seen; it's just his mom in the driveway, arms crossed in the evening light as she waits. He's usually pretty good at reading her, in the way a child knows how the wind is blowing, when to push and when to retreat. Now, though, he finds himself at a loss. He can't tell which way she's leaning.

“Hey,” he says awkwardly, wiping his palms across the thighs of his pants. They're not sweaty (yet), he just doesn't know what to do with his hands. He'd thought he would have time to prepare himself before making his pitch.

“Hi. Have a good trip?” she asks, arms opening for a hug.

That's a good sign. He gratefully accepts the hug, then steps back. “It was okay. Kinda long. California’s a big place, who knew?”

Mom's attention turns from him. “And this must be Pacifica.”

Pacifica has exited out the opposite side of the truck and walked around the hood, coming up alongside of them. She holds herself with a stately grace despite her rumpled clothing and flyaway hair. “Hello, Mrs. Pines,” she says a bit stiffly.

“Hello, it's nice to finally meet you,” Mom says warmly, taking Pacifica's offered hand. “Your other friends are already inside. Mabel said you're all having a sleepover tonight? I think they’re with my husband in the kitchen, probably making a mess, if you’d like to join them.”

Mom is perfectly friendly, but the hint is obvious enough. Pacifica's eyes dart towards Dipper’s. He nods slightly and she takes the cue. “Thank you, Mrs. Pines,” she says formally, and goes around the edge of the garage towards the front door. Dipper hopes Mom can't tell that Pacifica knows where she's going.

As soon as she's gone, Mom turns back to Dipper with eyebrows raised. “I'll tell you what, kiddo: I always knew you'd be bringing a girl home someday, but I was definitely not expecting this.”

Dipper immediately flushes red and stares at a spot on the asphalt somewhere to the left of Mom's shoes. He's not sure if Mom is referring to the general chaos that's resulted from his attempts to help Pacifica or the fact that Pacifica is the kind of moneyed, stunning beauty reserved for the arm of top school athletes as preordained by the choking hand of teen social structures (and pretty much every movie ever). He's hoping the implication isn't that Pacifica is out of his league or something (not that it matters, because there’s nothing like that going on, maybe) because that is so discouraging. Then again, maybe Mom is just surprised by the sharp contrast of Dipper and Pacifica’s personalities and backgrounds. Or all of the above.

Dipper will cop to making a frequent mess of things. It's some of the other possible assumptions he's having trouble with.

“She's our friend, we had to do something,” he says, stressing the 'our' and 'friend' and deliberately
ignoring any other implications in what Mom said.

Mom gives him the same look she's always given him when he tries to explain his way out of something, a look that says she sees right through him. “Uh huh. I think we're going to need some new rules around the house, buster.”

Dipper is so grateful no one else is around. He'll gladly (well, okay, not gladly) submit to whatever strictures Mom thinks are needed if it means getting what he wants. “You're the boss,” he says lamely, trying not to otherwise react.

Mom lets him sweat for a moment longer, then asks, “So how did it go? Was she alright?”

Dipper nods. “Fine, I guess. We picked her up from the hotel and then she went and talked to her mom and it was… okay, probably? I wasn't there, but she got permission to leave.”

“Good, I'm glad she was able to speak to her mother again,” Mom says. Then her head tilts slightly. “You never did tell me how the two of you met.”

Dipper doesn't even know where to begin. If Gravity Falls had been any other town he would still be thinking of Pacifica, if he ever did meet at all, as just a stuck-up rich girl he'd once encountered. The genesis of their friendship is complicated and tangled up in events that are, to put it mildly, a bit unbelievable. He didn't even think of her as being a friend until the very end of summer. He hardly knows what they are to each other now. Their closeness has been fostered by everything but time. It's like an accelerated friendship, forged through fire. They know each other in so many personal, secret ways and not at all in others.

“We met at a party,” he settles on, which is when he feels he met the real her (well, the second party).

Mom is understandably surprised. “A party? I guess you really did have a heck of a summer. Was this at the Mystery Shack?”

“No, the Northwests have — well, had — this annual party. It was kind of a big deal, locally. Very fancy, like… cummerbunds. Whatever those are.” He doesn't know how to explain his 'invitation', so he just stops there. It's time he got to the point, anyway. He clears his throat. “Um, so, Pacifica kind of needs—”

“...A place to stay?” Mom smiles when his mouth snaps shut. “I'm not oblivious, Dipper. It was fairly obvious what the outcome of all this was going to be.”

Obvious to her, maybe. But, then again, maybe she'd had the luxury of forward planning from where she stood on the sidelines. “And that's okay?” he says anxiously. “She really doesn't have anywhere else to go right now.”

Mom's smile thins, and then disappears. “She isn't the first kid to stay with friends during a divorce. I had a friend go through something similar, though it wasn't this bad.”

Dipper knows more about the stresses on the Northwests' marriage than he really cares to, but he keeps his mouth shut about it. Sometimes it feels like every secret he swallows drops into his stomach like a stone, a collective weight that is starting to be noticeable.

“So, your father and I talked about it while you were gone,” Mom continues. “And it's okay with us as long as it's okay with her parents, so we're going to have to have a few more talks. But, if it all works out, then yes.”
He wraps his arms around her, relief blossoming in his chest. “Thank you so much!”

She pats him on the back, and then pokes him a bit sternly in the chest, making him take a step back. “I was serious about the new rules. I want you to leave your door open tonight.”

“Geez, Mom…” He turns away from her in embarrassment, ears red. “It’s not like that.” He doesn’t even know if he’s lying or not.

“Whatever you say, hon,” Mom tells him without a hint of belief.

He realizes that having Pacifica around will add a layer of complication beyond the ones he’s anticipated.

He’ll cut himself some slack in this case, though, because how was he supposed to know Pacifica would suddenly want to hold hands? Or get all close to him in the backseat, or whatever that had been (Cuddling? …No. No, that… Well, maybe…).

He finds Pacifica inside with the others. Mabel, Wendy and Soos are rooting through the cabinets and the pantry, throwing together whatever they can find for a meal and setting aside snacks for the sleepover. Dad is talking to Soos about running the Shack, nodding with interest as Soos describes some of the day to day operations involved in parting tourists from their money. Pacifica stands at the edge of the group like a statue, clearly uncomfortable. Dipper doesn’t know if it’s because she’s worrying about the outcome of Dipper’s talk with his mother or just doesn’t feel like she can join in. Both, probably.

He walks over to her and she visibly relaxes when he smiles. He leans in close so no one else can hear and says, “So, we'll still have to go over some stuff with Mom and Dad later, but Mom said you can stay with us.”

She melts in relief, blue eyes going clear and honest, face open with gratitude. He finds himself once again frozen in surprise as her arms wrap around him. She releases him before he has a chance to respond, stepping back. It takes her a few moments to partially reassemble her armor, alabaster complexion tinged pink with chagrin.

“Thanks,” she says, hiding behind her pride as best she can.

He shrugs awkwardly (sometimes he feels like he does everything around her awkwardly, including walking and breathing). “Hey, I promised,” he says.
i: listen

two conversations

Pacifica blinks and rolls over. The sun is streaming through the window blinds overhead, illuminating her very vivid surrounds. At least this time she recognizes them. It's the second time she's awoken in Mabel's room, so the glare coming off all the highlighter-bright colors isn't as startling.

The previous night hadn't been the raucous gathering that she had prepared herself for, basing her expectations largely on the townsmen who had invaded the Northwest party. After a day spent in the truck, however, everyone had been tired, and the sleepover was pretty lowkey. They had watched a couple movies back to back, the viewers slowly dropping off one by one until only Mabel and Pacifica remained awake. While the credits rolled they had all been sent off to their designated sleeping areas. Wendy claimed the couch, Soos camped out on Dipper's floor and Pacifica was granted a cot next to Mabel's bed. It's a far cry from her own expensive bedding. If she hadn't been so exhausted she doubts she would have slept at all.

She glances to her right and sees Mabel's bed is vacant. For a moment, she considers going back to sleep. But without travel fatigue to ease her passage into slumber it's probably not achievable. She's just not tired enough. Her desire to remain within the confines of her sheets has little to do with being sleepy and everything to do with not wanting to face a very unfamiliar set of circumstances.

She looks around the room again. Purple curtains, starry ceiling, an entire wall dedicated to photos of the Shack. Is this her home, now? Does she have a home? Or is she adrift without destination, pausing only in passing, finding rest where it is offered and then moving on. That sounds very poetic, to her mind, and also terrible. She doesn't want to be adrift. She wants to be home. Maybe not in such a tacky room, but if it's her only option…

She kicks the sheets down and carefully gets to her feet, having discovered after an early morning trip to the bathroom that her cot is prone to tipping. The carpet is soft beneath her toes; she's not sure why that detail strikes her until she thinks of the house in Malibu and its endless hardwood floors. Mabel's room smells like craft paper and corkboard. It makes Pacifica miss the subtle scent of lavender that suffused her room at the summer estate.

Those days are gone, she realizes as she stands in the bedroom of a girl she once considered a rival. There's a picture of Mabel and Dipper on the dresser; their arms are slung over each other's shoulders and their grins display missing teeth. They must be seven, or eight. Pacifica looks at the photograph and is reminded of what has been gained, not just what is lost.

She steps out into an empty hallway. Dipper's door is partially opened. Curious, she peeks inside. Soos is asleep on a rumpled pile of sleeping bags, snoring softly. The ceiling fan whirs slowly overhead at a medium pace. Dipper is still in bed, his curly brown hair just visible over the edge of the second pillow he has at his back. She almost gives into the urge to wake him. She needs something familiar; she needs a guide. She wants to hold his hand, just for a second, and pull strength from it.

She shoves the thought aside and backs out into the hall. She refuses to be that weak. She can face this first strange day on her own. She doesn't want to, but she can.
So much is still up in the air. Is she really staying? If so, where? She can buy her own necessities, so long as Mother doesn't change her mind and cancel Pacifica's card. But Pacifica doesn't know what's expected of her. It's nerve-wracking. She is without anchor, bereft of balance. How is she to navigate a life that has so little resemblance to one she recognizes?

Everything is different now.

She makes her way down the stairs. There are voices coming from the kitchen and the television is on in the living room, displaying vibrant Saturday morning cartoons to an inattentive audience. Wendy is buried beneath a blanket on the couch, her titian hair draped partially over its arm. Pacifica would never admit it, but she's a little intimidated by the older girl. Wendy is tall and confident and it's abundantly obvious how much Dipper admires her. Pacifica's own self-possession is more of a charade — that has become clear. So much of her certainty is left behind, shaken by ghosts and golf and an apocalypse the rest of the world slept through.

She moves quietly past the couch and is about to investigate the kitchen when she hears her name and stops.

“—Pacifica,” Mrs. Pines says. “What, exactly, is going on there?”

“Aren't they so adorable?” Mabel says enthusiastically.

“They definitely looked comfortable in the backseat.”

Pacifica blushes, mortified. She'd wanted to touch him, so she had. And then she'd been asleep when they'd been all tangled up in the backseat, it didn't happen on purpose and it's not anyone else's business! Though, if it were anyone else's business, it would probably be his mother's…

Mabel suddenly becomes deflective. “Soos likes his cars cold, so I came prepared. Sweater prepared!” she says, dodging the implied question.

“Oh, lord, you're already protecting him?” Mrs. Pines says. “What did they get up to? They're only thirteen!”

“Technically a teen,” Mabel is quick to point out.

“Heaven help me, I'm not ready for this. I'm too young to be a grandma.”

Pacifica can feel her face burning.

“Mom, whoa!” Mabel interjects. “Don't be gross!”

“Then you'd better tell me what's going on with those two, Mabel Pines, because you and Dipper have been thick as thieves since you got back last summer and for all I know it has something to do with that girl. Should I have been checking his phone?”

“No, this is good! It's good he's moving on!” Mabel protests. “He was hung up on Wendy for most of the summer!”

Something freezes in Pacifica's chest.

“Wait, now it's Wendy, too? How old is she?” Mrs. Pines sounds shocked. “What on earth happened to him this summer?”

Mabel's laugh is forced and uncomfortable. “Well, he had to notice girls eventually…”
“And all at once, apparently. We put off having the talk with you two for too long, I told your father that last year but he never wants to admit you aren't his little girl anymore. We're going to sit down and—”

“It's done! All taken care of!” Mabel says desperately. “Grunkle Stan had a book about it, he told me everything. *Everything.*”

“Stan did? I can't imagine how uncomfortable that was.”

“Nope. You can't.”

“So let me get this straight: Dipper, who rarely notices other people exist, never mind girls, was first with Wendy—”

Pacifica's eyes involuntarily dart over to where the gangly, freckled cow is still sleeping.

“—and then becomes involved with Pacifica, right after?”

“No, Mom,” Mabel sighs. “The thing with Wendy was never going to happen, everyone knew that but him. She just likes him as a friend, so after she let him down easy he went and took my awesome advice way too far and sort of caused a string of minor heartbreak on our road trip—”

“Dipper? Breaking hearts?” Mrs. Pines says, and Pacifica can just about hear the woman's jaw hit the floor (and Pacifica is right there with her).

“Grunkle Stan was definitely involved with his bad old man advice, somehow. Dipper's still embarrassed about it. But at least he was trying to get over Wendy, which is way better than being all mopey about it, and then… um, we came home,” Mabel says, concluding the summer with a massive omission. “And Pacifica was having problems and Dipper helped her and I thought, you know, maybe something could happen because she was—” Mabel suddenly swallows her next word.

Mrs. Pines notices. “She was what, Mabel?”

Pacifica clenches her fists. Should she interrupt? Mabel had better not be about to relate anything regarding Pacifica's late-night sojourn to Dipper's room because it was *not* like that!

“…Different?” Mabel offers weakly. “Because of her parents and all that bad stuff…”

“She's definitely not in your usual friend circles,” Mrs. Pines says diplomatically.

“We didn't really hit it off at first, but she came around!” Mabel says.

Sure, after the sad state of her family was revealed and then the world almost ended. Pacifica sometimes feels ashamed of what it took to put her on her new path. Still, maybe that means she should be grateful it happened?

Someday, perhaps. Right now, it just hurts.

“By quite a bit, if yesterday was any indication,” Mrs. Pines says wryly.

There's a clattering noise; it sounds like someone is digging through a drawer of utensils. “Where are the cookie cutters shaped like cats?” Mabel asks.

“Mabel,” Mrs. Pines says warningly.

The clattering stops. “Mom, it's a good thing. All of my epic summer romances didn't work out—”
“All of your what?”

“—but Dipper still has a chance for his! He’s just really slow and kind of bad at it, that's all. It's a work in progress. But lucky for him, his twin is an expert matchmaker!” Mabel declares.

“I'm more concerned with what's already happened than what you want to happen, Mabel,” Mrs. Pines says.

“Dipper’s still pretty hopeless,” Mabel muses. “He probably doesn't even know that she likes him.”

Oh, no. Is Pacifica that obvious? She supposes she has been towards him, specifically (the whole putting her hand on his was probably a giveaway). Still, if Mabel thinks Dipper isn't aware, then at least she didn't witness any of that.

Mrs. Pines sighs. “Dipper was so determined to help her. I should have guessed there was more to it.”

“What? Dipper would anyway, he's not—”

“I know, I know. I'm very proud of both of you, that's still true. I just should have guessed he wouldn't tell me the whole story.”

Mabel resumes rummaging through the utensils and doesn't reply. Pacifica can't blame her. Mrs. Pines is missing much more of the story than just whatever is going on with Pacifica and Dipper.

Pacifica is startled when Wendy suddenly rolls over onto her back and yawns, stretching her arms towards the ceiling. Rather than be seen hovering nearby by the older teen, she darts back up the stairs.

She almost runs straight into Dipper, who's yawning widely and rubbing at his eyes as he walks to the bathroom. “Oh, hey,” he says.

He must still be half-asleep because he doesn't seem to care that he's standing there in his boxers and a threadbare white sleeping shirt. Pacifica does, though. After what she's just overheard, a partially-dressed Dipper is the last thing she needs to encounter.

She ducks around him and dips her head so her hair hides her face, hoping he hasn't seen how bright red her cheeks are. “Hey,” she says shortly.

She's trying to hurry back into Mabel's room when he says, “Pacifica, are you alright?”

She glances at him. He's blinking heavily, not fully awake, but still manages to look concerned. Why does he care so much? Why is she so grateful? “I'm okay,” she says. “Just… still tired.”

“Go back to bed,” Dipper advises, yawning again as he resumes his path into the bathroom. “There's not much going on today, anyway.”

Back in Mabel's room, Pacifica collapses on her cot and stares up at the ceiling, again wondering how she's gotten into this mess and why it doesn't bother her more.

A few hours later, the twins are saying their goodbyes to Wendy and Soos while Pacifica looks on. Dipper and Mabel are sad to see their friends go again. Pacifica has already expressed her gratitude (a handshake that had somehow turned into a brief hug with Soos, a much more distant handshake with Wendy) and now feels out of place. She feels like she should be leaving, too; if not with them, then with someone else. But she's being left on the driveway with the twins, even though the house
isn't hers. For a moment, she wonders if McGucket would be willing to rent her old room to her. At least that would be something closer to familiar.

As Soos' truck disappears around the curve of the street, Pacifica stands behind the twins while they watch it go. Dipper's shoulders are slumped, his hands in his pockets. Mabel is hugging Waddles to her chest, having allowed the pig to say his own farewells. The wind tugs at Pacifica's skirt and hisses through the neatly trimmed grass. The sleepover is finished, the road trip is behind them. She is no longer a guest; she's just become a resident.
Mabel is over the moon.

Dipper and Pacifica! Together at last! Sitting on the couch, side by side, hand in ha— well, okay, they aren't holding hands right now, but that's just because Mom and Dad are there. Close enough! Her brother has found love, sort of, even if he won't admit it. Violins will play and rose petals will gently rain down and Mabel will be a bridesmaid and she will catch that bouquet, so the other ladies better step off! She might have to wait awhile, though. Maybe Dipper and Pacifica won't be slow and boring about it and just get married after high school. That's only four more years, just about! That's not so bad.

Yes, Mabel's trusty twin has finally found romance, and… and… and it's kind of hard to wax poetic when Mom and Dad are laying out some ground rules and the moment is so laden with parental-imposed awkwardness that even Mabel is feeling it, and she's not on the receiving end. Dipper's head is in his hands and his cheeks are so red he looks like he's about to pass out from heatstroke. Pacifica is sitting ramrod straight on the couch with her hands clasped in front of her, her face tinged pink.

“—keep the doors open, and I mean it. Or there won't be any privileges. Understood?” Mom is saying.

“Tell me this isn't happening,” Dipper groans.

“Dipper?” Dad presses him.

“Yes! Yes, okay, I get it!” Dipper frantically concedes. “We're not—…”

“No one is saying you are. But there are going to be some rules anyway, and we need you to follow them,” Dad says firmly.

“I understand, Mr. Pines,” Pacifica says.

Dipper just rubs his eyes like if he does it hard enough, he'll be somewhere else when he opens them.

“Also, bedtime means bedtime. You can say goodnight, but I want you both to be in your own rooms after ten-thirty, and you need to stay there,” Mom continues.

Pacifica nods. Dipper hunches his shoulders and tries to disappear.

“Dipper?” Dad prompts him yet again.


“I suggest you take this seriously,” Mom warns.

Mabel is stuck at a halfway point between enjoying Dipper's torment because, face it, it's pretty funny, and being empathetic enough to find it almost as uncomfortable as he is. She's leaning towards empathy, though, if only because here he is taking all the flak for Pacifica and it's not like it's entirely his doing that she's moving in. Mabel has a big hand in all this. But now that Dipper
probably has a girlfriend (hooray!) he's getting all the Talks at once: The Girlfriend Rules, The Friend Staying Over Rules, and The You Drove to Malibu On A Moment's Notice and Then Asked If Your Friend Could Live Here Rules, two of which don't have any precedent. Mabel, meanwhile, stands on the sidelines even though Pacifica is her friend, too. Two out of three of those Talks also apply to her! Maybe she should do something? Speak up on Dipper's behalf, take some of the heat? Of course, most of the heat is on the 'girlfriend' side of things, which Mabel can't do anything about (not that she would even if she could because it's LOVE).

She makes an attempt at distraction. “But Pacifica can still sleepover in my room, right?” she asks her parents, drawing their attention.

“Maybe on weekends, sometimes,” Mom allows. “We'll talk about it. Now, we just want you two to be clear on all of this,” she says, going right back to Dipper and Pacifica.

Sorry, Dipper. She tried.

As if to underscore how momentous this occasion has been, it's a Monday. Normally a day anything but momentous, true, but Dipper and Mabel didn't have to go to school! That hadn't been an intentional side-effect of Pacifica's arrival; still, it's like she's already repaying the kindness she's been shown. No school on a Monday, courtesy of a Pacifica-impelled 'family emergency'. If it hadn't already happened, Mabel would have suggested it. She wouldn't have wanted Pacifica to be alone for most of her first real day in her new home. And she is also all about three-day weekends, so bonus.

Mabel sticks it out in the living room until Mom and Dad finally decide that Dipper and Pacifica have treated the rules with appropriate gravitas. Dipper flees the room like a dog let off a leash and Pacifica goes to the kitchen so that Mom can show her where all the food is. Mabel follows Dipper up the stairs to his room where he flops backwards onto his bed and pulls the bill of his cap down over his face.

"Can you believe them?" he says. "We're not even like that, they're just embarrassing us for nothing!"

Mabel generally tries to be a supportive sister, but she won't support this delusion. “Bro, you must be an Egyptian sailor because you are swimming in denial!”

“Ugggghhh…” Dipper groans. “You can't stay in my room if you're going to make puns like that.”

“You can't stop these truth bombs!” Mabel tells him. She runs forward and begins rapidly poking him in the stomach, blowing raspberries with each jab.

Dipper quickly curls into a protective ball. “Agh— a-ha ha ha — stop it. Mabel!”

“Just admit it now and save yourself! You love her!” Mabel switches from his midsection to his head, pushing it repeatedly into the soft mattress. “Love love love love loooooooooooovveee—”

Dipper is quickly driven past his point of endurance. “That's it!” he swiftly rolls over and grabs his pillow. “You asked for it! There's not a court in this land that will convict me if I whap the beans outta you!”

“Oh, ho! Beans there will be, Dipper, beans there will be: When you spill 'em!” Mabel snatches a second pillow up from the floor at the foot of his bed. “Looks like you just volunteered for some enhanced interrogation.”

“I'm serious, Mabel. I'm way bigger than you now, you don't want to get into this,” Dipper warns
her.

Mabel only brandishes her pillow with deadly intent. “Sounds like someone's scared of facing a pillow fight champion.”

They're both about a second away from launching into what will no doubt be an epic, prolonged and very fluffy battle when Pacifica suddenly appears in the door. “Hey, your mother said—” she stops when she sees them standing there, holding their stuffed weapons of choice. “Um, what are you doing?”

“Nothing!” Dipper says quickly, dropping his pillow. “Nothing, just… talking. What's up?” he asks, voice cracking on the second syllable.

“You're mother said you should eat lunch now so you're hungry for dinner,” Pacifica says. She looks lost. “Are you coming back down?”

“We'll be right there,” Dipper says.

When Pacifica is gone again Mabel braces herself for a surprise attack, but the fight has left Dipper. He straightens his hat and tosses his pillow back onto his bed. “Come on, we shouldn't leave Pacifica hanging. This has to be weird for her,” he tells Mabel.

“Such a gentleman,” Mabel needles him, one last time.

Dipper stops and sighs. “Look, even if there is, I don't know, something going on—”

“I KNEW IT.”

“If! There was definitely an 'if'!” Dipper retorts. “Even if, I don't need you shoving me into any closets with her, okay? I don't know what this is, or what we're doing, or even if it's anything at all, and I don't want you to push her into something she doesn't want.”

Mabel immediately latches onto the alternate implication. “So then what do you want?” she asks eagerly.

Dipper tugs the brim of his hat down and looks at the floor, hiding his expression. “It doesn't matter what I want,” he says stoically.

Oh, poor Dipper. So afraid to hope. So fearful of another letdown. Mabel suddenly feels awful about his doomed crush on Wendy, though she knows that even her expert matchmaking couldn't have made that happen. Teasing him had just seemed so funny, at the time. Less so, in the aftermath; especially since by the time he had come clean it had been so obvious that it would only serve to get it off his chest, not bring about anything more. But Dipper couldn't just shrug off his crush the way Mabel had always done. He isn't built the same way. Mabel hurts, heals, quickly moves on. Her flings were a means to an end, the only real downer being her failure to secure an epic summer romance worthy of her scrapbook. Dipper just hurts, before and after. He dwells.

Mabel wants this for him. And what's more, this time she's almost a hundred percent positive it can work out, because she's pretty darn sure that Pacifica wants it, too.

“Come on, Dip,” she says, pushing playfully at his shoulders (when did they start getting that broad?). “You know I'm just looking out for you.”

Dipper relaxes slightly. “I just want… to be sure this time.”
It takes every ounce of willpower Mabel has not to squeal at what he just implied. “Bro, you have **nothing** to worry about,” she assures him. “Pacifica wants a dunk in that Dippingsauce!”

His expression turns dubious. “That's... nice? No, actually, it's gross. Now I'm just picturing her jumping into a vat of barbeque or something.”

“Sexy, saucy Pacifica,” Mabel says, furiously waggling her eyebrows.

“This is me leaving,” Dipper says, pushing past her and out his door.

After lunch, Mabel eagerly leads Pacifica out the sliding glass doors to the back patio and into the yard. It's a nice day out, the sun just beginning to dip towards the horizon and the grass long enough to be soft and springy, at the perfect point right before it grows too high and has to be cut again. Waddles rolls over and observes them enter his verdant domain.

“And this is the backyard!” Mabel announces. “You've already met Waddles, pet pig extraordinaire. The biggest rule here is to stay out of the flower bed.”

Pacifica frowns slightly as she looks at the flowers in their mulched wood area. “Why would I even want to walk on them?”

“Well, let's just say that sometimes when there's a pool noodle fight, you don't always watch your feet,” Mabel tells her.

Pacifica casts her gaze about the yard, as if there's something hidden in plain sight. “You don't have a pool,” she says, sounding slightly perturbed by that fact.

Mabel shrugs. “Don't need a pool for a noodle fight!”

“Yeah, no thanks. Do you have croquet?”

“Croquet...” Mabel wracks her brain for a moment. Then she perks up. “Oh, you mean whacky-hammer-hoop-balls!”

Mabel digs around in the shed until she finds the box with the croquet set. By the time dinner rolls around she's learned how to play the game properly thanks to Pacifica's tutelage. It's nice to know how croquet actually works, but on the other hand she sort of prefers the freestyle mayhem she and Dipper usually indulge in with the set, even though their own rules had resulted in yet another winning streak for Dipper. What they play has more in common with hockey than the game proper (and always results in very bruised shins). Mabel isn't as good as Pacifica, but she's holding her own well enough. Dipper joined them not long after they started, and for once he's getting destroyed. Now that they're following the proper rules the girls' mini golf skills translate just well enough that he doesn't stand a chance.

“Aaaaand I'm done,” Dipper deadpans as his ball swerves well clear of its intended target and comes to a very gradual stop.

Mabel would normally bug him to keep playing, but he's saved the indignity of any further croquet trouncing when Mom sticks her head out the screen door and announces it's time for dinner.

When they go inside Mabel sees that another chair has been added to the table, next to where she usually sits. Before everyone can take their usual places, she rushes forward and takes Dipper's seat. He frowns at her and looks like he's about to try and kick her out of his chair; then he sees Pacifica sitting by herself, an empty chair between her and Mom. The look he gives Mabel is exasperated, but he goes over and sits next to Pacifica without an argument. Mabel's not-so-subtle manipulation
doesn't go unnoticed by Mom, either. She gives Mabel a very wry glance across the table, with perhaps a bit of warning in the forward tilt of her head.

It isn't until the food is being passed around the table that Mabel starts to consider how Pacifica feels about all of this. The blonde heiress is stiff in her seat, carefully picking at her food with a fork held in an obviously trained manner. She looks kind of distant as the conversation moves around her.

Mabel's first instinct is to ask Pacifica some questions or proclaim to her parents how Pacifica is awesome at mini golf; something to draw the other girl out. But when she opens her mouth to do just that, she stops and reconsiders. Pacifica's just had her entire life turned upside down. Maybe attention isn't what she needs right now. Maybe what she needs... is Dipper! And there he is, the dope, eating his baked potato and ignoring the love of his life. What a boy.

Mabel sinks in her seat until her legs are out far enough to kick him sharply beneath the table. He jumps a little and glares at her. She glares right back and jerks her head meaningfully in Pacifica's direction.

Dipper assesses his friend and looks a little guilty. He leans into Pacifica's space and says something that's quiet enough that Mabel can't make it out over Mom and Dad's conversation. Pacifica's eyes refocus, and her reply is equally soft but her mouth quirks up in a small smile as she continues to talk with him.

Mabel turns her attention back to her food, satisfied with a job well done.

A few hours and a couple TV movies later, it's bedtime. Mabel walks out of the bathroom with her teeth freshly brushed and stops near the stairs. Down below, Pacifica is sitting on the couch, one sheet stretched over the cushions beneath her and another pooled at her side. The room is dark and still, and she's just sitting there, staring at nothing. Mabel bites her lower lip with concern, then descends the staircase.

Pacifica doesn't look up until Mabel is close. It's like she's coming back to herself. She doesn't say anything; she just schools her features.

“So, if you get lonely you know me and Waddles are just upstairs, right?” Mabel says.

Pacifica relaxes almost imperceptibly. “Thanks. I'll be okay.”

“Okay. But, if, I don't know, you just happened to sneak up to see a certain brother of mine, and you needed someone to cover for you…” Mabel says slyly with an exaggerated wink.

It's too dark to tell if Pacifica blushes at all, but she does roll her eyes. “Good night, weirdo,” she says dismissively.

“Heh. Good night!” Mabel trots back up to her room, confident that everything is working out just fine.
Dipper is sitting on a step ladder in the laundry room and adding the occasion to his mental list of Most Uncomfortable Moments.

His mom is in the garage, just through the solid weather-proofed door to Dipper's right. He can hear her muffled voice sometimes. He's glad it hasn't been raised, at least not yet, because she's talking to Pacifica's mother.

He's not sure what he'll do if their voices do become raised. Intervene? Would that even work? He's on the powerless side of the scale, just a kid doing what he can for a friend, all the while knowing that only the adults can really do anything. All he can do is ask. It's frustrating, but it's a well-worn thought. No, he decides, intervention would need to come from Dad, if anyone. Dipper doesn't know Pacifica's mother very well but given the circumstances of their first meeting he must assume that showing his face would only make things worse.

Even Pacifica made herself scarce; she's in the backyard with Mabel, playing with Waddles. The Northwest heiress has taken to the pig and Dipper wonders if she remembers Waddles from the fair, or her intention to win him (hadn't she won a chicken instead?).

Pacifica hadn't outright stated that any direct contact with her mother would end badly; she had made that clear enough by the way she'd disappeared. Which is fine. The last thing Dipper wants is for her to jeopardize her stay by sparking a confrontation.

Dipper straightens up on the step ladder, rolling his head from side to side. He doesn't know how long he's been sitting. Too long, he thinks. He knows there's some very important details to hammer out regarding Pacifica's stay, it's just… he doesn't know how it's going. What are they talking about? Maybe if he opened the door, just a little, he could… No, there's no way. The door to the garage is like the front door, heavy and impossible to open in silence.

He's stuck waiting. He settles back down on the step ladder. It's not like he's been ordered to wait or anything, he can go do something else if he wants. There's just no way he can while this is going on. He needs to be nearby in case… something. He doesn't even know. What if Mrs. Northwest wants Pacifica to leave with her; what if she changes her mind? Man. Dipper doesn't think he could break that to Pacifica. This has to work out.

He perks up when he thinks he hears the thump of a closing car door. Is that it? Is it over?

The door to the laundry room suddenly opens and his mother comes in, closing it behind her. Her face is a mask of restrained anger, mouth pinched and pale. Dipper instinctively wants to hide, even though he knows Mom's rage isn't directed at him.

She thrusts something against his chest as she passes, and he automatically grabs it. “Get rid of this,” she orders.

Dipper looks down, confused. It's a rectangular black leather case, unmarked and shut with steel clasps. He pops it open and stills, heart thudding in his chest. Nestled in its specially crafted space is a small brass bell.
Well. That explains the look on Mom's face.

He studies the thing with revulsion. It seems odd to have such a reaction to so innocuous an object; it is, after all, just a bell. But he knows what it was used for and what it represents.

His first thought is to just throw it away, as his mom probably intended. The big trash can is right out in the garage. Mom had just enough decorum to not toss the thing where Mrs. Northwest could see. Mom is furious, so it had obviously been explained to her what the bell is for and how it works so well (not as well as it used to, does it, Pacifica's mom). He can't imagine what Mom said in reply to such a thing, and whether Mrs. Northwest is so shameless she didn't even understand why Mom reacted that way. Still, Dipper is glad to have not been witness to the conversation. For once, not being the adult is in his favor.

He stands up and reaches for the garage door and then he stops. He could just throw the thing away and it will probably never be mentioned again. But, is it really his place? Is he doing Pacifica any favors by forcibly protecting her? He doesn't want to confront her with the bell. He doesn't want to hurt her. But, at the same time, this is her burden and she has the right to lift it how she chooses. She's spent her whole life at the receiving end of the bell. Maybe it's time she held it.

Or maybe she won't want to. Whatever the case, he really thinks it's up to her, not him.

She's out in the yard, sitting on the lawn while Mabel weaves together a grass hat for Waddles, who is contentedly sunning on his side in a clover patch. It's a scene reminiscent of the summer except Pacifica isn't here in an antagonistic context. It's hard for Dipper to remember how he used to think of her. He stops for a moment on the concrete outside the sliding door, studying her. He tries to connect the girl sitting in the grass to the miniature tyrant who had needled Mabel so, but all he can see is the sheen of her hair as it flutters in the gentle breeze, flowing over slim shoulders and framing her blue eyes, fine nose and sculpted pink lips.

He realizes he's staring and looks away before she notices. This is not what he came out here to do.

“Pacifica,” he calls out.

She turns to look at him, pivoting with her legs in such a way that they won't skid across the grass and stain. She isn't wearing clothing that looks any different to what he's seen a lot of girls wearing at school, but it's still the little things like gracefully avoiding grass stains that tell where she comes from and what was expected of her. He gestures to her and she approaches.

Mabel pauses in her weaving and meets Dipper's eyes questioningly. He discreetly motions for her to stay put; he doubts that Pacifica will want more than an audience of one for what's about to happen. Mabel looks curious, but her bright brown eyes skip between him and Pacifica for a moment before she nods with an understanding twist of her mouth.

Pacifica frowns when she gets close enough to see his strained expression. “What's wrong?” she asks, worry etched on her face. She’s clearly on edge and he can’t blame her; sitting out here while knowing her mother was around couldn’t have been easy.

“Your mom's gone,” he tells her, figuring some good news might help.

She visibly relaxes. “She wasn't terrible, was she?”

“Well, uh…” Dipper winces, “I wasn't actually there. Mom talked to her. I didn't hear anyone yelling, though.”

“So at least she was kind of sober,” Pacifica mutters.
Dipper can't think of any way to reveal the bell gently; he's not sure she would even want him to. He pulls the case out of his pocket and pops it open. “She gave us this.”

Pacifica goes as pale as a sheet when she sees the bell nestled in its cloth.

“Nobody's going to use it,” Dipper quickly assures her. “My mom told me to get rid of it. I thought you might want to do the honors.”

Before he can even react, Pacifica plucks the bell from the case and throws it as hard as she can against the patio. It clangs off the concrete and then rolls in a half-circle, ringing. She shudders and clasps her hands at her waist until it stills.

Dipper picks it back up, careful to hold onto the clapper. The brass is now a little scratched on one side, but otherwise there's not any major damage.

“Throw it again,” Pacifica tells him.

Dipper taps his fingernail against the brass. “You know what? I've got a better idea.”

Pacifica follows him to the front of the house. The garage is still open; Dipper squeezes between the SUV and the wall, arms outstretched like a spelunker navigating a narrow passage. His goal sits in a space between the wooden studs of the garage wall, next to the big freezer and the recycling bin. There, he can see the twin metal tanks of Dad's acetylene torch.

He's never tried to use the thing on his own before and hasn't been directly forbidden from doing so, but it seems like the kind of unspoken rule that's probably a safe assumption, even if he isn't that far from being fourteen. An acetylene torch might be an over-eighteen kind of thing. He'll worry about that later; this is for a good cause. He has this mental vision of the bell destroyed beyond all recognition or chance of repair, and it's very appealing. There are always other bells, sure, but this one has the weight of sordid history behind it. And he thinks that knowing it's really gone will do Pacifica some good; that, and it will be irrefutable evidence that the Pines would never use the thing against her. He wants her to know that she is safe with him. Them. Them. He's making things so personal and he doesn't even know where he stands with her. It remains an open question, one he's hesitant to press. Is it really rejection if they aren't even actually…?

Forget it. More important things at hand.

Pacifica eyes the torch with confusion as he wrests it out of its storage place. It's not exactly the lightest thing in the world; he takes the handle in both hands and leans back a bit. “What is that?” she wants to know.

“How hard can it be?” Dipper says rhetorically.

Pacifica does not reply. But she does take a step backwards, which is not a vote of confidence.
Dipper is a technical-minded sort of guy, he can figure it out. When he finally ignites it, the sudden whump of flame and heat nearly causes him to drop it. Once it's burning, he fiddles with it until the flame is at a decent length. He picks up the bell case with one hand and turns it over. The bell falls and hits the dirt, ringing. Pacifica flinches slightly, but she doesn't have to worry. Revenge is at hand.

He stands and offers her the torch. “You should do the honors.”

She takes it from him gingerly, holding it as if it's a live grenade. She leans back from the flame and steps closer to the bell. Carefully, she bends down and applies the flame to the shiny brass.

It takes longer to get tangible results than Dipper had expected. First, the brass blackens where the flame touches. Gradually, the blackness begins to spread. Then, right beneath the flame, the brass starts to glow. Soon it is cherry red, a patch that widens. It is as if the bell has a skin of some sort, because the top layer of brass shrivels and shrinks away from the flame. Beneath it, the inside has become liquefied, sloughing down onto the opposite side of the interior. Pacifica moves the flame from place to place, melting the solid pieces that stick out from the molten mess. The bell collapses on itself like a popped bubble, a deflated, glowing hot dough. The wooden handle has long since ignited from radiated heat alone, varnish burning blue and leaving charcoal behind.

Finally, she stands back. They look down at the gradually cooling puddle, small flickers of flame and tufts of smoke rising from the carbon husk of the handle. It no longer resembles the hated bell. Dipper takes the torch back and extinguishes it with a pop as Pacifica watches the hardening remains. Her face is red with heat and excitement and maybe even relief.

“So, do you feel better?” he asks her.

“Yeah…” she says slowly, and then her features transform with a triumphant grin. “Yeah!” She viciously kicks some dirt over the destroyed bell.

Dipper follows suit, kicking until the steaming remains are mostly concealed. “If Mom asks, we threw it away.”

He's putting the torch back into its containing rack when he feels a slender hand on his shoulder. He looks back at her.

“Dipper… Thanks.” She can't quite meet his eyes, but he knows she means it.

“Don't mention it,” he says, made suddenly awkward by her touch (and he's sweating, but it's not because of the torch). “You should get back to Mabel before Mom starts wondering where we are.” He then winces, realizing what that implies. “Not because of, not because we… are up to something, I mean, we are, but not…” He shuts his mouth before he can dig himself any deeper.

Pacifica rolls her eyes and turns away. “Like we would even make out or whatever.”

“Yeah, no way,” Dipper laughs weakly.

Then she glances over her shoulder and her blue eyes make his mouth dry. “Well, I don't know. I bet it would be fun,” she states, and then saunters away.

He's not sure which is worse: the thought that she isn't serious, or the thought that she might be and he's probably blowing it.
Pacifica hasn't been one for nerves, typically. Confidence was always her calling card. But now that her unshakeable sense of superiority has been revealed to be a facade (like so much of her life), the self-doubt that underpinned it all has begun to bubble up between the remnants of her birthright. It is painful, destabilizing, to be forced to admit what a part of her has known for a long time: She is a very insecure person.

Her first day of public school threatens to illustrate that in all kinds of ways.

She is standing in front of the full-length mirror that adorns the door of Mabel's closet. She'll have her own mirror, at some point. The downstairs study has been hers for a very short time period and requires further conversion before it is a proper bedroom.

She's critiquing her chosen outfit for the day, riding the fine line between fashionable and trying too hard. Will anyone even recognize her designer accessories? This is Piedmont; it's hardly as isolated as Gravity Falls, so, probably. She's always tried to look her best, regardless of locale. It's ingrained in her, automatic and, to her mind, necessary. She has an image to uphold. Thing is, she's not sure what that image is, now. Middle class fashionista? Teenage runaway? She's accustomed to her clothing reflecting her lifestyle, not to it being a reflection of a life she is no longer living.

Which likely brings her closer to 'trying too hard'; such a fine line to walk. In Gravity Falls she hadn't needed to worry about that, seeing as she was the one setting the trends to begin with. She had never told anyone at her old school about her multiple wins in the Gravity Falls youth pageant, both because a Northwest winning something there was a forgone conclusion and because none of her former classmates had ever heard of the place. She may as well brag about winning a potato contest in Iowa or something if she's going to brag about being Miss Gravity Falls.

She needs to know what's in at Dipper and Mabel's school. Problem is, she can't rely on either of them to tell her. Dipper doesn't know or care (which is baffling) and Mabel's taste in fashion is something Pacifica has only recently been able to term 'eccentric', seeing as they are now friends. There's going to be no help from either of them.

So, the question remains: is her Helgenson blouse too much? The answer hinges on how many students are capable of recognizing a five-hundred-dollar blouse from London. The right students, presumably. Between the blouse and the Parisian skirt, she should catch the favorable attentions of any popular kids in the know.

But the more important question, she is discovering, is whether she wants that. And that is much more difficult to answer.

She has no illusions as to which social tier Dipper moves in. Mabel is more difficult to pin down; given her level of outgoing charm and self-confidence, it's doubtful she can be considered unpopular, or that anyone targets her. At least, not to her face. Mabel is socially fearless, effortlessly genuine, a free spirit capable of being her own unique self even within the stifling confines of expectations and school structures. Pacifica knows exactly the kind of people who will hate her for that. Pacifica was one of them, not so long ago. She's well past the aversion — the envy comes and goes.
The twins are her only lifelines, her anchors. They will be her introduction to her new life and she will become acquainted with their circles. Is she brave enough to untether herself, to find her place at the top (where she belongs, a small part of herself still insists)? Can she navigate her new environment on her own?

Hah. Trick question. It's really the other way around: Is she brave enough to leave fake smiles, fake friends and price-tag superiority behind to try something more genuine?

What does she really want? Who is she now? Who's staring back at her in the reflective glass? Does she *like* this new person?

She's not sure. She only knows she doesn't like who used to be looking at her in the mirror. So, in that sense, any change is progress. And she wants her new friends to like her as much as she is finding she likes them.

She is startled from her reverie when she realizes Mabel is standing just behind her, to the side. “Yep, it's still you,” Mabel says, grinning into the mirror.

“Ugh. I don't know,” Pacifica grumbles, turning away.

“You. Look. Fabulous! Work it, sister!” Mabel enthuses. “Oh my gosh, Pooja is going to love that skirt!”

Pacifica looks thoughtfully down at her skirt, twisting her lips. Mabel clearly has expectations for Pacifica's integration into her circle of friends. “Mabel, you hated me, like, a few months ago. Your friends aren't going to like me.” She makes the prediction with the appropriate note of disdain, but internally she finds the thought surprisingly disappointing.

Then she just about jumps out of her skin at the sudden blast of an air horn.

**“FRIENDSHIP REALITY CHECK!”** Mabel bellows. She leaps down from the swivel chair she somehow managed to stand on without falling and discards the air horn onto her bed (Pacifica can hear Mrs. Pines shouting something downstairs). “Firstly, I never hated you,” Mabel declares, raising one finger. “Maybe sometimes I thought you were being a big buttwad, but never hate! Secondly, my friends are way too cool to not like someone who can fight Boss-Lobsters. And thirdly, we've been friends for like six months! Didn't you learn to count in fancy school?!”

Pacifica suspects Mabel's definition of 'friend' is much looser than her own. Then again, Pacifica never had a real friend before last summer, so what does she know?

She opens her mouth to reply and then is startled again by a pounding at the door. “Mabel, I told you not to use that thing in the house!” Mrs. Pines says. “Is Pacifica in there?”

“Sorry, and yes,” Mabel calls back.

“You're going to miss the bus, so both of you move it.”

Pacifica turns to gather up her school supplies but is stopped by Mabel's hands suddenly falling onto her shoulders.

“Pacifica, I know you're worried 'cause it's your first day at regular school, but just remember: You're the coolest, you look great *all the time*, and Mabel is your BFF for infinity plus one!”

Pacifica rolls her eyes but has to smile at that. “You have gum in your braces,” she says.
“I'm saving it for later!”

Dipper leans into the doorway, backpack slung over one shoulder. “Hey, the bus is already at the end of the street.”

“Remember!” Mabel implores Pacifica as they race out of the room.

Mabel, energy as boundless as usual, surges ahead. Dipper and Pacifica walk quickly behind her, out the door and down the sidewalk as the distant sound of the bus echoes out from the other end of the street.

“Remember what?” Dipper asks Pacifica as they hurry along.

“That you're a huge dork,” Pacifica snipes at him for no other reason than there's something tight in her chest that's only getting tighter with every step.

Dipper leans away, looking at her askance. “Geez, what did I do?”

Pacifica sighs, instantly regretful. “Nothing. I don't know about this.”

“Come on, you'll do fine. Who's going to mess with Pacifica Northwest?” he asks rhetorically, giving her a shy smile.

He's messing with her in all sorts of ways, even if he doesn't know it.

Boarding the bus is almost surreal. It's a scene out of a movie, literally, because she's only seen the inside of school buses on TV and in movies. It's crowded and loud and smells intensely of diesel and rubber. Hardly anyone gives her a second glance. They all seem too intent on their half-done homework, gossip, trading cards, phones or window naps to look at who's coming on board. Mabel waves to someone and moves a few seats back. Dipper slides into the only empty seat Pacifica sees, the one behind the driver, and she immediately sits next to him, relieved to not be separated.

He gives her a strange look as the bus lurches into gear. “The cool kids sit in the back,” he tells her.

“So?” she says.

For whatever reason, that makes him relax.

The ride is hot and feels like an eternity. Pacifica asks Dipper about the school; basic things, like the name of the school team and what's on offer in the cafeteria. He also knows some stuff that she hadn't needed to consider at her old school, like which water fountains are actually cold and where the good chairs are in the library.

“Of course you would worry about library chairs,” she teases him.

“Hey, you had a library inside your old house,” he fires back.

“Yeah, but I didn't go there,” she lies, having spent many an hour reading, not that he needs to know that. Besides, she always read in her room.

She doesn't start feeling really overwhelmed until the bus pulls up in front of the school. She knows her schedule only coincides with Dipper or Mabel's for portions of the day. She files out of the bus and slowly moves with the crowd towards the double doors. It's ten minutes to the first bell and the students mill about, talking, laughing, exchanging affections with their significant other. Pacifica moves to the side and stands stiffly in the space between two rows of lockers. Why had she ever
considered that she would even want to be queen of this school? She's just a new kid. She already wants to go home.

Then Dipper pushes through the crowd with Mabel close behind him. When they move in front of her, Pacifica feels their presence as one would a shield. She's safe, for the moment.

“I think Jess is waving to me,” Mabel says, standing on her toes. “Are you going to be okay? You know where your first class is?”

“I think so,” Pacifica says.

“I'll walk her through it. You'd better go if you're going to get to the annex on time,” Dipper advises Mabel. Pacifica vaguely recalls that Mabel's first class is in a newer building, clear on the other side of the school.

Mabel quickly clasps Pacifica's hand. “Good luck! You'll do great!” she says, and then slips into the flow of students and quickly disappears from sight.

Dipper outlines the path Pacifica needs to take. She does her best to memorize what he's telling her, but at the same time she's also trying to memorize the feeling of safety she has, with the glossy painted concrete block wall at her back and Dipper between her and the rest of the school. Why can't she just have every class with him?

“You're gonna be fine, right?” he says, looking concerned.

There are a million things she wants to say to him. “It's not what I expected,” is what comes out.

“Is it really that different?” He looks over his shoulder. “I guess it is kind of crazy. You get used to it.” He turns back, expression pensive. “No, you know what? We know what crazy really is. This isn't that. Which is good, since otherwise it would be… insane and on fire, I guess.”

She takes in the bedlam in the hallway. All around her are boys her age. Some of them are taller than Dipper, some of them are stronger. But could any of them possibly be braver? She can't imagine these other kids defying a dream demon. None of them know what she and Dipper know. And even if that knowledge is pretty scary, it's still something they earned, and something they share. It's important. It's a part of who they are.

When she focuses on Dipper again, there's a small smile on his face. “See? It's not so bad. It's just… normal. It kind of got to me when we came back, but I had Mabel, and you have us.” He puts his hand on her shoulder — another echo, another afterimage of the hidden room and the hope he gave her. “I know you're stronger than anything this school can throw at you.”

It's not too late.

She doesn't think about it.

She just leans forward and presses her lips to his.

The kiss is simple, short. She pulls back, cheeks pinked and eyes wide. He looks like he's been short-circuited.

“See you at lunch,” she says, and hurries away before he has a chance to say anything.

“Dipper! Dude, who was that?” she hears someone exclaim as she winnows through the crowd. She doesn't hear him respond.
Her lips are still tingling when she walks into her first period class. She sits down and opens her book, waiting for the inevitable moment when the teacher singles her out as a new student. But she doesn't care.

She's just counting the minutes 'til lunch, when she'll see him again.
For about thirty seconds Dipper doesn't even know where he is, which is good, because he's in a school hallway where he just had his first kiss in front of an audience. He'd be mortified if that was something he was capable of being at this moment.

His first kiss! (And no, Mermindo does not count.) And it wasn't awkward, or unwelcome, or out of pity after a lame date with one of Mabel's friends, as he's always sort of suspected it would be. It wasn't meaningless. It was hope and gratitude and promise. It was soft and sweet and just right. And it was with a really, really, smoking hot girl, and, you know, he's not shallow or anything, but come on! Pacifica Northwest!

His moment of nirvana is inevitably invaded when he hears a voice just behind him. “Dipper! Dude, who was that?”

It's Mikey Diego, one of the guys from the Tragic: The Garnering table. And he isn't alone: Dan and Jon are with him. All of them appear equally curious and close to something like disbelief, as if a celebrity just walked by. Which, Dipper supposes, is about as likely as him getting a kiss from Pacifica Northwest. Not that these guys have any idea who she is. All they know is that they've never seen her before and now she's kissing Dipper, which makes two things no one's seen before.

Dipper straightens his hat, steadying himself. “Hey, guys,” he says, approaching them.

“Who was that?” Mikey repeats.

“Pacifica,” Dipper says, nearly tripping on the syllables. Knowing that more is required, he adds, “Me and Mabel met her over the summer and now she's staying with us for a while.”

It's an almost ludicrous simplification of a very complicated situation, but that must not be apparent from the outside because his friends accept it easily enough. Everything except the most obvious point of detail.

“You started dating last summer?” Dan says, probably wondering why they've never heard of her even in passing. Dipper isn't really close with any of them, but he's spent enough time hanging with the group for such a revelation to have come up in some capacity.

Dipper isn't ready to talk about it. And he's pretty sure Pacifica won't want him to, either. He's been second guessing everything she's done up to this point; a kiss on the cheek would have left room for further doubt but a kiss on the mouth is a message even he can't confuse. Now he knows that she's at least attracted to him (which blows his mind). They still need to talk, though, now more than ever, and he's not going to speak for her by claiming some kind of relationship.

“No,” he says truthfully. “I can't really talk about it, okay? It's complicated.”

“Oh, one of those,” Mikey says, but he's not being judgmental so much as wry. School is full of relationships that fall under the wide umbrella of 'it's complicated'.

He and Dan and Jon drop the subject readily enough, mostly because when it comes down to it they aren't especially interested in Dipper's love life. Dipper kissing a new girl is odd enough to be
temporarily interesting, but these guys care a lot more about the Star Wars EU and the minutia of D&D&MD than they do about who is or isn't dating who. He's lucky in that way. They don't care enough to dig.

There are other people who do, though, and one of them is in his second period class. He's leaning over the water fountain by the girl's locker room (always the least likely to be jammed with gum) when he is suddenly grabbed by his backpack and hauled backwards, water dribbling down his chin.

It's Mabel. She's practically vibrating with excitement, which means news has spread fast. She points a finger at him, eyes huge. “Rochelle said you were making out with Pacifica!” she says accusingly, probably because he had dared to not inform her immediately.

“We weren't making out,” he immediately denies.

Mabel gasps. “So you were doing something!”

Dipper shifts uncomfortably where he stands, tugging at the straps of his backpack. “Mabel, can't we talk about this later?”

Mabel takes his reluctance as an implicit admission (which it sort of is). “I missed it!” she laments, face crumpling with dismay. “Why couldn't you have done it a minute sooner?!?”

“Okay, hold on,” Dipper says sternly. “First of all, quit being a creep. I don't need a running commentary on every step I take with a girl.”

“I knew steps were taken, I knew—”

“And besides, she kissed me, okay? It's not like I had any advance warning.”

If Mabel was a cartoon, there would be rainbows shooting from her eyes and songbirds settling on her shoulders. “She kissed you,” she sighs dreamily. “Was it magical? Did it set your heart aflutter?”

Dipper sets his jaw. “We'll talk about this later.”

“But—”

“No, Mabel! It's not even all up to me.”

Mabel's shoulders slump and she slowly backs away, making certain he can see her hurt expression by maintaining eye contact until she backs around the corner. He knows he'll have to smooth things over later, but after the unmitigated disaster that had been his would-be courtship of Wendy he knows better than to allow Mabel to meddle or to allow himself to jump to conclusions (or start making lists). He's going to be the mature teen he likes to think of himself as and talk to Pacifica about it when he has the chance.

That doesn't mean he won't be a jittery bundle of nerves in the meantime.

If he were as brave as he wants to be, he would have shaken off the stunning effect of her kiss to follow her and ask her exactly what it had meant. But his bravery is of the monster-hunting variety, not the dealing with girls variety. He’d demonstrated that to an embarrassing extent over the summer. Plus, Pacifica isn't Wendy. It's hard to think of any similarities beyond them both being girls and being attractive, and even their respective attractiveness has so little in common.

Wendy is tall and athletic, with bright mischievous green eyes and a ready smile. In retrospect, he must recognize that, as much as he had been attracted to her, the feeling had been inextricably tied up
in his need to be her friend, and to be like her. Wendy is so cool, so capable, so easy-going, so
collected and comfortable in her own skin. Dipper is none of those things. She had represented a
teenage ideal, a hangout buddy and a pretty girl in the same package, with a ready-made circle of
friends just waiting for him to step in and expand it. It's embarrassing to realize, but, setting his crush
aside, he probably wouldn't have behaved much differently if Wendy had been a guy. He'd been a
hanger on, a wannabe, desperate to impress his cool older friend. The fact that she is female had just
complicated things, wrapping up his admiration and emulation in newfound hormones. He isn't sure
what he'd wanted more: To be with Wendy or be her.

What if she had reciprocated? He finds it hard to imagine her doing so from any stance other than
pity (such fantasies had once come so easily, too). It would have been a disaster. She'd known that
even when he couldn't admit it to himself. He is so grateful to be her friend. He needs that more than
he had ever needed all the other noise.

Pacifica is a study in total contrast. She is short and graceful, with curves that grow more pronounced
every passing month. Her eyes are blue like the bay in clear summer; they turn electric with little
warning, storm fronts flashing beneath straight blonde bangs. They can soften with sunshine or grow
dark with tears like a rainy purple evening. Her lips plump into a smug pink rosebud or thin into a
pale petal slash. But, sometimes, they bloom full and genuine, grateful, hesitantly affectionate, with a
rare flash of the finest smile money can buy. She is cashmere and porcelain, blue and blonde and
china white wrapped around a core of steel she is still learning to flex. Diametrically opposed to
Wendy in just about every way. Dipper wonders if he even has a type.

Or, he thinks with chagrin, his type is 'has boobs'.

Good grief. All this rumination seems premature considering he doesn't really know where he stands
with Pacifica. But, maybe he has cause to hope it's something good for the both of them.

Mabel ignores him through second period, broadcasting her displeasure with crossed arms. He's not
entirely unrepentant and feels kind of bad for brushing her off. Still, he can't let her do this for him or
push him into something he's not ready for.

Darn it. He realizes he should have said something; now Mabel will go after Pacifica since she didn't
get anything out of him. Pacifica isn't Wendy or Candy. She won't take Mabel's meddling with good
humor or embrace it as an opportunity. She could feel humiliated; she might turn inward and regress.
She's still uncomfortable with some of the newly exposed sides of herself.

He hopes he's wrong. Maybe Mabel and Pacifica are good enough friends now that Pacifica won't
react badly. Maybe he's not giving her enough credit. Mabel is a close companion to the Northwest
heiress too, it's not just Dipper. And Pacifica's never been as fragile as she sometimes seems.

Well, all that aside — whatever is happening, whatever the kiss means, it was meant just for Dipper.
He has to deal with this no matter what Mabel does. The result of Pacifica's presumably impulsive
gesture of affection isn't extreme, at least. He isn't well known beyond his small circle of friends. His
personal life is not a hot topic in the halls.

He honestly expects Pacifica's social cachet to outstrip his within the week. She's gorgeous,
fashionable, sharp-tongued and confident enough to use her words to get what she wants. She has
the air of someone who belongs at the top, that ineffable popular quality, and she knows it. She can
probably score a seat at the coolest lunch tables by style alone.

It's true that she's been shaken by all that's happened. She has discovered great wells of dormant self-
doubt along with a new sense of perspective (as they all have, after Weirdmageddon). But Dipper
figures that being popular is like riding a bike. Placed back into a semi-familiar habitat, she will rise
to the top ranks. Because she's Pacifica Northwest, and that's what she does.

He doesn't know what will happen to their friendship if they become separated by social tiers. At least they'll still live together. She can't avoid him at home. Not forever, anyway.

He shakes his head slightly and tries to focus on the lesson at hand. He's a little ashamed of the direction his thoughts have wandered. He needs to give Pacifica the benefit of the doubt. She's already put forward more effort to change herself than he would have ever imagined before. She has reached out to him more than once. It makes him want to be worthy of that trust.

And to be worthy of being kissed again, because wow.
Pacifica's first class goes by without incident. Which is good, obviously… but also strange. Good, because she wants her first day to go well, and strange because she isn't used to drawing no attention beyond scattered glances. She's not exactly invisible, it's just that no one seems to care who she is. Maybe that's self-centered of her, to notice that. Maybe it's just too late in the school year for anyone to care. It's not like they'll get a chance to know her.

At her old school she would have expected some more judgment; her shoes are very last year, after all. Her social status in private school had been carefully tended to, buoyed by expertly deployed outfits and tactically superb flattery or barbed bon mots. By contrast, in Gravity Falls she was (and it is past tense now, she supposes) a trendsetter, a social queen, by default. Of a very small fiefdom, sure; she had always chosen to ignore that part. Looking back, she can see how her pageant of a summer life had always carried an air of desperation. She'd needed to be loved somewhere, even if it was grudging and conditional.

Now she's building something better. She has to believe that.

And it's so easy to believe when she can still feel the warm press of Dipper's lips against her own.

It's second period and she hides the faint blush rising to her cheeks behind her history book. She isn't paying much attention to her lesson, both because of her preoccupation and because she's already covered The New Deal in her old classes. Her history of expensive private schooling, equally expensive tutors and the Northwest expectation to excel has allowed her to slip into the end of the school year in Piedmont without much trouble. She's in the process of completing some standardized testing, her grades have been transferred and she's more or less riding out what little remains of school until summer arrives.

After that… well, so much of her future remains up in the air. If Mother and Father divorce (which seems inevitable by this point), she could end up anywhere in the world with one parent or the other. Each have their downsides but given the choice she would rather stay with her mother. Mother’s inattention grants greater personal freedoms. Both parents have high expectations, it's just that Father is more likely to enforce them. And after the incident with the bell (and Weirdmageddon, because, no, she hasn't gotten over what he tried to pull) she doesn't want to talk to him. Not for a long while.

Pacifica hates to even think about it. She's spent such comparatively little time in Dipper and Mabel's company, but already the thought of leaving them…

She can't go back to how things were. She won't.

And this thing, this growing something she has with Dipper; it's nothing complete, just a possibility, the faintest promise. What it could be, she doesn't know. All she knows is that she wants to be closer to him than she is. And she's trying. She doesn't know if that's enough, but it has to be. What else can she do? She can't take back all the things she said and did last summer. Life doesn't work like that. Not without a time machine, anyway, which actually exist according to Dipper (and apparently she was going to win Waddles in some other timeline, which is such a weird thing to be told and she still doesn't know what to think about it). She doesn't have one, though, so too bad. Besides, even if she did, wouldn't changing how things went last summer change how things are now? She doesn't want
The bell rings, startling her. She places her book back into her bag and walks out with the rest of the students.

She stops near the intersection of two halls to consult her schedule. She wrinkles her nose; next up is PE. She has nothing against maintaining a proper figure, but the gym clothes she's been given are less than flattering. She is also reluctant to display any of the pale scars around her ankles and feet. Weirdmageddon had not left her physically unscathed. She knows she's lucky to be alive, they all are; she just doesn't care much for the reminder every time she looks at her bare feet.

She girds herself and turns in what she hopes is the right direction when a blur of brown and pink suddenly appears in her field of vision and drags her bodily in the opposite direction. It's Mabel, obviously. Pacifica rolls her eyes but allows herself to be pulled out of the path of the crowd.

Mabel appears almost frenzied. Whatever she wants, she must have been holding it in for awhile. Her finger comes flying up and points at Pacifica like a triumphant spear. “I told you you liked him a lot!” she declares jubilantly.

Pacifica blushes; she can't help it. That doesn't stop her from glaring back at Mabel. “What did you hear?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Mabel says coyly. “School news, sports news, you tonguing Dipper news—”

“I did not!”

“Then what did happen tell me—tell me—tell me—” Mabel says frantically.

Pacifica briefly considers walking away, though it's not like she can escape when Mabel will be waiting at home. Besides, even if Pacifica is personally involved she can't deny it's some momentous gossip. Last summer, this would have shocked the whole town.

Who knows? It still might.

“I kissed Dipper,” Pacifica admits, and it doesn't sound any more real or plausible when stated out loud. Pacifica Northwest does not kiss Dipper Pines, even though she had, and it was perfect.

Mabel pushes her cheeks together and makes a noise that only dogs and people under twenty can hear.

Pacifica appreciates how stunning this news is, but she's going to be late for next period. “Mabel, I know this is a big deal, but I'm going to be late!”

Mabel snaps out of her hearts-and-rainbows trance and grabs Pacifica by the hand. “It's this way, but later you're telling me everything!”

Pacifica had forgotten her next class is with Mabel. She spends the period trying to play volleyball, which usually isn't a problem because she's good at it. However, Mabel's ambush has brought the kiss back to the forefront of her mind: His hand on her shoulder, the warmth of his presence, the press of his lips against hers (soft, shy, slightly chapped). He left behind his bookish scent and the gentle burn of menthol lip balm. Oh, geez, is she getting all sentimental about his Carmex? She's totally lost it. Between Weirdmageddon, the ghost and the impending divorce, she's misplaced her old life along with her mind.

It feels wonderful. She's never been so lost or so alive.
After class she shrugs out of her gross PE uniform and back into appropriate fashion as quickly as possible. She's chosen a vacant locker next to Mabel's and is now slightly regretting it due to Mabel's sly glances. The smugness Mabel is emitting is practically a palpable vapor. Pacifica sets her jaw and refuses to look over at the other girl. But the fact that Mabel was probably right about Pacifica's feelings before Pacifica herself even knew means she's going to be insufferable until Pacifica caves in. And while Pacifica has her virtues, patience is not one of them. If she ends up trapped in a house with an increasingly self-satisfied Mabel she's going to snap in a couple hours, tops.

“Soooo… I hear you have a crush on a certain someone's brotherrrrrr…” Mabel whispers gleefully as the locker room begins to empty.

Pacifica slams her locker shut and spins the lock with more force than necessary. “Would that be your brother, Mabel?” she drawls acridly.

“Yes!” Mabel exults. “Oh my gosh, it's so perfect! My brother, my best friend — and way better than last time.”

Pacifica freezes. “Wait, 'last time'?” Is Mabel talking about Wendy? No, she can't be. That never actually happened. Right?

“Candy is awesome, but she just wasn't right for Dipper. I was blinded by the possibility of best-friend-and-brother-romance. I flew too close to the sun,” Mabel muses. “But this isn't summer love. Or even an epic summer romance! This is soul-bonding destiny love! No seasonal restrictions! Just year-round romance, against all odds, no matter what dumb old society says! A love for the ages…” Mabel's voice lowers to a reverent whisper.

Pacifica doesn't know about living up to that kind of expectation (she'll get back to the thing with Candy; is that the big weird girl or the small weird girl?). She's only almost fourteen. What does destiny love feel like, if there's even such a thing?

No, you know what, it doesn't matter because Mabel is crazy. And so is Pacifica, because she kissed a dork and loved it. Sick. That dork happens to be smart and cute and stronger than he looks and brave beyond all reason, but still… He wears a trucker cap and keeps an annotated journal. She should be mocking him behind his back or to his face and keeping her distance because, ew, nerd vibes.

God, she likes him so much.

Mabel is still waxing semi-poetic. “You're like Romeo and Juliet except you know how to talk like people!”

That brings Pacifica up short. “Um, Mabel — they, like, died.”

“Only because they were really really dumb. You and Dipper are totally smarter than them,” Mabel says dismissively. “You guys are more of a musical power couple. Something modern, maybe kind of Disney Channel-y?”

Pacifica is so over this conversation. “Look, we haven't even talked about it. And I guess you're a spaz for matchmaking or whatever, but don't be.”

Mabel is crestfallen. “You're just going to leave it at that?!!”

That isn’t what Pacifica means. She can easily imagine a future where she turns from Dipper, never kisses him again, never talks about it as she slowly refreezes and walks with the cheerleaders or whoever it is that's popular in this lame school. When she passes him at his locker she will see his
hurt or anger from the corner of her distant eye and it will reflect off the perfection she projects. And somewhere deep in an unvarnished corner of her Northwest-jacketed soul she will scream and scream.

It's so easy to picture. It would be so easy to do. It's what she's supposed to do.

It makes her stomach churn. Needles of burgeoning panic prick at her thumping heart. She can't do it. She can't she can't she won't—

Mabel must notice Pacifica's suddenly shaken demeanor. Her dismay turns to concern. “Pacifica?”

“I— I need to talk to him. I will,” Pacifica says, taking a deep breath.

Mabel brightens. “Yes! You totally should do that!”

Pacifica nods as she steadies herself. What was that? A panic attack? A premonition? She's pushing it back down, but she can't quite help herself; there's something naked and desperate at the back of her throat.

“Please don't let me change back,” she abruptly begs, and she is so ashamed but still so needy.

Mabel grips Pacifica's hands without hesitation. “You would never,” she says.

In this moment, Pacifica can believe it because Mabel does.
Pacifica surveys the lunch room. She knows exactly what she's looking at: the animal kingdom. An ecosystem of Ziploc bags and Formica tables; a hierarchy laid out in lunchboxes, plastic trays and crinkled brown paper. This is where the structure is bared, no longer disguised by assigned seats and group projects. As it does on the bus, the natural pattern asserts itself in the absence of any higher power imposed. Groups gravitate. Cliques congeal. Every layer calls to its own, and if you forget in which spectrum you are painted, you will be reminded. If you're lucky, it won't be public.

Pacifica Northwest is the cream: She rises to the top, as is her nature. But lately that nature has been slowly revealed to be more nurture than she had ever before considered. Now she knows how fragile her life really is and just how much insecurity was stocked beneath every condescending smile, cutting remark and victory sash. The knowledge comes painfully in sharp, sudden bursts and long, agonizing reflections, each of which have rent her further apart.

It's the unexpected bounty she's found in the ruins that makes it all seem bittersweet; and growing sweeter.

She has a decision to make, as she stands there with her lunch tray. She spies a gaggle of finely dressed girls, at least a few of which have eyed Pacifica's designer wear with appreciation or envy, both of which are useful. There's also Mabel, openly waving to Pacifica without a care as to how she appears, surrounded by girls who mostly seem to fall into the crafting crowd; art-types with handmade bracelets and earrings, trapper keepers with personal illustrations; the extracurriculars, a multi-club gathering.

And then there's Dipper, sitting not too far from his sister with an open book by his sandwich as he looks furtively at Pacifica and tries not to look like he's looking.

The only surprising thing, really, is how easy a decision it is to make. Her flag was already planted right where she wants it, before the first bell rang.

Head held high, she casually navigates the tables and seats herself next to Dipper.

His eyes go wide; then he tries to play it cool. “Hey,” he says, whatever nonchalance he is aiming for going down in flames when his voice squeaks like a rusty gate.

Some of the girls near Mabel stifle giggles. Dipper's face turns red and he tugs his hat down and pretends to concentrate on his sandwich, as if eating it presents a challenge.

Pacifica would have rolled her eyes on any other occasion, but right now she's too busy making a point to make fun of him. Time to refashion some of that old Northwest confidence, except this time for what she wants and not what the name demands. She sits straight in her seat, cool and composed. She takes Dipper's hand off his book and wraps it around her own.

The message is clear to everyone who is watching — which, given her status as a total unknown and Dipper's lack of status in general, isn't very many people. What's more important is that the message is understood by its most direct recipient. Slowly, Dipper's fingers close around hers. His brown eyes lock with hers, full of questions. They still need to talk. They've taken every step but that.
Which is intimidating. She doesn't know how to talk about things. It's not like they ever did that in her family. In the Northwest house the less said about anything inappropriate (meaning anything that didn't gel with their projected self-image of the perfect family), the better. Talking about feelings is lame. Why can't she just hold his hand and let that be enough?

Because, she internally counters with a sinking feeling of realization, that isn't just not enough for Dipper — it's not enough for her, either. If they are going to be something, she needs to hear him say that. She needs it. Otherwise, she's not sure she can ever truly believe it.

The moment is dispersed when Mabel, brimming with glee, says, “So this is our awesome friend Pacifica. She's from Malibu!”

This garners the expected level of interest. Pacifica is grateful that Mabel didn't default to the point of origin being Gravity Falls, which would have been answered by a lot of 'where'?s. She makes her introductions and answers the usual inane questions about Malibu (the truth is that Gravity Falls is much more interesting, albeit in a way that can't be discussed). She relinquishes Dipper's hand so they can both eat, aware their meal has a deadline.

She should be in her element; she's with a group of girls and she's the wealthy, exotic outsider. In no time at all she'll know who to flatter and who to subtly put down in order to end the meal with a new gaggle of would-be friends. But she's off balance. Mabel's friends aren't all cut from the same cloth as the type of people Pacifica is accustomed to dealing with. Her usual methods might work in some cases and backfire in others; the formula is delicately different. Besides, it is Dipper who is her point of focus. His shoulder is next to hers and the near whole of her attention resides within that gap.

Plus, there's Mabel to consider. Pacifica doesn't care all that much about the opinions and feelings of these strangers around her. But she does care what Mabel thinks, even if there's a part of her that doesn't want to, and she's looking to her exuberant friend for cues. Pacifica knows exactly how to wound another girl's fragile ego with just the right combination of friendly observation and hidden poison, a vital lesson she'd learned well in her old circles (in Gravity Falls, she hadn't bothered to cloak her venom: There had been no rungs left to climb). She's afraid she might involuntarily slip into old tactics, so she follows Mabel's lead. She's a good friend now, right? Whatever that means. At the moment it means she lets Mabel choose the topics and keeps things noncommittal.

After lunch, her next class is with Dipper. They walk the halls together, winnowing through the press. They aren't holding hands, but she walks so close to him that their arms brush.

“So what do you think of public middle school?” Dipper asks, gesturing at the throng around them.

Pacifica looks up at some water-stained acoustic tiles, several of which sport pieces of hurled gum. She grimaces. “It's kinda gross.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Dipper says with a quick grin. “Can't wait for high school. Who knows what new and interesting gross things we'll encounter.”

Pacifica suddenly hopes with all her heart that she'll be going to high school with him. The thought of starting over yet again with a freshly divorced parent is hanging over her like a guillotine. She wants more time. Like, forever would be good.

Don't think about it. Push it down; it'll save.

In class they divide into pairs to create a paragraph describing their assigned nation's economy. She pairs with Dipper and doesn't miss the slightly apologetic nod he gives to a boy who must be his usual partner. As they work, Pacifica amuses herself by 'accidentally' brushing against Dipper every
time she moves. He's flustered and distracted and still does about seventy-five percent of the work. If she manages to stay and go to high school with him then she needs to make sure they have the same classes. She's no slouch when it comes to schoolwork (her parents would not have stood for average grades), but if she can work with Dipper then making honor roll will only be half as difficult.

After class finishes they are standing in the hall once again. The next period they will be separated. Pacifica knows she needs to get going, but for some reason she feels like she can't leave without saying something. It's getting ridiculous, all the things they need to talk about. And the day isn't over yet.

“Well, see you,” he says awkwardly. Maybe she imagines it, but she thinks he looks at her lips.

Dipper has been the bold one before, in the sense of what they are to each other. He has already saved her in so many different ways. So if this part of things is up to her, that's fine. She's better at it, anyway.

She tugs him forward by a strap of his backpack and when he steps towards her, eyes widening, she presses her lips to his again.

She supposes every thrill gets old, but this one sure hasn't started to.

When she moves back he's looking stunned. “Okay, so, we meet at the bus? Which is it again, seventeen?” she asks.

“Uh, yeah, seven, uh, seventeen,” he stammers, and then clears his throat.

“You'd better be there,” she says with a bit of bite. She's not serious and he knows it, but just the playful edge to her command seems to put him back in balance.

“Bet I get there before you,” he says through a smile, then trots away.

The rest of the day is a blur of new faces and new assignments and lots of questions after class. She's playing catch up, but her transferred grades are good enough that she's going to finish just fine whether her teachers know who she is or not. Her pedigree demands a level of academic excellence that had sometimes been difficult to maintain, though it had usually just been an annoyance. She's smart and she knows it. Dipper is also intelligent (he may actually be a budding genius in the mold of his mad-scientist great-uncle — not that she'll ever admit it). But there's a difference between getting straight As and being a big nerd, a divide mostly measured in social status and preoccupations with certain forms of fiction.

When she steps back out into the hall after her last class the press of students eager to go home is momentarily overwhelming. She's never attended a school with this many kids before; it strikes her as overcrowded. She supposes that's just how public school is. Well, not everywhere. She really doubts Gravity Falls has too many students (though, now that she thinks about it, she's pretty sure the schools in town are attended by all the kids from the county, too).

Dipper was right, of course. As the buses are being boarded she just barely makes it out in time, having been forced to discuss assignments with a teacher. She sees Dipper out in front of the bus, scanning for her. When she hurries towards him Mabel suddenly appears from behind.

“There you are!” Mabel says.

It's nice to know they were looking for her.

The bus is, again, cramped and smelly. The other kids are much louder and more active than they
had been on the morning ride, boisterous and ready to be home. Pacifica feels exhausted. She sits on
the tacky rubber seat as her nose is assaulted by diesel fumes and too many bodies with too little
airflow and tries not to get motion sick or think much about anything at all. It's been a day of too
many firsts.

Not, she thinks as Dipper's hand brushes hers, that she regrets any of them.
The bathroom has taken on the ambiance of a sauna, mirror beginning to streak as condensation gathers, beads and runs. Dipper doesn't know how long he's been in the shower, but it's probably too long.

This thing with Pacifica — and he knows it's kind of juvenile to think of it as a 'thing', but it is — has taken sudden definition today. The kiss was unexpected, obviously, but equally so was the way she hadn't retreated from it. Pacifica had only reached out enough to start becoming a friend in the midst of a dark, desperate moment. Dipper had figured she'd need more time to work through their mutual attraction. And, filled with self-doubt and innate awkwardness though he is, even he can be certain now that it's mutual. She kissed him, after all, not the other way around. And he's clearly a few steps behind. He had still been trying to wrap his head around the hand holding.

Now it's the night after Pacifica's first day at school and Dipper is thinking in the shower because she's given him a lot to think about. If he is somehow wrong about every signal he's received (and if a consummate solipsist like him received them, then they were loud and clear) then he is truly bat crap crazy. Pacifica likes him.

He can't decide how to feel about it. On one hand, there's the amazing fact that a girl who is his friend and happens to be very (very) attractive is interested in him romantically. A little less than a year ago, he would have been disappointed that she wasn't the correct attractive female friend, but he's well past that. Disappointment is not a factor. He likes Pacifica's sharper sides in their more tempered form, admires her social confidence, respects her for making a concerted effort to better herself and finds her to be exceptionally pretty. Reciprocation isn't a problem, either.

On the other hand, there's the question of what they have in common. There are some deeper things they share, to be sure: Gravity Falls binds them both to its fantastical contours. But is that enough to overcome surface differences? They come from such opposing backgrounds. He doesn't even know what pastimes they share, what they can do together as a… couple? Is that the term? Or are they just fumbling around, too young and inexperienced to form anything real?

Heck, maybe he's too young for this kind of reflection. The part of him that likes Pacifica is telling the rest of his brain to shut up and go for it. Who cares if they don't like the same movies? They'll just play video games. She might let him kiss her! He's out of his mind if he turns that down in some lame attempt to be adult about it.

He can hear Grunkle Stan's voice in his head as clearly as if the old man was actually saying it: *Kid, guys like us don't get a shot at a girl like that everyday. There's a million and one jerks out there just waiting to move in on that money! Uh, girl. She's a girl, she's not… she's not money. The point is, you're the jerk she's looking at. So get in there! And if she ever asks for a pre-nup, say no.*

Okay, so even Pretend Grunkle Stan's advice makes Dipper feel kind of dirty (no mean feat, considering he's in the shower). And that's definitely not what the real Grunkle Stan said about it, though he'd just been talking about Dipper's need to intercede, not a possible relationship. Still, the basic point stands: No one knows tomorrow. Take a chance. Be spontaneous. Basically, don't be like himself.
But — he thinks as the relentlessly forward-thinking, impossible to quash corner of his mind begins to issue a refutation — but, her life is in the middle of a total upheaval. What if he's taking advantage of that? What if she doesn't really know what she wants anymore, doesn't know herself anymore, and she's just latching onto him as the closest port in a storm? Would he be a bad person, then, for taking what she offers?

Or, his other mind and his hormones vociferously rejoin, that same upheaval has brought them together in a way that's true, has allowed them to know one another far beyond the shallow, puberty-driven relationships of their peers. They can build something better, based on respect and trust and hard history. She's reaching out to him not in a way that's superficial; she's reaching out to him in a way that is anything but that. She's not confused. They connect.

And he likes kissing her. Which is a far more compelling argument than its simplicity suggests.

Man, he really is good at rationalizing.

Whatever the case is, nothing is going to be settled, no matter how long he thinks in the shower, until he and Pacifica talk about it.

A pounding at the door underscores the finality of the thought. “Dipper!” Mabel yells through the door. “How pruny are you trying to be?!”

“Alright, I'm getting out!” he yells back. He is starting to feel kind of wrinkly.

He dries off and dresses, brushing his teeth quickly in the steam, watching his fogged reflection. His sleeping shirt is damp by the time he opens the door, which is fine. He'll be extra cool beneath his ceiling fan.

Mabel is waiting, holding her own pajamas. “Woo!” she exclaims, leaning back as the steam billows out. “Geez, Dip, are you writing a report on the rainforest or what?”

“Take an exotic safari in your own bathroom,” he advertises, waving her in.

Mabel favors him with a knowing look. “Are you going to avoid her all day tomorrow, too?”

“I'm not avoiding her,” he protests. “I'm just… working some stuff out.”

“Don't tell it to me, bro,” she retorts, striding into the steam.

Ugh. When she's right, she's right.

Pacifica isn't in his room, or Mabel's. Which is fair. He should have to go to her. She's taken her share of big steps for the day. He's still so pleasantly surprised about what happened at lunch. Maybe it wasn't a huge deal for the collective, seeing as nobody knows who she is, but he knows it was a huge deal for her. What happened is less important than what she meant.

Downstairs the house is cool and quiet. The hum of the central air permeates the background beneath the deep hiss of the pipes as water runs to the shower. Pacifica is in what used to be the study, sharing her space with a bookcase Dad intends to move. His work computer has been relocated to the basement; Pacifica’s arrival was the impetus Dad needed to finally set up the workstation down there he’s always talked about. She’s supposed to have a delivery of her things at some point. Dipper doesn't know what all is on its way but knowing her its more than she has room for. He has a feeling that space in the Pines house is about to become a premium.

The living room is dark, lit only by a soft glow from the kitchen. Dipper peeks in to see the recessed
light over the countertop is on, probably serving as a nightlight so Pacifica can make it to the 
bathroom without stubbing a toe. He moves past the couch where Wendy had so recently slept (and 
that fact is strange, like he's not in Piedmont and the house has shifted six hours north, where Wendy 
can crash whenever she wants). In the alcove behind the living room are the double doors to the 
study and the sliding glass that leads to the enclosed back patio. The study doors are open; he can 
hear the whir of the ceiling fan inside and see the faint yellow emission of the standing lamp.

He knocks on the door frame, just in case she's getting dressed or something. “Pacifica?”

“Dipper?” she says.

“Yeah, it's me. Can I come in?”

There's some rustling and what sounds like a closing book. “Okay.”

He steps inside. She's sitting on the edge of the fold out guest bed, waiting for him. She's wearing a 
matching set of sleeping shorts and a soft t-shirt, both of which look expensive. He's wearing a ratty 
white shirt with some conspicuous holes and a pair of mesh shorts with the string drawn so tight it 
almost touches his knee. They're both dressed for comfort, but of course she still manages to be 
stylish.

She's looking back at him in the dim light, devoid of makeup, blonde hair slightly tousled from the 
towel. She is gorgeous in the near-dark — almost ethereal. His mouth is suddenly dry. He's forgotten 
what to say.

“Are you going to bed?” she says, prompting him.

“Uh, yeah, in a minute.” He's got about twenty different openings and he can't settle on one. He 
blows out a slow breath, steadies. “So, we should probably talk, huh.”

She tilts her head up imperiously, fine nose raised. He is suddenly a supplicant before Oregonian 
royalty. “About what?” she says archly.

Not so long ago, this would have ended the conversation badly. He would have been confused, 
annoyed, turning to leave with a roll of his eyes and something suitably sarcastic on his lips. Luckily, 
he's seen her defenses rise and shatter too many times over the past months to be fooled. She's 
protecting herself. She's afraid he will hurt her.

How does she think that will happen? Does she fear rejection? It's the possibility that best fits the 
moment. Dipper isn't exactly in his element here, but he's nothing if not logical. Her sudden distance 
is therefore a good sign. If she fears his rejection, then, logically, he doesn't have to fear hers.

If only such rational conclusions worked as well on the heart as they do on the mind. Logical as it 
may be, he still feels… well, Mabel put it best.

Awkward and sweaty.

He might understand what she's doing (he hopes); that doesn't mean he appreciates it. He calls her 
bluff. “About the bell. I think we should bury it tonight, just to make sure we don't get in trouble.”

It works. Confused by the sudden change in topic, her body language loses its rigid tones. She 
blinks. “Oh. Okay, if you think that's…” Then she sees the smile he can't entirely suppress, trying 
though he is. Blue eyes spark and narrow. “You jerk!”

“Me?” he protests. “I came down to talk to you and you were all, 'about what?'” he parrots, busting
out his curled-lip impression of her valley girl cadence.

She's not flattered. "I don't sound like that, shut up!"

He continues to contort his face until she hurls a pillow at him; but she's giggling as she does it.

"Fine, you don't sound like that," he concedes under the threat of further barrage.

"Oh, really? I thought I was the worst," she says, looking away.

That has nothing to do with what they're talking about, and everything to do with what they're supposed to be talking about.

Dipper sighs. "Pacifica, I'm sorry I said that. You're not the worst."

She curls her legs up and sinks into the pillow behind her. "...I'm sorry for everything," she says, barely audible.

He shrugs it off. He'd stopped holding a grudge for past behavior the moment she'd volunteered for the assault on Bill's fortress, and maybe even the moment she pulled the lever. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't!" she suddenly bursts out. "Why are you so nice to me?"

She sounds almost resentful. He doesn't know what he just started; all he knows is that he has to keep talking until something gets settled. "Because you're my friend, and... I— I like you," he manages to say.

There. He's openly reciprocated. That's clear, isn't it?

As it turns out, not clear enough. Pacifica slumps on her bed again. "Maybe you shouldn't."

Okay, so this is... guilt, or something. Or she likes him back but doesn't want to, a possibility that makes his heart start to sink, so hopefully that's not it. Whatever the case, this is the moment. It's monologue time. He needs to put the words together that will fix this. He's managed to say the right things to her in the past. That couldn't have been all luck. Could it?

He lets his gut lead because his brain isn't helping.

"Why shouldn't I like you?" he challenges.

She looks at him like he's lost his marbles. "Uh, because I was a total tool to you and Mabel, duh."

"Yeah, like a year ago. And you've been working so hard to move on, why bring this back? I don't care about that stuff anymore. I know Mabel doesn't either."

"Because! Because I—" she cuts herself off, eyes glistening wetly in the low light. She swallows, pale neck flexing. "...Because I really like you and I want you to like me back, but why would you? My parents don't like me. Sometimes I don't like me," she finishes with a whisper.

Dipper is relieved. Not by her admission, but because this he can make better. She doesn't have to be afraid, not of what he feels. What he ends up saying is a far cry from smooth, but it's honest.

"Pacifica, I like you, a lot. And not as a friend — no, I mean, I like you a lot as a friend, too, you're... awesome — but as a girl. I like you. And when you kissed me today, that was just, wow. That was the best. So not the worst."

He wishes he could tell what she's thinking. He's done well reading between the lines of her words,
but when she wants it to be her face is undecipherable; probably something she learned swimming with the sharks of her old social circles. He's sure, though, that this is necessary. It's his turn to put himself out there. That doesn't make it any easier to sit there, trying not to sweat, though. What if she's toying with him? What if this whole thing is some kind of incredibly, unnecessarily elaborate revenge?

No. No, she's better than that. That's not what this is. Hasn't she proven herself enough times already?

It's then he realizes her mouth has just slightly opened, as if in shock.

He can only take feeling this exposed for so long. It's a gauntlet of self-consciousness. “Well, uh, I should probably go to bed, I guess—”

“I like you, too, a lot,” Pacifica says. Then she grimaces. “Stupid Mabel and her dumb…! Just because she was right about this doesn't mean she's an expert!”

Dipper can't help but laugh. “Oh, man, you too?”

“She's so weird,” Pacifica huffs. “Like she wants to be Cupid or something.”

“She sort of was, for about a day,” Dipper recalls.

“So weird,” Pacifica reiterates.

The pause that follows is loaded with dawning realization. “So… you really like me?” Dipper can't be too sure.

Pacifica tosses her hair back in exasperation. “Did you not feel me hold your hand? Ugh! I kissed you in front of, like, a million dweebs you dummy!"

“Hey, this is new to me,” Dipper defends himself. “I've never had a…” He doesn't finish the thought, not sure if he should say the actual word. Is it too much?

She watches him expectantly from the shadows.

He straightens up, braces himself. “I've never had a girlfriend.”

“Do you want to be my boyfriend?” she asks. The shaky underpinnings of her sardonic tenor betray her anxiety.

Dipper smiles shyly. “I kissed you back, didn't I?”

Blue eyes go wide, exhilarated. Then, suddenly, they smolder. She leans forward, hands pressed to the bed on either side of her knees. Her head tilts invitingly. “Not really…”

His mouth goes dry as fast as his palms go slick. “Oh. So, um… M— Maybe I should…?”

“It's only fair,” she says imperiously. She's almost daring him, but she's just as off balance as he is, flush with excitement, with nervousness, with the acknowledgment of what it all means.

There's still so much to say. As he starts to approach her, he knows there will be time and space to say it. And right now, he knows exactly how to express what's on his mind.

There is a sudden rap at the door frame. Dipper stumbles to a halt and Pacifica jolts so hard she nearly falls off the bed.
It's Dad, standing in the doorway in his sleeping clothes, hair damp from the shower. “Time for bed, guys,” he says casually, but his expression is shrewder than his words.

Dipper is just glad it isn't Mom. He and Pacifica are just standing and sitting there, respectively, the door is open, nothing happened! Dad's expression remains neutral and friendly, but his eyes catch Dipper's meaningfully.

“Um, yeah, I was just saying goodnight,” Dipper says, shuffling away from the bed. “Goodnight, Pacifica.”

“Goodnight,” she says, only the slightest pout betraying her disappointment.

Dipper follows Dad into the kitchen to get a glass of water and then goes back upstairs. At the top he pauses when Dad's hand falls on his shoulder.

“I might have heard a certain someone will be checking on you tonight,” Dad says conversationally. “Probably be best if she finds you in your bed, huh?”

Dipper wishes he could turn invisible. “Yeah. Sound asleep.”

“Mm-hmm,” Dad hums genially, and gently squeezes Dipper's shoulder before returning to his own room.

An hour later, as Dipper stares at the ceiling and pictures the girl who is so close, he can't help but wish Dad hadn't delivered his timely warning. It's not that Dipper really wants to get in trouble again or anything like that.

It just would have been worth it.
The sun is bright over the north Atlantic, bouncing off the swaying waves. The rippling sheen flickers in the foam and the curling tips of the swells that wash against the side of the Stan ‘o War II. Ford stands at the prow, watching as the ship cuts through the sea, pointing the way home.

He's answered many questions during the excursion. He's attained goals he had once only dreamed of, charting anomalous activity in the dimensional membrane with an accuracy achievable only in the new digital age he now finds himself in. It feels like only yesterday that he and Fiddleford couldn't have wrangled the kind of processing power they had wanted even if they had unlimited funding. These days the phones that rest in most people's pockets are more advanced than the machinery which controlled the portal. He's witnessed some strange and advanced civilizations in his travels, sure, but it still makes him marvel to see how far his own planet has come in a scant thirty years. A digital revolution, indeed. The Information Age.

He's been interested in a more personal brand of information, though, not just the kind that sparks through microchips and writes to new media. Over the course of their months at sea, Ford has sought every story he can out of Stanley regarding the twins. He had found himself with new family the second he'd exited the portal and had been surprised at how quickly he grew fond of them. He had been so afraid, at the end, that he would lose them before he really got to know them. Stan's stories are a delight. It's hard to miss the thirty years’ worth of life on Earth — it's too much, too soon. But he does wish he had come back just a little sooner, because with every story and anecdote about Dipper and Mabel he finds himself missing the rest of that summer. Stan’s telling of their birth hits Ford especially hard. He should have been there to welcome them into the world.

Of course, for all his reminiscing about his niece and nephew it is his own doing that separates them with endless miles of ocean, he thinks with a slight twist of his lips. He's done his best to stay in touch and he's been successful, for the most part, but he can't help but think that he's allowed his work to come between himself and his family again. It's a divide he intends to address as soon as he returns to the mainland. A day not too far off, if his GPS is correct.

There are other questions he has; ones he hasn't permitted himself to ask. Dipper and Mabel represent his new life, one he's eager to establish. Other questions can only dredge up a past he wasn't there for. He's held his tongue, knowing he won't like the answers.

It's not like him. He prefers the truth, even when it's unpleasant (and it so often is). But so help him, he always wanted one more day with Stanley without the specters between them raising their ghostly heads. It's been a revelation, becoming brothers again. He'll do anything not to ruin that.

But it's time.

He turns from the view and walks back to the bridge. Stanley is inside at the helm, a cup of coffee in one hand and the wheel in the other. The sea is calm, and their course is set. Ford settles into the second chair.

“What, is it your turn already?” Stan asks.

“No, no. Not much to see at the moment. Clear sailing ahead.” Ford rubs at his stubble, wondering if
this really is the time. The thought is cowardly, and he quashes it. “Stanley, I wanted to ask you some things.”

Stan sighs and sets his coffee mug down. “Yeah, I figured this was coming.”

Well, Ford probably shouldn't be surprised. Stanley has become far more perceptive with the decades gone by than he ever had been in youth. “We don't have to if you don't—”

“No, you need to know. But it's gonna be hard. You know that.”

“I do,” Ford says solemnly.

Stan is quiet for a moment, his distant gaze fixed on the horizon. “We lost Mom first,” he says abruptly. “That was in '89. Emphysema. You know how she loved those lousy Lucky Strikes.”

Ford is thrust into vivid memory: The smell of tobacco on the old plaid couch, the flicker of a match in the dark. Ford and Stan, stealing cigarettes and sticking them behind their ears, convinced they looked like G.I.s, pretend-storming the beaches of Jersey on overcast days. A raspy cough in the morning, accompanying shuffling slippers and the sound of frying eggs.

“The funeral was the first time I'd seen Dad since what happened,” Stan continues.

“What did he say?” Ford asks, concerned at how much worse that could have made things between them.

“We didn't talk. I don't think he or Mom ever heard about my fake death. I've had so many other identities that when I 'died' it woulda taken some work to connect the dots all the way to Jersey. When I took your name, I thought I was gonna have to bust out my impression of you on a regular basis, but I guess you didn't talk to the rents much more than I did. Only had to write a few times.”

It's true. Ford had been consumed by his studies and then by his research. The phone calls to Mother had become fewer and further between, the letters less frequent. “Dad and I... Well, things never were the same again after he kicked you out. I know that doesn't make up for—”

“Hey, we got a great thing goin’ here,” Stan interrupts. “Let's not dig that up, okay? We're good, you and me. Let's stay good.”

Ford smiles crookedly. “Of course, Stanley.”

Stan takes a long swig of his coffee, as if fortifying himself. “…Dad went in '98. Heart attack, but not bad like in the movies, just... He went to the hospital and he never left. Still lived alone in our old place above the shop, right up to the end. Shermie took care of everything, but I went over in '99, just to see the place before it was sold. I thought, I don't know, I might…” Stan shrugs almost angrily, like there's an insect digging at his neck and he's trying to dislodge it. “I don't know. I shouldn't've bothered. Didn't even recognize the neighborhood, all gentrified or whatever they call it. Less character, more coffee shops.”

Ford had already been certain there wasn't anything left for him in New Jersey, so the confirmation doesn't come as much of a shock. What comes next probably will. He hasn't heard anything about Shermie since his arrival, but that is, in its way, a form of bad news. All that's left is learning the why and the how.

“And Shermie?” Ford says thickly.

He sees his older brother in his mind's eye. Shermie was tall and boisterous and charismatic in a way
the twins never were. He'd been good with people; with women, especially. An athlete, a crowd-pleaser, quick with a joke or a compliment. He'd been the bridge, the voice of reason whenever flare ups occurred between Stan and their father, whenever Ford's introverted tendencies drew parental exasperation. The dynamic of the family had shifted when Shermie moved out. Ford can't help but wonder how things might have ended differently if Shermie had still been around for the finishing catastrophe of Stan and Ford's senior year.

Stan's jaw tightens. This is the hardest one, for sure. Ford honestly hadn't expected his parents to still be around, not after thirty years. He had hoped, but not expected. Shermie should still be here.

Stan stares down into his coffee cup. “You know I avoided him? Shermie woulda seen right through me. He always could tell us apart. Twenty years and maybe ten phone calls, a dozen letters. Some brother I turned out to be.” He drains the rest of his coffee in a single swig and smacks it down, hard. “It was '03. He was living in Colorado. Wanted to be closer to his son, I think, just didn't make it all the way. But he was an East Coast kid at heart, even more than us.”

Ford needs to know. “How?”

“Car accident,” Stan says, and he suddenly looks older, like the memory has settled on his shoulders. “Nothing dramatic. Nobody was drunk, nobody was speeding or yakkin’ on their phone. Just black ice and some poor woman with three kids in the back and bad brakes. When she spun out, the tail end crossed lanes and tapped Shermie's rear axle, and that was it. He hit a tree, driver door first. He either died on the way to the hospital or in the ER, I wasn't ever clear on which. I guess it don't matter.”

“No,” Ford says, heart aching, “I suppose it doesn't.”

They sit in silence, together, for what could only be a minute or so, but it feels like hours. Two men, one rewrapping an old wound and the other freshly injured. Ford needs time to grieve. He must absorb a loss that happened a decade ago to everyone but him. He doesn't know how to come to grips with the great weight he's been handed. He can hide behind his intellect, rationalize, minimize, distance and distract himself, but it will still be there, waiting.

“Dipper and Mabel don't really remember him,” Stan says sadly. “And I don't got any pictures, or at least I didn't find any.”

“In my study, perhaps,” Ford murmurs, thinking about it. “You didn't have access to the second level, but whatever family mementos I kept would be there.”

“Shermie left everything to his son and he had whatever Dad kept, so the kids might have already seen more than whatever we can dig up,” Stan says.

“That's something, at least.”

“Yeah.”

They sit together in silence, ruminating. It occurs to Ford that, as much as they've lost, it isn't as if they haven't also gained.

“I want to see them, when we get back,” he says to his brother. “Shermie's boy, I mean. And the twins.”

“I figured.” Stan blows out a breath, grimaces. “I hope you remember how to drive, because I ain't doing it all myself.”
“Oh, I've been behind the wheel of a few interesting machines,” Ford recalls. “Some of them bore adequate resemblance to a car. I'm sure I'll do fine.”

“Famous last words,” Stan grunts, and it probably would have gotten a smile out of them both if the news about Shermie hadn’t just been delivered.

That evening, Ford is standing at the prow of the boat again. The sun turns the waters orange, dying the horizon in its layered, darkening shades. He knows he's looking at the longer wavelengths of color not filtered out at the angle the sun’s rays are striking the atmosphere, color made even more vibrant by pollution. Still, the familiar hues of the Earth's sun are comforting after so much time away. Even after all the places he's been and all the things he's seen, Earth still has beauty to offer.

Somewhere to the West, past the curving edge of the horizon, across the vast plains and mountain spines, resting at the far edge of the North American continental plate — basaltic where it lies beneath the waters he now traverses and granitic where it slopes up from the depths; Ford always did enjoy the slow shuffling of the lithosphere — lies California, and two people who have become in such short a time so very vital to him. It’s been a lifetime since he formed connections like that.

This time, he's determined to never let go.
Mabel walks off the bus with her face bunched in a scowl. The object of her dissatisfaction is right behind her, nose and lips curling in an aristocratic sneer.

“Are you still mad?” Pacifica says in a tone of bourgeois boredom.

Mabel says nothing until the bus is on its way with a deep grumble. Behind her, Dipper is keeping his distance; he doesn't know what this is about.

“Yes!” Mabel exclaims.

The incident in question had occurred at lunch. Pacifica had been seated next to Mabel and Dipper had been temporarily called over to the card collector's table, probably to give his long-winded opinion on one dorky thing or the other. Tabitha had been proudly displaying a new outfit in a very loud combination of neon orange and red: She has a lot of enthusiasm for fashion and little sense of restraint. Mabel's never thought much of it, being in something close to the same boat and loving it. Her other friends, though, had given compliments marred by slightly incredulous smiles and sideways glances.

“I thought I'd just try to be bright, you know? Something cheerful for summer!” Tabby had said.

“Yeah, I really see what you were trying to do there,” Pacifica had drawled.

Her tone hadn't even been biting; more dismissive than anything. The underhand slight had not gone unnoticed. Tabitha only smiled awkwardly and seemed to brush it off, but Mabel knew she was hurt. The whole mood at the table had been quietly strained for a time. At least Dipper had returned and held Pacifica's attention for the rest of the break. The last thing Mabel had wanted was more subtle sniping from the blonde girl.

Now, as the bus disappears around the corner, Pacifica still hasn't apologized. “That outfit was hideous, and you know it,” she says, hands at her hips.

“It doesn't matter!” Mabel retorts. “You can't just say stuff like that!”

Pacifica flinches slightly, as if Mabel's admonishment is a physical thing brushing past her. “Like what? Truthful?” she says, jaw set aggressively. “I thought I wasn't supposed to lie?”

Mabel doesn't buy that for a second. “You know saying sucky things is wrong!”

Pacifica is finally beginning to turn red, her marble front cracking. “Yeah, thanks, Mabel. I'm so glad you're here to tell me how to act,” she scoffs.

“I shouldn't have to,” Mabel says. She spins on her heel, intent on finding Waddles to calm herself down.

“Whoa, okay, what is this about?” Dipper tentatively intercedes.

“None of your business, Pines!” Pacifica snaps at him.
Dipper stammers something that may or may not be a coherent reply. Mabel stamps across the grass to the backyard and the comfort of her favorite pig.

Sometime later she's squinting up into a clear blue sky while Waddles naps against her side. With her righteous anger dimming, it's time for her to reflect. And it's a beautiful day for it, so that's a plus. A single, puffy white cloud hovers near the edge of her vision, sliding slowly past her periphery. She closes her eyes and thinks.

She finds herself thinking of her own reaction as much as Pacifica's words. With the gift of hindsight, she figures she wouldn't have been so mad if it wasn't for a second emotion furthering her negativity: Disappointment. Once, Pacifica's glib putdown would have been expected. Now, it strikes Mabel as an unwelcome remnant of the past. She's come to expect better of her friend. But she also has to acknowledge that the reason she expects better is because Pacifica has done so well, all things considered. Are Mabel and Dipper pushing her too hard? Or has she been thrown so far off balance by the changes in her life that she's still lashing out? It's true that she’s been uncharacteristically withdrawn at school, even after a week to settle in. Mabel assumed she was just preoccupied with Dipper as much as her new environment, but maybe Pacifica is still far from her comfort zone.

How can Mabel be happy if her friend isn't happy? It's throwing off her happiness chart all over again!

Maybe this, maybe that, maybe whatever. Mabel sighs loudly and spreads her arms out. Who is she now, Sigmund Fraud? Trying to analyze her friend or something. She doesn't know why Pacifica decided to be mean. She should probably just ask instead of trying to run around inside her own head. This is what Dipper does all the time, and Mabel's seen how that usually works out. Butts to that. She's tired of thinking about it already.

And you know what? Pacifica probably hadn't even meant to say it. It probably just came out, she didn't mean it, and she would come around and apologize given a little time. Yep, that’s it. Mabel just overreacted. Problem solved!

It's easier for Mabel to believe in the best than the opposite.

She hops to her feet and goes back into the house, ready to settle the minor spat and get back to the business of being friends. But once inside, she finds Pacifica's doors are shut. There's no sound coming from within. Is she taking a nap or something? Dipper can't be in there, because then the doors would have to be open. Mabel raises a hand to knock, hesitates, and decides to let it be for a while longer. Waking Pacifica up is a good way to make her even crankier.

Mabel settles onto the couch and whiles away a solid hour flipping back and forth between cartoons and sitcoms, all of which are aimed at kids younger than herself but some of which are funny anyway. She finds herself missing Duck-ective and all the other no-budget shows on Gravity Falls Public Access. Even when they were terrible, they were terrible in an entertaining way. She has to get back to the Falls in time for the Duck-ective season premier. The writers must be going somewhere good with the whole evil twin plot. Which reminds her, she needs to send Soos another email with some more ideas for their collaborative Duck-ective fanfiction!

It's about forty-five minutes or so before Dad usually starts dinner when Dipper comes down the stairs with a determined gait. His jaw is set; he has the look of a boy with something to say. Mabel watches him over the rim of one of the throw pillows she's piled onto herself. She doesn't know exactly what's going on, but she can guess. Looks like Dipper has finally decided that even though Pacifica is his girlfriend now, he can still confront her like he used to.

He disappears around the corner, but Mabel knows she'll be able to hear everything. She would feel
sort of bad about eavesdropping, but, hey, she was there first. It's not her fault the couch is right against the wall to Pacifica's room.

Dipper knocks on the door. “Pacifica?”

“Go away!” Pacifica says, voice muffled behind her closed doors.

“Look, I don't know what's going on, but it's gone on long enough. I want you to talk to me,” Dipper says, voice not quite as firm as he probably wants it to be.

“There's nothing to talk about,” Pacifica denies.

“Right, I forgot, you have a big fight with Mabel and then lock yourself in your room all the time,” Dipper retorts. “Come on, Pacifica. You can't stay in there forever.”

“That's what you think.”

Unfortunately for Pacifica the doors to her room are intended for a study and don't actually lock. With a clack, Dipper pushes them open.

“Hey!” Pacifica says, outraged.

“Pacifica, I'm not going away. Just tell me what's wrong.”

“What's wrong is you barging in here, you wad!”

“Why are you so upset? I can't help if you won't tell me.”

“Like you tell me anything,” Pacifica huffs.


“What about that Corduroy girl?” Pacifica challenges.

Uh oh. Mabel sinks a little lower on the couch. Wendy has nothing to do with Mabel and Pacifica's current argument, but it looks like Dipper has stumbled his way into an entirely different confrontation. Maybe it's misdirection on Pacifica's part; still, given her insecurities and the newness of her relationship with Dipper, it was bound to come up at some point.

“Wendy?” Dipper says with confusion. “You know her.”

“Not as well as you do, apparently,” Pacifica says stiffly.

Dipper makes a frustrated sound. “Don't try to change the subject. Come on, tell me what happened.”

“You first! What am I, just your rebound?”

“Wh— that's not… That's not even remotely…” Dipper stammers.

He's caught off guard, ambushed. Mabel would intercede on her brother's behalf if she didn't know that making an appearance right now would only worsen things.

Dipper is stubborn, though. He shuts his mouth just long enough to recover and forges on. “You can't just distract me. I was right there when you were arguing with Mabel, I know something's up.”
Pacifica is equally stubborn. “Oh, and nothing was ever up with you and Wendy?”

“There wasn’t any me and Wendy!” Dipper exclaims (and even though the moment isn’t exactly ideal, Mabel can’t help but be glad he can admit that).

“That’s not what I heard,” Pacifica says, and even though she’s hitting the same notes of scorn, so familiar from the first half of the past summer, her tone lacks its old distance.

“Then you heard wrong. She—…” Dipper halts momentarily, voice heavy with frustration. Mabel can visualize him clearly; she knows this mode of his and the mannerisms that go with it. “I had this stupid, unworkable, totally hopeless crush on her, and when I finally came clean she turned me down, okay? It wasn’t a thing, it was nothing, it was never going anywhere and I just didn’t want to see it. I was so, so dumb about it and then, all of a sudden, there you were holding my hand and, I don’t know, flirting with me, I guess, and I know I was kind of dumb about that, too, but I was just afraid that… that it was just me again. And now you’re all ticked off and you won’t even tell me why, and is that because of me? Am I… not, did I not say something or do something, or…”

“No!” Pacifica says, and she sounds aghast as Dipper’s mini-meltdown pierces her defenses. “It’s not that. It’s me.”

“It’s… Are you breaking up with me?” Dipper squeaks pathetically.

“What? You dweeb, what are you even talking about?!” Pacifica lambasts him. “This isn’t about us, I had a fight with Mabel because I said something I shouldn’t have and I’m sorry, okay?”

That’s all Mabel needs to hear. Too bad Pacifica isn’t talking to her.

“Okay, that’s— good, yeah, I don’t want to, either.” Dipper says quickly, nearly tripping over his words in relief. “Wait. So we’re talking about this thing with Mabel again? Not Wendy?”

“Oh my gooooosh,” Pacifica groans through what sounds like her clenched teeth. “You call me out for changing the subject, and then when I change it back you don’t even notice!”

“You threw me off with the whole Wendy thing! Which I guess is what you were going for, so… well played?”

“Obviously,” Pacifica huffs.

“What did you say to Mabel?”

“I didn’t say it to her. I said something that maybe she thought was—” Pacifica begins. Mabel’s heart starts to sink with disappointment again, but Pacifica stops in the middle of her sentence. “…I said something mean to one of her friends. It just came out, I wasn’t trying to… Whatever. She hates me again anyway, so whatever.”

That sounds like Mabel’s cue. She pushes out of the pillows and hurries around the corner to Pacifica’s door.

“Mabel doesn’t hate you, there’s no way,” Dipper is saying. “You already said you were sorry to me, so just tell her and—”

He’s cut off in surprise when Mabel skids into the room and halts her momentum by catching his shoulder, nearly bringing them both crashing down as her socks slide along the hardwood floor. “Pacifica-I-was-just-disappointed-and-I-forgive-you-and-let’s-be-best-friends-FOREVER!” she says in one breath.
Pacifica looks away, picking at her sheets with one well-manicured nail. “I thought you were still mad.”

“Disappointed,” Mabel immediately corrects. “I mean, everybody says dumb stuff. Dipper told Soos that he just messes everything up one time!”

“Really, Mabel?” Dipper mutters, tossing his hands up. “Don't drag me into this…”

Real talk. “I know you're trying, Pacifica. I shouldn't have got all frowny just because you messed up once. But you really hurt Tabby's feelings. You know that, right?”

Pacifica seems to wrestle with herself for a moment. “I don't know why I said it, alright?” she bursts out. “I'm… sorry.”

“Do you think you could apologize to her?” Mabel suggests.

Pacifica stiffens.

“Uh, one step at a time,” Dipper quickly intercedes. “Maybe you could work your way up to that.”

Pacifica nods with obvious reluctance. Mabel hopes for more, eventually, but she'll accept that for now. Pacifica is still trying, after all. What more can Mabel ask for?
Pacifica wonders: if she stares into a mirror long enough, will she cease to recognize herself?

Because unless a bubble of madness has descended over Piedmont and possibly the whole of California (still not a possibility she's totally ready to discard), that is definitely Dipper Pines sitting next to her. His shoulder is pressed to hers and their knees meet beneath the desk. Occasionally it just strikes her, for no apparent reason, that this is home: This is the new normal. She is so far from what normal used to be that her memories often seem like they belong to someone else. Sometimes when she goes to bed she thinks she might wake up in the panic room beneath a burning mansion, the gate lever untouched by her hand.

It's like a fork in the path of her life so clear and immediate that it transcends metaphor, becomes something close to literal. In dreams, sometimes she pulls the lever, and sometimes the bell defeats her, and she diminishes again. She lies there in her darkened room and stares at the dark shapes around her until they bring her back to herself, to the present; to the Pacifica who somehow braved the storm and came out the other side scoured of everything she had thought she was but was really what she had been made to be.

She's not simple enough to blame it all on her parents. She made plenty of bad choices for all kinds of petty reasons. But when she examines those choices, she finds it hard to connect with them the way she used to. She doesn't know why she had ever wanted to be that person. Perhaps all she had needed was another option. In the end, she only knows she took one when it was presented to her. She had a lot of help, though. She can't dismiss that; not when he's sitting right next to her, reminding her of her attachment to him with his welcome presence.

This is who she is now, somehow. This girl sitting so close to her dorky boyfriend in their modest suburban home, doing homework from public school. And resting silently between them (and Mabel) are secrets so wild and weird they sound ridiculous spoken aloud. Those truths certainly hadn't seemed ridiculous at the time. They saved themselves and the world. Who does she expect to be after something like that?

Pacifica Northwest, now queen of nothing. And so, so free.

Dipper is hunched over his math paper ostensibly making calculations in that brainy head of his, but his eyes keep darting up to Pacifica's face. He's distracted and it's her fault and she likes that. There's this single, curly brown lock of hair that curves across his forehead. He brushes at it habitually, tucking it away, but it always curves back down. She wants to tug at it, like it's a string tied to his attention.

“Uh, okay, so if that's the X for the first problem, then… I mean, with the, with…” He stutters to a halt in the middle of his sentence, eyes darting to her face again.

“Then it's…?” she prompts him.

“It's, uh…” He clears his throat nervously, brought to a stop yet again when she brushes his bare arm with hers. “…Maybe we should take a break,” he suggests.
They aren't getting much done, that's for sure. They're too distracted by each other, caught up in this new thing they've created between them. It's exciting and nerve wracking and Weirdmageddon may be over but the regular apocalypse has arrived because Pacifica has a boyfriend and it's Dipper Pines. A boy she hadn't even known before last summer (and how easily it could have stayed that way, she shudders to think). A boy she had dismissed then disliked then grudgingly respected and then liked and now like-liked, and now boyfriended, if that's even a word. He gave her what she needed to save herself and then kept giving, over and over. He didn't do it to make her like him; whatever else this is, he isn't a white knight and she isn't a damsel in distress. He helped her because he thought it the right thing to do; and he had trusted that in the end, she would do what was right, too.

She isn't so sure. But she's trying.

"Bored already?" she says archly.

He looks down to where her fingers are lightly grazing his. "You're totally messing with me," he accuses with a grin.

"You wish," she retorts, even though it's true.

He drops his pencil with a shrug. "We'll have to finish this later, but I'm done if you are."

She's done with homework. That doesn't mean she's done with him. She reaches out and swipes the cap from his head. "Why do you wear this all the time?" she asks, examining it. It's identical to the one she'd always seen him wearing in Gravity Falls, though that one had significantly more wear and tear. He must have received a new one at some point.

He doesn't try to take it back, which is unexpected; it makes her heart beat a little quicker to see how comfortable he is with her. "I started wearing a hat all the time in grade school. It was kind of my thing, I guess. I lost my old hat somewhere in the woods when me and Mabel were attacked by gnomes, so I snagged a new one from the gift shop."

The hat does suit him, but she also appreciates the sight of his wavy brown curls. "You should wear it less," she advises.

"Is that Pacifica Northwest's advice for hatless trends this summer?" he says dryly.

"That's your girlfriend's advice for wanting to see your hair more. It's nice," she says, finally taking the opportunity to run that single curl between her thumb and forefinger.

Dipper blushes slightly. "I don't know… Maybe. I always thought I looked better in a hat. "Your hair is nice, too," he awkwardly compliments her. "And I was wrong. So there's that."

"You were wrong," she repeats, confused.

"Your hair isn't fake," he clarifies.

She forgot about that. "You noticed," she says, pleased.

"Yeah, I kind of figured when I saw that family portrait and your hair was the same color when you were little. But your roots aren't showing, so it's for sure. Sorry," he says sheepishly.

"How are you going to make it up to me?" she wants to know.

"Um…" He looks around his room as if one of his belongings will make a suitable gift.
Pacifica rolls her eyes. “You can't be serious.”

“What? You don't want… uh, a refreshing Pitt Cola?” he offers, pulling a dusty can out from somewhere in the mess at the back of his desk.

Never her favorite, especially after enduring a mini golf kidnapping with the tang of sickly peach flavor still on her tongue. She crosses her arms, unimpressed. “Do I have to draw you a map?” she says, and then, when he still looks blankly back at her, pointedly licks her lips.

It can't be physically possible, but Dipper seems sweaty within a half second. His gaze turns nervously to the open door of his room. “Oh, that. That's… I mean, Mom is just down the hall, but —” he cuts himself off and takes a quick breath, like he's about to jump off something tall. It's kind of adorable. “Sure,” he finishes, voice slightly warbling.

Pacifica might make some attempt to mask her eagerness — just to play it cool, which is her first instinct — but the heck with it, she's been sitting next to her way-too-cute boyfriend for almost an hour and she wants her kiss. She leans forward with anticipation. Their noses bump uncomfortably for a second; then they adjust to their respective positions properly and their mouths slot into place like they were made to be there. Pacifica is bent forward awkwardly and her back is stiff and she's kissing a dork and she's in heaven.

When they separate Dipper exhales too soon, fluttering hair and making her sneeze.

“Bless you,” he says automatically.

“I must be allergic to nerds,” she taunts, grabbing a tissue from the top of his desk.

He laughs. “We probably would have found that out already. I mean, we've been in close contact for prolonged periods before, so it really wouldn't make sense for—”

“I'm going to sneeze again.”

“Can I get in there first?” he asks shyly.

They trade a few more tentative kisses in the fading evening light from his window, finally breaking apart at the sound of footsteps in the hallway.

Later that night, Pacifica is seated at the kitchen table. She's losing badly at Monopoly and doing her best to ignore the irony.

“Go directly to Jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two-hundred dollars,” she reads in a monotone, holding her unlucky card with aversion.

“Oh, snap! Pacifica got popped by the fuzz!” Mabel exclaims. She treats every play of the game like it's a major event. Her real estate empire is haphazard at best, and she seems to be succeeding, or at least surviving, through sheer enthusiasm.

Dipper, predictably, is a methodical tycoon. He takes as long on his turns as Pacifica and Mabel combined (Mabel sometimes kicks him under the table to hurry him along, though he seems so accustomed to it that he barely reacts). Mabel might be hanging in there, but Dipper has a ten-turn plan and enough houses to make venturing into his territory a losing proposition.

Pacifica is just about broke. She's landed on every bad space and drawn every bad card there is, and she doesn't much care for the parallels with her real life. She never liked this stupid game, anyway. Who cares if she's getting her butt kicked in. Not her, that's who.
She looks furtively towards Dipper to see if he's noticed her sulking, but he's too busy being a good fake capitalist and a bad real boyfriend.

It takes another few turns and then she's finally had enough. She resigns from the game over Mabel's protestations and leaves with as much grace as she can salvage.

About half an hour later she's sitting in her room and playing one of those phone games that are more about killing time than actually interacting when Dipper makes a hesitant entry. She's all set to be appropriately frosty towards him, but she sees his expression is conciliatory, which is an unexpected level of awareness. She fully anticipated him to remain oblivious until she either said something or got over it.

“So, it's come to my attention… that maybe you're kind of upset about something?” he tentatively proffers.

Okay, so he's still half-oblivious. But it's been long enough for her to cool down, and just the fact that he’s pointing out that she’s upset is enough to make her feel kind of dumb. It's just a stupid game. She shouldn't care that she lost.

But, darn it, she does. Changed though she has, she's still competitive, it seems. Which is weirdly reassuring. Maybe she can just be a better person, not a completely different person. And a better person wouldn't be a jerk to her boyfriend just because he plays Monopoly the only way she ever expected he would.

Besides, he looks so cute in his rumpled sleep clothes that she can't stay angry.

“I'm okay,” she says, setting her phone aside. “I just don't like losing.”

“Yeah, I definitely remember that about you,” he wryly agrees. “Whatever happened to Sergei?”

“His contract was up at the end of summer. After what happened he went back to wherever he was from. One of those countries that ends in 'ia'. I was done with mini golf, anyway.”

“Huh. I wonder if he told anyone what happened. Or if he's encountered anything weird since. Maybe I could email him…” Dipper muses, immediately subsumed in a dorky mental tangent.

Good thing she finds that attractive about him, for some reason. “I don't know. Maybe. But I'm not asking my parents for his info.”

That snaps Dipper back to reality. “No, yeah. That would be… no. Anyway, I came down to say goodnight.”

She glares at him playfully. “Only say it?”

He quickly sticks his head back out of the room. The coast must be clear, because he approaches her with obvious anticipation. He leans forward. “Goodnight,” he says again, voice cracking.

“Goodnight,” she replies quickly, ready for the next part.

Their kiss is uncomplicated but imperceptibly more practiced; easier, familiar in the best way. When they break apart, he doesn't look away. He holds her gaze for several weighted seconds. The brown of his irises seems to pour into her, warming her to her toes like hot chocolate.

When he's gone, she falls asleep on top of her sheets and dreams of newer days with him.
Ah, the freedom of a lazy Saturday morning.

Mabel is sunk into one of the beanbag chairs in Dipper's room, legs splayed out in front of her, gamepad on her stomach and a half-eaten bag of nacho cheese triangles tucked down next to her hip. Dipper and Pacifica are playing the game with her. Technically, she's fulfilling her role as Saturday chaperone while Mom and Dad are out running errands, but her temporary rule is pretty magnanimous. Dipper is looking very cozy in the beanbag he's sharing with his girlfriend. And they keep looking at each other instead of the screen, so Mabel is totally winning. Everyone is getting what they want!

Mabel lands an especially spectacular jump and celebrates by cramming a chip into her mouth. “Booyah!” she says around the crumbs.

It's only then that she realizes the downside to Dipper's newly developed romantic preoccupation: He doesn't even react to her sweet moves. He's grinning at something Pacifica just said. They're sucking it up in the game and they don't even care.

Mabel's eyes narrow in discontent for about two seconds, but it doesn't last long. The love in the air quickly overcomes her urge to pout. They are just too cute and perfect together. How can she be upset with that? They're cuddling like kittens!

Besides, for the most part they've been good about not devoting a hundred percent of their time to each other. Some of that is due to parental restrictions, true, but they haven't forgotten about Mabel. They're better about it than Mabel had been during her brief flings, she must admit. Her drive to have an Epic Summer Romance hadn't been one of her finer impulses. She's learned to be content to let love happen instead of trying to force it. At least regarding herself, that is; other people can still benefit from her matchmaking prowess. Why, just look at her brother and Pacifica! Mabel didn't have that much to do with it, maybe, if she's going to keep being critical, but she knew it could happen and be awesome and it did, and it is!

Someday, it'll be her turn. Those high school boys aren't far away now…

The doorbell rings downstairs. Mabel isn't supposed to answer it when her parents aren't home, but she still usually checks through the peephole to see if it's a package she should bring inside. She hits the pause button on her controller and sets it down. It's not like Dipper and Pacifica are really into the game, anyway.

“I'll get it,” she tells them.

She hurries down the stairs, more eager to return to the game than she is to bring in what she suspects will be a package for her dad (though she does love packages). The doorbell rings again as she enters the living room, which is kind of weird since delivery people usually only ring once. She looks through the peephole, blinking as her eyes adjust to the light and the fishbowl effect.

Grunkle Stan is on the porch, looking impatient.

Mabel's hands are scrabbling at the deadbolt before she even realizes what she's doing.
She throws the door open. Grunkle Stan’s expression immediately brightens at the sight of her. “Hey, sweet—”

She rushes into him, wrapping her arms as far as she can around his midsection and squeezing like she can somehow be even closer to him, if she just tries hard enough. He returns the hug, albeit in a gentler fashion. He’s lost weight, she notes: The hug is less squishy, more solid. Still just as wonderful.

“Grunkle Stan!” she exclaims into his shirt. “You're back!”

“Little clingy, aren’t ya?” he remarks, though he makes no attempt to remove her.

“It's been forever,” she says direly.

“Yeah, sailing ain't exactly the fastest way to get around. Can't say driving was much of an improvement.” He leans back slightly, getting several loud pops from his spine. “Yeesh. I need to have Ford build me a robot back.” He looks curiously past Mabel. “So this is your place, huh? Pretty swanky.”

“It's just a regular 'ol house. Not full of mysteries or anything,” she says, poking him in the stomach.

“The only mystery I wanna solve is 'where's the can'?” he tells her, loosening her grip so he can move again.

“Around that way, to the left,” she says, pointing the way.

“Sweet Moses, I'm saved!” Grunkle Stan pushes past her and hurries inside. “Why don't you say hi to Ford while I take care of business!”

Grunkle Ford! Well, it makes sense that he would be here, too. Mabel just got caught up in the first Grunkle she saw. She goes tearing out the door and into the driveway. There’s a large rental moving truck parked there, orange sides bright in the morning sun. Mabel eagerly goes to the cab, but there’s no one inside. She’s momentarily confused until she hears a loud clank emanating from the boxy rear of the vehicle.

She rounds the back of the truck to find the door rolled up. The interior looks a lot like Grunkle Ford’s bunker laboratory. Equipment lines the walls, some of it stacked with ratchet straps holding the unstable-looking piles in place. Other assorted gizmos appear to be functioning with the help of a haphazardly wired rack of car batteries. Grunkle Ford is bent over a glowing screen, one side of it popped out of its setting as he reaches inside with a screwdriver, tinkering with its innards.

“Grunkle Ford!” Mabel trills in delight.

Startled, he rears up and clocks his head on another overhanging bit of hardware. “Mabel!” he replies as if nothing just happened, turning around.

“Um, are you okay?” Mabel asks.

“What? Oh, yes, the blow to my cranium. It smarts a little, but there’s more than one benefit to having a metal plate in my head.” He sets down his tools just in time to make room for Mabel's forceful hug. “Ha ha! How have you been?”

“Only missing you every day,” she says, hugging him tighter.

“The feeling is mutual,” he says, awkwardly patting her hair (he still hasn't quite gotten the hang of
hugs again yet, but Mabel is trying to make up for all that lost hugging time).

She finally relents, stepping back. “You gotta come say hi to Dipper!”

“Of course. Let me just put this back into place.” Grunkle Ford carefully sets the screen back and tightens the screws. “I thought this blasted thing was malfunctioning, but now I'm not so sure…”

“Sounds science-y. You should tell Dipper about it!” Mabel says, tugging on his hand.

He smiles and allows her to pull him along. “Lead the way!”

Mabel can't wait to see the look on Dipper's face. Not only are the Grunkles here for a surprise visit, but Ford brought all his gadgets, too. It's nerd heaven in the back of that truck (it's nerd heaven upstairs in that beanbag with Pacifica, too, Mabel thinks with an internal snicker). Mabel is less interested in what Grunkle Ford's learned than she is in seeing him and Grunkle Stan again, but she's not oblivious or anything. The weirdness touched her as well. Just because she won't understand as much as Dipper doesn't mean she doesn't want to know.

“Grunkle Stan's in the whiz palace,” she informs Ford as they approach the stairs.

“I don't suppose there are secondary facilities upstairs?” Grunkle Ford says hopefully. “I've had quite enough of using the bathroom after Stanley, if I can avoid it.”

Mabel understands his pain. “Don't worry Grunkle Ford, you don't have to put up with that Stan Stank. Mabel's got your back.”

Mabel waits outside the bathroom, practically humming like a live wire. Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford are here! Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford are here, Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford are here, Grunkle Stan, Grunkle Ford, Stan and Ford here—here—here—here—

When Grunkle Ford finally emerges, Mabel shoots the rest of the way down the hall like a horse out of the starter gate. Dipper and Pacifica are still right where she left them, cozied up on the beanbag. The pause screen music of the game is loud enough that they're unaware of the new arrivals. Mabel doesn't have a problem with them being all lovey-dovey (duh, of course she doesn't!) but don't they know it's Grunkle Time?!

“Dipper!” she shouts, gaining his immediate attention.

He flounders in the beanbag, legs kicking as he tries to extract himself. “Whoa, what? Is there someone—”

He finally regains his footing just in time to almost lose it again when Grunkle Ford appears in the doorway. Dipper's mouth drops open.

“G-Great-Uncle Ford!” he stammers, voice cracking under the strain. Pacifica isn't quite as dramatically surprised, but she still stands up, face curious.

“Dipper!” Grunkle Ford greets him with a wide smile. “How is my erstwhile protege?”

“Surprised!” Dipper replies, still stunned. “When did—”

“This room at capacity or something?” Grunkle Stan grumbles from out in the hall. He pushes at Ford's back. “Move over, Sixer. That's my niece and nephew, too.”

“I'm not a turnstile, Stanley,” Ford retorts, but he edges into the room enough to allow Stan to
Mabel beams, a hint of tears collecting in the corners of her eyes as Dipper steps forward and puts an arm around each of his Grunkles. “I can't believe you guys are here!” he exclaims. Mabel, unable to bear being on the sidelines a second longer, hugs Stan and Ford from the back, completing the hug circle.

“Let's stay like this forever,” Mabel says into Grunkle Stan's shirt.

“Are you kiddin'? My feet hurt already,” Grunkle Stan complains (he doesn't try to get out of the hug, though).

“Yeah, well, I didn't miss you at all, either,” Dipper tells him with forced nonchalance, dropping his arms and stepping back.

“Don't get mushy on me, kid,” Grunkle Stan tells him sternly. Then he does a double take. “Wait a minute, are you wearing high heels or something?”

“You're the one who owns a pair,” Dipper shoots back.

“Those were a gift! Seriously, though, you're going through some sorta freak puberty and I refuse to look up at you. You get any taller, you're only allowed to walk on your knees at the Shack.”

Dipper isn't tall enough to be level with Stan's eyes, not yet, but it does seem like only a matter of time at the rate he's growing. “Couldn't be any worse than that wolf boy costume,” Dipper tells him.


“Wolf boy costume?” Pacifica says, speaking up for the first time.

Dipper blushes. “Don't worry about it.”

Grunkle Stan glances towards Pacifica, his expression slightly suspicious. “Northwest,” he says gruffly.

“Mr. Pines,” Pacifica responds, equally cool.

Dipper looks between the two of them nervously. “Uh, so, Grunkle Stan, Pacifica is staying with us because of…” His hands rotate wildly as he tries to find his next word. Pacifica's expression hardens in silent warning and his discomfort intensifies. “…stuff, you know, and… things. Anyway, that's why she's here.”

Pacifica reaches out and snags Dipper's hand. “We're dating,” she informs Grunkle Stan, raising her chin in challenge.

Grunkle Stan rolls his eyes. “Hoo, boy.”

He opens his mouth to no doubt comment colorfully and at length. Mabel frantically tries to think of something to say to distract him, but Grunkle Ford beats her to it. “Wonderful!” he says, stepping forward to offer Pacifica his hand. “Stanford Pines; I don't believe we were ever formally introduced, events being what they were last summer.”

“Pacifica Northwest,” she says, briefly shaking his hand. She drops it quickly, staring at his six fingers.
“Yes, good, we're all introduced now,” Ford says briskly, ignoring her reaction. “Dipper, I need your eyes.”

“My eyes?” Dipper says blankly. “There's something you want me to look at? I hope?”

“Yes, exactly. I didn't mean your eyes in the literal sense, I didn't bring that equipment,” Grunkle Ford says. Noting everyone's reaction, he adds, “Not that I would extract my nephew's eyes. Come now, time is of the essence! Possibly.”

With that, he strides out of the room. Dipper, who looks very excited, is hot on his heels. When they disappear into the hall Pacifica stands in place for a moment, looking lost. Then she glances at Mabel, shrugs, and follows the eager pair.

Grunkle Stan and Mabel are left in a suddenly emptied room. “Yeah, this is about what I expected,” Grunkle Stan says to no one in particular.

Mabel looks up at him. “What do you say, Grunkle Stan? Science stuff?”

“Eh, maybe in a bit. I've had Ford's whatchits beeping at me for months.”

Mabel seizes the opportunity. “Come see my room!” she implores, tugging at his wrist. “I made a Super Shack Collage!”

“Sure, why not,” Grunkle Stan agrees. “You got anything eat in there? I know you're hiding something. I found your stash of Cheese Boodles when I was packing up.”

“Maybeee,” Mabel says slyly. “But you can't tell Mom!”

“I'm a lot of things, sweetie, but I ain't a snitch,” Grunkle Stan informs her, jerking a thumb at his chest.

“Snitches get stitches!” Mabel proclaims, jabbing the air with the flat of her hand.

Mabel is sure there's something scientific going on out in the truck, but whatever comes of that can wait. First, she gets to spend a little quality time with her Grunkle Stan.
Dipper still can’t quite believe what is happening. Great-Uncle Ford is here, at the Pines’ house! And not only that, he has something to share, something exciting! Dipper had already been having a pretty good day. Now, it’s something special.

“Initially, I believed my equipment needed a reset. There's substantially more chances for interference in a city like this, and I thought my attempts to increase the sensitivity had backfired,” Ford says as he moves quickly down the stairs.

Dipper tries to listen and keep up, which is often the case when it comes to Ford. At least Dipper's legs are longer now. It's not as hard to stay close.

“But then I began to consider my readings in a different light; specifically, in the light of your theory. Suddenly, what I was seeing made a great deal more sense.” Ford crosses the driveway and unlocks the back of the rental truck.

Dipper's eyes widen when he sees the array of electronics stored inside. He doesn't know exactly what he's looking at, but it sure is cool. “What kind of readings?” he asks, climbing up into the truck after his great-uncle.

“See for yourself.” Grunkle Ford flips a switch and one of the monitors springs to life. The display looks sort of like an old radar scope. Most of it is blank, but there's a green mass on the left side of the circle.

Dipper leans in to look more closely at it. It's just a green blob to him, though. “What is it?”

“An anomalous sector. In other words: something Weird!” Ford presses a few buttons. The blob comes into focus, shrinking as the screen seems to zoom out until it's a bit left of the center. But there's now a faint patina of green, again at the left side. “Left is North, relative to where we're standing,” Ford explains. “That shading you see is Gravity Falls; or rather, its signal bleed. This Weirdness Emission Spectrometer is what I use for close range determinations, so it's much less sensitive than my long-range equipment. But even this far away, Gravity Falls' signal is strong enough to be detected throughout the spectrum.”

Dipper is suddenly much more concerned about that solid green blob. “Wait, so then that big spot…”

“Now you see why I assumed my readings were incorrect! After all, what are the odds of finding an anomaly right here in Piedmont? Especially after Stanley and I crossed most of the country without seeing anything so concentrated. But, no, it's working properly.” Ford claps a hand on Dipper's shoulder, smiling proudly. “Yet more evidence for your theory! I highly doubt this is coincidental.”

Dipper is elated, if also a little concerned for Piedmont. “What is it, though?”

“In all our travels we never encountered something this centralized. Most of my measurements were taken at sites that seem to be the remnants of temporary rifts; short-lived holes to other dimensions that close as quickly as they open. I believe them to be a side-effect of Weirdmageddon, but I've yet to find one stable enough to examine while it still exists.” Grunkle Ford puts his finger on the blob. “I think this is what I've been looking for.”
The sight of the monitor glow catching in the edge of Ford's glasses is an image so familiar that it transports Dipper directly back to the summer. He shakes it off, concentrating on all this new information. “Couldn't that be dangerous?”

“Yes, I suppose it could,” Grunkle Ford says, not sounding particularly concerned. “We stand to learn a great deal from this. I'd like you to help me track it down.”

“Of course!” Dipper says immediately. Grunkle Ford's hardly just arrived, and he's already got an adventure for them. It's turning out to be a pretty great day.

“Wait, you just said this was dangerous,” Pacifica says.

Dipper spins around, chagrined to realize she is standing just outside the back of the truck. “Uh, well, it won't be too dangerous, right Great-Uncle Ford?”

“Who can say?” Ford cheerfully replies as he starts to dig through another pile of his equipment.

Dipper really should have known better. He looks at Pacifica and shrugs helplessly. She puts her hands on her hips, appearing less than mollified by that response.

“Dipper, would you go back inside and inform Stanley of our departure?” Grunkle Ford asks absently, fiddling with a handheld device.

Dipper automatically hops down out of the truck and goes to do as his Grunkle asked, only to find himself swiftly intercepted on the sidewalk by Pacifica. “Tell me what's going on,” she demands.

He tries to summarize. “Uh, there's some kind of dimensional tear in Piedmont and me and Grunkle Ford are going to go find it so we can study it, and, maybe close it? I don't know if we can do that or not.”

“A tear? Like the one last summer?” she says, and while her tone is at maximum imperiousness, she is very pale.

“No, not like that,” he reassures her. Then he stops to think about it. “Well, I mean, sort of like that…”

“So, what? You're going to fight him again?”

Dipper doesn't need to ask who 'he' is. “No, he's dead. I think this tear could go anywhere, or maybe nowhere. Grunkle Ford said these things close themselves all the time. It might be gone if we don't hurry,” he hints, taking a half step backwards.

One side of her upper lip curls with aristocratic incredulity. “You're crazy. And your great-uncle is an even bigger dork than you are, which should be impossible. And you're even crazier if you think you're going without me.”

“That's fine with me, but you'll have to ask Grunkle Ford,” Dipper tells her, backing away again. “I'll be right back!”

“Fine, I'll talk to him,” she says, her tone making it clear she is far from being a supplicant. She spins around, blonde hair flashing in the sunlight, tossed dismissively.

Dipper might have been offended by her sudden attitude if he hadn't already seen it before. She's worried and out of her element and doing her best to hide it with a haughty air and a biting delivery. He can deal with her in a minute. First, he has to find Grunkle Stan and Mabel. Dipper figures there's
about a zero percent chance that Mabel will sit this one out. Grunkle Stan could go either way, depending on how lazy he's feeling after a day spent in the truck.

When Dipper gets to the upstairs hall he can hear voices coming from Mabel's room — looks like she and Grunkle Stan have relocated. He goes to her door; inside, Mabel is showing off some of her recent crafts, including her huge wall collage of Shack photographs from Soos.

“I really think I captured the mystery,” Mabel is saying as Dipper enters the room.

“Why, it barely looks like a shack at all! Nice work, pumpkin,” Grunkle Stan says, studying the collage. “Is Soos still printing pamphlets? We gotta shove this under some doors.”

“Hey!” Dipper interrupts. “Grunkle Ford found an anomaly right here in Piedmont and we're going to check it out!”

Mabel immediately dives into her closet and emerges with her grappling hook in hand.

“GRAPPLING HOOK!”

“Might come in handy,” Dipper agrees, having underestimated the grappling hook before. “Coming, Grunkle Stan?”

Grunkle Stan sighs heavily. “Obviously. Someone has to keep you eggheads from blowing us all up.”

Dipper laughs. “Come on, Grunkle Ford wouldn't… I mean, not on purpose, not if…” He trails off, realizing he might be on the wrong side of the argument.


Mabel slings an arm around Dipper's shoulder on the way out her door, grappling hook raised jauntily in one hand. “Mystery Twins!” she proclaims.

Dipper tugs Journal A out of his vest pocket and tucks it beneath his arm. “Mystery Twins,” he affirms.

Back in the driveway, Dipper is just starting to consider the logistics of cramming everyone into the rental truck when he realizes Pacifica is nowhere to be seen. He leaves Mabel and Grunkle Stan at the cab and goes around to the back. There, he finds Pacifica holding one side of a console open, Grunkle Ford's lower half protruding from its innards. Dipper isn't surprised that Grunkle Ford solicited Pacifica's help; he tends to treat everyone around him as assistants, willing or not, when he's deep into a problem. Dipper is surprised that Pacifica agreed to help.

Then again, maybe he shouldn't be surprised. Pacifica had certainly dragged her feet when it had come to building the Shacktron, but she eventually put forward some effort. Or maybe she just doesn't want to get left behind and has decided to be helpful so long as she gets what she wants. Whatever the case, he knows better than to ask.

“That should do it,” Grunkle Ford announces, voice echoing hollowly from inside the console. He back out on his hands and knees and takes the metal sheet from Pacifica. “I'll just tape this back into place for now. I've bolted things together a few too many times before they were properly fixed.”

“Okay,” Pacifica says in a tone that indicates she isn't sure why he felt the need to inform her of that.

“I found Grunkle Stan and Mabel,” Dipper says, climbing into the truck. “They're both coming, too.”
“Good, you've returned,” Ford says, still intent on his console. “Here, place your finger near this junction and tell me when you feel a shock.”

Dipper reaches forward without considering it and then stops when he sees Pacifica looking at him like he's lost his mind. “Um, did you hear what I said? Grunkle Stan and Mabel are coming with us.”

“Yes, Stanley will drive us. With the proper direction, of course.” Grunkle Ford stands and reaches up to slide open a hatch Dipper didn't notice before. It opens into the back of the truck cab — they're greeted with the sight of Mabel's braces glittering in the slot as her grin practically fills it.

“What's up, nerd team!” she shouts back at them.

“Yeah, we're the cool team, nerds,” Grunkle Stan jibes from somewhere behind her.

“Yes, yes, we're all intelligent,” Grunkle Ford says impatiently. “Stanley, you'll need to start heading east until I get a more precise reading.”

The truck shudders to life, shaking beneath Dipper's feet. He reaches out and steadies himself with what's closest, which happens to be Pacifica. She doesn't pull away, but she's now glaring at the slot to the cab. “Oh, nuh uh, no way. I am not on the nerd team.”

Dipper nudges her arm and then reaches down, tentatively wrapping his fingers around hers. “Hey, it's not so bad,” he suggests.

She rolls her eyes (though she doesn't tug her hand out of his loose grip). “Yeah, this is so great. We're all going to get eaten by an even bigger Boss-Lobster or radiated or something else gross.”

“Irradiated,” he automatically corrects her.

Now she does pull her hand away. “Ugh, whatever. If you think I want an irradiated boyfriend, you'd better think again.”

“A perfectly valid concern, but never fear — I have a Geiger Counter for just such occasions,” Grunkle Ford says, moving to the other side of the rocking vehicle. He extracts the Geiger Counter from a pile of assorted instrumentation. “It's one of my own design. Of course, I should probably turn it on.” He flips a switch. There's a short beep and a light comes on; the machine emits nothing else. “There, see? We're perfectly fine, assuming it's functioning correctly.”

“Perfectly fine,” Pacifica repeats. While her voice is too flat to be openly mocking, she is clearly less than appeased.

Dipper is beginning to wonder if he should have ridden up front with her. Then he imagines her spending any time in close quarters with Grunkle Stan and realizes things could be much worse.

He glances towards Ford to make sure the scientist is distracted by work, then puts his hand on Pacifica's elbow and guides her to the side (or at least as much to the side as they can get in the back of a rental truck).

“Look, you don't have to come if you really don't want to. I know hunting dimensional anomalies isn't your idea of a great afternoon,” he says, and tries to make it clear in the way he says it that he's okay with that, he understands she doesn't have the same interest in this sort of… endeavor? That sounds more official than the spontaneous charge into the unknown that's actually taking place.

Somehow, he still says the wrong thing, because Pacifica's eyes spark electric blue. “I am not scared!” she hisses at him.
“Wh— I didn't say that!” he stammers back, unprepared for her vitriol.

She backs off slightly, eyes still narrowed. “Then why don't you want me to come?”

“Pacifica, I thought you didn't want to,” he says, confused. “I mean, you're not... really into this, you know? Right?”

“What I'm not into is getting attacked by eyeballs or covered in, in, ectoslime, or whatever, or irradiated, or turned to stone, or spazzed at by a stupid Boss-Lobster, or trying to keep you from getting your big dork head snipped right off!”

So, she is scared. Or, scared for him? Or both of them? Or... something? He's so bad at this. “This isn't like the Boss-Lobster. It's not just us. And it's not like the end of summer, either, okay? This is just an anomaly. Besides, Great-Uncle Ford knows what he's doing.”

Something heavy falls over behind them as Grunkle Stan brakes, bouncing off one of the consoles with a worrying crack. “I've got it!” Ford calls out.

Dipper sighs. Maybe that wasn't a good point to end on.

Pacifica crosses her arms, her true feelings disappearing behind a mask of indifference. “Fine. But I'm not holding your hand if you get alien cooties.”

“Yeah, that's fair,” Dipper agrees with a small smile.

The truck hits another bump and he grabs hold of the nearest stack of equipment, even though he's not sure it's any more stable than he is. It's not the most auspicious start to an anomaly hunt, bouncing around the back of a rental truck, but he's had worse. At least this time he's prepared.

You know. Probably.
Ford comes to a stop, eyes intent on the device in his hands. He's just completed walking a full circle around the building. Dipper is the only one who followed with him; everyone else stayed with the truck, either talking (Grunkle Stan and Mabel) or looking bored (Pacifica).

“The readings are definitive,” Ford says, lowering his scanner and turning towards the building. “Whatever it is, it's in there.”

Dipper looks at the structure again. It's a large, ramshackle old warehouse with rusted siding and a chain link fence around the perimeter, complete with a few 'NO TRESPASSING' signs for good measure. Neither of Dipper's great-uncles had been dissuaded by the signage: Stan had deftly picked the padlock chaining the gate shut and Ford strolled inside as if he had every right to be there. Dipper's got the feeling that Grunkle Ford has trespassed in any number of places, so long as science took him there (and as for Grunkle Stan, the less said about his experiences, the better). Judging by the state of the place, it's unlikely that they'll be caught. It doesn't look like anyone's been around for quite a while, with the exception of some graffiti artists.

Dipper sketches a quick outline of the building in his journal; he'll shade it in and add detail later. “So, what's our first move?” he asks Grunkle Ford.

Ford is examining yet another device. “It would be ideal to pinpoint its exact location before entering the building. Some crucial advice, Dipper: Don't become so intent on your readings that you forget to look up occasionally. I've had some close calls thanks to my eyes being glued to a screen.”

Dipper flips the page in his journal and quickly jots that down. “Got it.”

“That goes for journals, too,” Grunkle Ford says, and Dipper reluctantly pockets it. “In any case, we've reached the limits of my precision. I have plans for future improvements, but for now all I know is that the anomaly is somewhere within the southeast portion of the building, which is to say the half to our immediate right.”

“So we should probably start on that end,” Dipper suggests, pointing left.

“That would be prudent,” Ford agrees. He walks briskly toward that end of the warehouse.

Dipper jogs over to the rental truck, where Grunkle Stan, Mabel and Pacifica are all sitting on the edge of its opened back. Stan seems to be in the middle of telling Mabel one of his stories; it must be one of his better ones because Pacifica looks interested. Dipper gets their attention when he approaches.

“My nerdy brother finally ready to go in instead of just lookin' at it?” Grunkle Stan says when Dipper comes up to him.

“We weren't 'looking', Grunkle Stan, we were researching,” Dipper says defensively. Grunkle Stan just grunts dismissively. “Anyway, we're starting over on that side.”

“Monster hunt! Monster hunt!” Mabel chants, hopping off the truck bed. She runs enthusiastically after Grunkle Ford's distant form. Grunkle Stan follows at a more leisurely pace.
Pacifica gracefully dismounts the truck and stays close to Dipper. “Is there a monster?” she asks.

Dipper glances at her, trying to judge if she's worried. “We don't actually know what's inside,” he admits.

“You guys are really into this,’’ she observes.

“Well, yeah! Isn't this cool? Who knows what we'll find? It could be anything from anywhere,” he says eagerly, fumbling to explain his excitement. “A dimensional anomaly, right here in Piedmont!”

She considers that. “…You're lucky I'm soft on dorks now,” she concludes.

Dipper laughs. “Uh, yeah, okay Miss Private School. Don't act like I haven't seen all the books in your room.”

“Whatever. I'm still not a big nerd like you, Journal Boy.’’

“You like nerds,” Dipper accuses.

Her gaze flits over to his, warm with humor. “Maybe one of them,” she concedes.

He reaches over and takes her hand, tugging gently at it. “Come on, let's catch up to the others. You don't want to be late for your first monster hunt.’’

“Um, do ghosts and Boss-Lobsters and crazy triangles not count or something?’’

“First deliberate monster hunt,” he corrects himself.

And maybe it's his imagination, but as they approach Mabel and his Grunkles he thinks Pacifica's getting into the spirit of the thing a little.

Ford has his face against some very dirty glass, trying to peer through the small square window at the top of a steel door. “Can't see a thing,” he assesses, stepping back. “I believe this door requires your skill set, Stanley.’’

Stan rolls his head back and forth a few times, stretching, then goes up to the door and rears back to kick it. Ford catches him by the shoulder before he unleashes the blow.

“Your more subtle skills,” Ford adds.

“Well why didn't you say so?’’ Grunkle Stan reaches into a pocket and withdraws the small black pouch that contains his set of lockpicks.

Dipper watches closely as Grunkle Stan bypasses the lock, deftly maneuvering the pick and applying pressure with the torsion wrench. It's the kind of skill that comes in handy for monster hunts or other forms of adventuring. Really, Dipper's kind of surprised that Grunkle Ford can't do it himself.

“You could have Grunkle Stan teach you how to do that,” Dipper says to Ford.

“I taught myself how to pick locks years ago; largely by necessity, after I locked myself out of the lab a few too many times. But I lack Stanley's finesse,” Grunkle Ford explains.

“Go, Grunkle Stan! Pick that lock!’’ Mabel cheers loudly right next to Stan's ear, which probably isn't helping him out any, but he seems amused anyway.

“Why am I not surprised?’’ Pacifica mutters as she watches Grunkle Stan break into the building with
a practiced hand. Dipper is reminded that she probably has history with his Grunkle that he doesn't know about. She was going to Gravity Falls for the summer long before he did, after all.

Grunkle Stan rises and fully torques the lock, turning the knob with a flourish. The heavy door swings open to reveal an interior too dark to make out any details.

“I’ll see if I can get the lights on, but don't count on there being any power. Did everyone take a flashlight from the truck?” Grunkle Ford asks, pulling his own out from somewhere in his various pockets.

Dipper takes his flashlight out of his pants pocket. He turns around to see if Mabel and Pacifica have theirs, only to freeze for a second when Mabel is right there in his face. Her cheeks are puffed out and her eyes are crossed, and she has her lips puckered around her flashlight, lighting the interior of her mouth and giving her cheeks a translucent red glow.

“Okay, Mabel has hers,” Dipper says dryly, stepping around her. “Pacifica?”

“It's not working,” she responds. She smacks the heel of her hand against the bottom of it where the batteries are to no effect.

“Here, let me see it,” he says, holding out a hand.

She favors him with a very indignant look. “I know how to work a stupid flashlight,” she tells him haughtily.

“I know, I just thought I'd look at it,” he says a little defensively.

She hands it over with a slightly sheepish twist to her lips. She's clearly on edge; he remembers what she was like when they were preparing to fight Bill, but what's going on now isn't even close to being that tense. Unless… maybe it is for her? He reminds himself that she doesn't have the same monster hunting experience that he does. All her encounters with the paranormal were traumatizing in one way or the other. She's nervous and probably expecting the worst.

He messes with the flashlight for a minute while everyone else is exploring the small office, determining that it's busted. He even swaps out the batteries for his own; no dice. “Grunkle Ford, Pacifica's flashlight is dead,” he says.

Grunkle Ford comes over and takes it, though he quickly reaches the same conclusion. “I'll make a note to get another one. For now, the two of you will have to share. Stay close to Dipper, Ms. Northwest. I wouldn't recommend getting lost with an anomaly so close by.”

Call him crazy, but Dipper doesn't think he'll have any problem with that arrangement. Mabel must be thinking the same thing, because she strafes by the two of them just long enough to make a kissy face with her flashlight held under her chin.

“Like this is where I'd want to make out,” Pacifica mutters, brushing dust off her pant leg.

“Okay, so it's not exactly romantic,” Dipper agrees. “But that's not why we're here.” He approaches an old desk and picks up a biking magazine — it's dated September 1992. “Looks like this place has been empty for a while.”

“I'd say at least fifteen years, probably more,” Grunkle Ford says, his voice echoing out of an adjoining room. “We'll check the upstairs offices, but I don't see anything out of the ordinary. Judging by the layout, the anomaly is somewhere out in the warehouse proper.”
The offices are pitch black and covered in dust and dirt. The acoustic tiles in the ceiling are yellowed and many are missing, revealing old ducts and a ceiling splotchy with water stains. The whole area smells strongly in the way only abandoned places do, of musty metal and concrete and moldy fixtures. Dipper moves slowly around the desks and piles of disassembled cubicle sections. He's not sure what he's looking for, but he's pretty sure he'll know it when he sees it.

“Nothing up here,” Grunkle Stan calls down the stairwell.

“Hey, Dipper!” Mabel yells, also from up the stairs. “I found your other twin!”

There's a loud smack as something drops from the second-floor landing and hits the concrete at the bottom of the stairwell. Dipper shines his flashlight in that direction and does a double take as he spots what appears to be a severed head wearing a hat. It's only when he looks closer that he realizes it's not an actual head, but a blank rubber one from some kind of model or test dummy. It's wearing a trucker cap emblazoned with a symbol that looks like it's for a tech or engineering company.

“If he's my twin, then he's yours, too!” Dipper shouts back up at her.

Mabel comes careening down the stairs, shoes slapping loudly on the bare concrete. She scoops up the head and holds it in the crook of her arm like it’s a morbid rubber baby. “It's our triplet, Headsy! Come on, Headsy. You're family, now.”

“That thing is creepy and gross,” Pacifica says firmly.

Mabel thrusts it out towards her. “How’d you like to kiss my other brother?”

“Get it away from me!”

“Headsy just wants some sugar!”

“Cut it out, Mabel!” Pacifica beats a quick retreat around a nearby desk, but without a flashlight of her own she can't go far.

Mabel chases after her, Headsy held forward. “He looooooves youuuuuuu—”

“Don't you dare touch me with that!”

Dipper is too busy laughing to intervene, but Grunkle Ford steps in, returning from the side room. “Ladies, keep in mind that we need to remain cautious. Let's not make any more noise than necessary.”

Mabel immediately halts her charge, tucking Headsy back underneath one arm. “Sorry, Grunkle Ford.”

Ford ruffles her hair fondly. “That's alright. I know this is exciting! We're on the cusp of a discovery, I can feel it.”

Dipper points to a set of double doors in the far wall, the kind of doors with a rectangular push bar. “I bet these go into the warehouse.”

Grunkle Stan walks out of the stairwell. “There's another way in upstairs, too,” he says, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

“Should we split up?” Dipper asks.

“No, not yet. I'd prefer we not separate unless it proves advantageous. Let's check the upstairs
entryway first; always take the high ground if you're able, Dipper,” Grunkle Ford tells him.

Dipper wants to write that down, but it'll have to wait. They regroup and go up the smudged concrete steps to another level of offices which are in even worse shape than the ones downstairs. Water damage is evident everywhere, from the slumping ceiling to the warped floor. The unpleasant smell of mildew abounds. Dipper glances at Pacifica, making sure she's staying with him. Her face is shrouded in shadow, but he thinks she actually looks kind of excited. He grins at her in the dark, feeling like he is returned to his element at last; she smiles back.

“We should exercise stealth once we're in the warehouse,” Ford says quietly, reaching for the door handle.

Everyone nods their understanding. Dipper mimes zipping his mouth shut and throwing away the key; it makes him momentarily wish that Wendy was here. She would have gotten a kick out of it, too.

Grunkle Ford turns the handle, and the dark beyond the door beckons them forward.
The door opens to reveal a catwalk that splits in two directions, forking off to run along the walls to the left and right. At first Dipper thinks there's some spots in his vision from looking at someone's flashlight, but after a second or two of staring into the darkness beyond the doorway he realizes there's actually a greenish-blue light emanating from somewhere in the warehouse. The black paint flaking off the steel walkways is tinted by the strange light just enough to make the railings and ceiling anchors visible even outside of the flashlight beams.

Grunkle Ford turns off his flashlight and steps out onto the catwalk. It rattles with every step, the steely reverberations loud in the empty space. “There!” he says, pointing upwards. “The perfect vantage point.”

Higher up on the left wall, just barely visible in the faint light, is what appears to be a crane. Dipper looks more closely and can see that it's mounted on rails that run the length of the warehouse, with a hook dangling from the center of its wide bar. Grunkle Ford is looking at the cab of the crane, a chipped yellow construction with a dirty glass window overlooking the warehouse floor. Below, rows of high industrial shelving stretch out and disappear into the gloom.

“What's that light?” Pacifica whispers near Dipper's ear as the rest of the group follows Ford into the warehouse.

“I don't know,” he whispers back. “Maybe we can see it from up there.”

This proves to be a more challenging task than expected. The staircase up to the cab of the crane has partially broken from its moorings in the wall and is also twisted out of shape, possibly from an impact. The group is held up as Grunkle Ford tests it with his foot. It shakes a little but seems fairly sturdy until he puts his full weight on it; another of its anchors pops out of the wall with a crunch and small shower of brick dust.

Ford quickly retreats to the stable portion of the catwalk. “Too structurally damaged,” he decides. “We may have to go around to the other side.”

“Or do we?” Mabel says slyly. When they turn to look she's standing behind the group with her braces glittering in the eerie greenish light and her grappling hook hoisted in one hand.

“Well done, Mabel!” Grunkle Ford quietly compliments.

Mabel zips up to the cab with Grunkle Ford's handheld camera tucked under one arm. Grunkle Stan has been left in charge of Headsy, a task he has accepted without comment (though, given his attachment to the wax version of himself, perhaps he simply understands these things). They all wait in the dark for Mabel to return, eyes straining in the strange light.

“Okay, that is pretty cool,” Pacifica admits after Mabel grapples her way up.

“I know, right?” Dipper says. “She saved both our butts with that thing, more than once.”

“I want one.”
“I guess we could ask Grunkle Stan where he got it.”

“None of your business, that's where. A man's got a right to own a grappling hook. And black gloves. And maybe a ski mask or something, but it's *completely legal* to have them, not that I do or ever have, if anyone asks,” Grunkle Stan says.

“Uh, we'll check online,” Dipper tells Pacifica.

He stands perfectly still and tries to tell if he can hear anything, anything at all. Maybe he's imagining it, but he thinks he can make out a low, distant drone, so low that it may be at least partially infrasound, below the range of the human ear. Infrasound is theoretically linked to ghost sightings and feelings of depression and unease. If only he had recording equipment… Well, that would go on the list of stuff he'd take for his own expeditions.

Mabel comes back to the door of the cab and jumps down into Grunkle Ford's arms. “Did you see anything?” he asks her.

“There's a glowy portal thingy!” she says excitedly.

“Like the one in the lab?” he says intently.

“No, this one is all green-blue instead of white-blue. Yours was prettier. This one looks like someone spilled it.”

“Wait, like someone spilled it?” Dipper says, confused.

“Yeah, like an accident. It's shaped just like that stain on the rug outside Grunkle Stan's room!”

“Ohhh, like Soos' birthmark!”

“Almost *exactly* like that. And there's something inside it.”

“So it's irregular,” Ford surmises. “Naturally occurring, possibly unstable. If it's being blocked, that may explain why it hasn't closed yet. At least we don't have to worry about running afoul of anyone trying to maintain it.”

This quickly turns out to be an incorrect hypothesis.

Finding the portal is easy enough — it's a big, glowing green-blue rip in the dimensional fabric (or something). They go back to the offices and then enter the warehouse from the lower section, winding their way through the dusty shelves and stacks of boxes filled with scrap and industrial equipment, all of it obsolete and rusty. Near the end of the building the shelves come to an abrupt halt. This isn't because there aren't any shelves set up there; the floor suddenly slopes downward in an incline of cracked concrete and scattered boxes. It's like a sinkhole, a depression that has knocked over anything standing on that side of the warehouse. In the middle of the pit is the portal (or aperture: Grunkle Ford is picky about his terminology, and 'portal' implies it's intentional, something created). It's quite a sight, an amorphous, flickering hole in space with constantly shifting borders.

Of even greater concern is the *thing* sticking halfway out of the tear.

Dipper ends up crouched behind a stacked pile of crates. He's not sure what those crates contain, he just knows that they're large and heavy and wrapped in dusty plastic. They make him feel slightly more secure, like if something happened they could take a hit or two. Which seems like it might be a possibility at this point. At least Pacifica is there with him, so he knows she's safe. Or as safe as any of them are, anyway.
The thing in the aperture is… Dipper is honestly at a loss to describe it. It's not quite a classical dragon and it's not quite a big snake: it's all scales and spines and no discernible eyes, nose or mouth as far as he can tell. For all he knows they're looking at the tail of something, or some other kind of appendage. But it doesn't really seem like a tail — it moves like it's sensing the room, seeing or feeling or maybe even tasting. Dipper could swear that it deliberately elongated in Grunkle Stan's direction when he had kicked an old screwdriver across the floor by accident. Whatever it is, it's blocking the aperture with its bulk and, Grunkle Ford thinks, preventing it from closing.

Mabel probably already has a name for the Thing, but no one is talking much. Grunkle Ford kneels behind the last row of shelves, taking a reading with one of his smaller devices. They wait for him to finish.

“The aperture isn't stable,” he says quietly, tucking the instrument away. “I'm almost positive that it will close if we remove the obstruction.”

Grunkle Stan says what they're all thinking. “The 'obstruction',” he begins, complete with sarcastic air quotes, “is made of muscle and spikes, Ford.”

“Yes. This will be… problematic.”

Dipper knows it didn't exactly work out the last time he tried it, but it's still best to be methodical. “Should we try talking to it, first?” he suggests.

“Not this again,” Pacifica says, her tone making it clear he's hopeless.

“Hey, it's worth a shot!” he says defensively.

“Kid, for all you know you'd be tryin' to talk to someone's butt,” Grunkle Stan points out.

“Heee… Butt,” Mabel repeats, nudging Grunkle Stan in the side. Then they're both laughing while Dipper glares at them.

“Butt or not, Dipper is correct. We should at least attempt to communicate. Good thing I still have my dimensional translator.” Grunkle Ford goes over to the edge of the crates, though he stops short of revealing himself. “Hello there!” he shouts. “Can you understand me? We mean you no harm!”

The Thing pulses a bit like a worm, or a squid's tentacle. It moves across the floor until it is pointed in the direction of Ford's voice, spikes grating against the concrete.

“Ah, good, you can hear me! You seem to be lodged in the dimensional tear; do you require assistance?”

Three glistening red spikes fly hissing through the air and imbed themselves with a thunk into the side of the crate stack.

Ford withdraws. “I don't need my dimensional translator to understand that.”

“Do you think it's intelligent?” Dipper asks, trying to ignore the fact that Pacifica's fingernails are now sunk into his arm.

“I doubt it, but I can't say for certain. What's important is that we know it's hostile. Now, to remove it.” Grunkle Ford pulls a journal out of his coat and begins scribbling furiously, no doubt concocting a plan of action.

Dipper reaches into his vest to do the same and is stopped mid-motion because Pacifica's hands are
still tight on his arm. “Are you okay?” he quietly asks her.

She seems to realize what she's doing and drops his arm immediately. “Why are these stupid monsters always trying to kill us?” she hisses, fixing a frosty glare in the general direction of the Thing.

“It could just be territorial, or frightened,” Dipper guesses. “Or, you know, it's a monster.”

“So how do we beat it?”

“Great-Uncle Ford will think of something,” Dipper says confidently.

“What, you don't have anything in your dumb book?” she says, tugging at it.

He tightens his grip on it possessively. “No, and I told you, it's not dumb! It's not even the same book.”

“You should read from it. Maybe you actually could bore this one to death,” she suggests, leaning into his space with narrowed eyes and a teasing twist to her lips.

Even now, with the Thing wriggling ominously nearby, his heart still skips a beat at her proximity. “Or, maybe it would be so interested it wouldn't want to kill us anymore,” he counters.

“Yeah, that would totally happen,” she deadpans.

Grunkle Ford snaps his journal shut, drawing their attention. “I believe I have a workable plan of action, and it's going to require all of us to pull it off.”

Dipper eagerly opens his journal, ready to take notes from the master. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he sees Pacifica silently mocking him by exaggeratedly mimicking his eager stance. Mabel snickers somewhere behind him (so does Grunkle Stan). Dipper is determined to ignore Pacifica, but when she starts pretending to write in a journal it's too much.

“I don't look like that!” he tells her indignantly. “…Do I?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I guess some people might think it was cute,” she says flippantly.

He can't be mad at her when her teasing is so harmless (and what a difference that is, from how it used to be). “Anyone I know?”

“You wish,” she snorts.

“Ahem…” Grunkle Ford breaks into the conversation with an impatient clearing of his throat. “There is still a monster and an unstable aperture, yes? The business at hand?”

“Sorry, Grunkle Ford,” Dipper says, embarrassed by his lapse in focus. There are probably better times to be flirting, all things considered.

Ford begins to lay out his plan as the eerie light pulses in the dark and grimy confines of the warehouse.
i: plan

leave it to science to solve all your problems

The eerie light shifts over the boxes and shelves, giving them strange shapes in the corner of Dipper’s eye. It’s a light that obscures as much as it illuminates; contours seem to fade and waver, shadows grow deeper and darker. He blinks away the distraction and concentrates on the plan Grunkle Ford is presenting. The Thing isn’t going to get rid of itself.

Ford kneels on the dirty concrete floor and begins using his finger to draw in the accumulated grime. “Stanley, I'll need you to run interference. See if you can't keep its attention somehow. It may be attracted to vibration, so I'm sure you'll think of something.”

“Vibration, eh?” Grunkle Stan muses, eying a tall stack of crates not too far from where they’re hiding.

“Just try not to put anything between the aperture and this shelf: We're going to need as clear a path as possible. Mabel, you'll be with me. Your grappling hook is going to be key.”

“Grappling hook!” Mabel whispers triumphantly, holding it aloft.

Grunkle Ford favors her with a quick grin. “Exactly. First, I'll need to get to the fuse box near the crane and see if I can't restore power to that circuit. Dipper, Pacifica — while we're busy with our side of things, I need the two of you to try and undo the cap nuts on the concrete anchor bolts here on the feet of this shelf. They're old and I doubt they've been unfastened in recent memory, so it will likely take the two of you to do it. Some of the anchor bolts may already be broken, judging by the age of this shelving, so that might shorten the task. There should be twelve caps in all, two on the front and back of each side and then four on the middle column.”

Dipper looks over at the end of the shelf closest to him, where the metal footing of the shelving unit is fastened with a heavy bolt encrusted with decades worth of filth. “Um, won't we need a wrench or something?”

“Yes, that or a large ratchet.” Grunkle Ford scoots over to the edge of the shelf and pulls a tape measure out of his pocket. “I saw a tool cabinet near the entryway to the offices. Looks like you'll need a half inch diameter. Check the drawers until you find what you need.”

“What if there aren't any tools?” Dipper wants to know.

“Then we go to plan B,” Grunkle Ford says, pulling his coat aside to reveal his pistol. “But I'd rather not use my weapon in here if we can avoid it. Plus, I may need it to power the crane.”

“You wanna let us in on the rest of the plan, brainiac?” Grunkle Stan says.

“Using the ceiling crane, we'll lower the hook and secure it to the middle of this shelving unit. When the feet are free of the anchors the crane will drag the shelf forward and push the creature back through the aperture,” Grunkle Ford explains. “The tear should close once it’s no longer obstructed.”

It's daring, but efficient; exactly what Dipper expects from his Great-Uncle. He reaches up and straightens his hat, steeling himself. “Well, we won't know until we try.”
Ford chuckles fondly, slapping a firm hand on Dipper's shoulder. “Sometimes it's like I'm looking at my younger self, eh, Stanley?”

“Yeah, yeah. We all know who takes after who around here,” Grunkle Stan says, but his tone is good-natured instead of fully dismissive.

Like a light being turned on, Dipper experiences a very sudden insight into Grunkle Stan's attitude towards him during portions of last summer. He must have been a painful echo and a second chance, all wrapped up in the kinds of conflicting emotions Grunkle Stan doesn't handle well (would anybody?). It had to be hard to take in another set of Pines twins, a reflection of the way Stan and Ford must have been, once.

Dipper doesn't have much time to think about it. As Grunkle Stan stealthily makes his way around the far end of the shelves (having left Headsy safely tucked away on a second-tier shelf), Mabel and Grunkle Ford grapple up to the catwalk. Dipper and Pacifica hurry back towards the offices; there's a rusty red tool cabinet near the double doors. They force open each drawer in turn, sending screwdrivers, levels and files clattering. On the fourth one down they get lucky: a whole selection of wrenches.

Dipper directs his light and puts his finger on the numbers. “Five-eighths… Fourteen— wait, these are metric. Here!”

There's only one wrench, but that's probably okay since he figures it's going to take both of them to loosen the old cap nuts, assuming they even can. If not, the alternative is quite a bit less stealthy than any of them are going to like, especially if the Thing starts slinging more giant red quills around. Dipper's already almost lost a hip; he doesn't want to imagine what it'll feel like to get one of those spikes in a leg or something (and the 'or something' is even less worth thinking about).

They creep their way back to the shelves and kneel on the hard, dirt-crusted concrete. Dipper slots the wrench into place around the first cap and gives it an experimental tug; it doesn't budge. He braces himself on his heels and puts his weight into it, but it isn't until Pacifica leans forward and pushes from the other side that the nut suddenly gives; Dipper's feet skid out from under him as he lands on his backside. After that, it's just a matter of turning it a few more times until it's loose enough to spin by hand. The cap comes off the top of the anchor bolt and into Pacifica's grease-streaked palm.

One down. Eleven to go.

It feels like they work an eternity, there in the dark. The boxes cloak them in shadows but the greenish light shining through the gaps flickers in and out in strange patterns as the Thing writhes in the aperture. Overhead, the crane shudders into motion — a bell rings out every second it moves, chiming in warning. The Thing's thrashing intensifies. A heavy object hits the floor in the distance, likely Stan's handiwork, and the sound is followed by the thud of spikes impacting something wooden. The nut in the wrench's grip refuses to turn, even with Pacifica's help. Dipper scoots around until he can put his feet against the steel of the I-beam column in front of the shelving unit and pushes with his legs as hard as he can, arms straining to hold on to the slippery metal of the wrench, hands aching with the effort. Pacifica is on her knees on the other side of the column and thrusts her palms out, hitting the wrench as she falls forward with a grunt of exertion. The stupid cap finally gives with a little grating shriek, like it's in pain.

They're only a little over the halfway point when Dipper looks up to see the hook of the crane dangling just to the front of the shelves. It's slowly lowering with a steady industrial hum. He and Pacifica are definitely the slowest part of the operation, but there's not any way around that. He hears the familiar ratcheting rope of the grappling hook and Grunkle Ford lowers himself down from the
“Mabel's learned how to work the crane,” he says by way of explanation, leaving the grappling hook dangling where it is. “Move to the other end and undo the caps there, first. The pallets are mostly empty here and I’m not certain the lattices are still sturdy. We’ll find out when we try to move the unit!”

“Is Grunkle Stan okay?” Dipper asks as he abandons the cap he's working on and gets to his feet.

“Yes, he's fine. I’m sure he’s enjoying making a mess over there. Do your best to finish; I don’t know how intelligent this creature is, if at all, but let's not allow it time to figure anything out.”

As Grunkle Ford ascends the dusty, orange-painted metal beams of the shelf, Dipper and Pacifica go over to the other end, heads ducked and doing their best to minimize noise. The anchor caps on this side are just as stubborn as the last ones and once again they're sweating and straining to get the job done.

“If I break a nail, I'm gonna—” Pacifica huffs, her threat remaining unfinished as the wrench slips off the nut and sends her sprawling.

“Pacifica!” Dipper gets up and helps her back to her feet. “Are you okay?”

She clamps a hand over her lightly bleeding skinned elbow and looks down at the cap nut like its existence is a personal affront to her. “This sucks,” she opines. “Ugh. I am so gross right now.”

Dipper thinks she still looks better than anyone with that much dirt and grease on them has any right to. “We're almost done,” he says, crouching down and slotting the wrench back into place. “Come on, it's just a few more.”

They're ready to finish the middle of the shelf by the time Grunkle Ford hops off the first tier. He surveys their work with a nod of approval. “We're almost ready. I'll assist you in finishing this middle column. Then we'll proceed to the next step of the plan.”

“Grunkle Ford, is the crane going to be able to move all of this?” Dipper asks. Many of the shelves are still filled with crates and pallets, some of which look exceptionally heavy.

“It's rated for ten tons, but the weight isn't evenly distributed. We'll use the crane to tip the shelf and then lift it up and over whatever falls off. I want the two of you back behind the next row before that happens.”

They resume working in relative silence until, at last, the final cap nut reluctantly unscrews, and the shelf sits free on its moorings. The crane will have to lift the shelf upwards until the feet clear the bolts, but as Dipper pointed out, there's still quite a few crates and other things stored on the racks. He winces internally when he thinks about the property damage they are about to incur. This is someone's stuff, after all. Still, it's better that the owner loses a few pallets to fall damage than lose all of them to another dimension.

“Alright, get to safety!” Grunkle Ford instructs them. He grabs hold of the grappling hook and shoots back up to the catwalk.

Dipper grabs Pacifica's hand and leads her back around the next shelf to the protection of its crates (it's easier to guide her with their sole flashlight if he's holding onto her; plus, he gets to hold her hand, which he doesn't really need a pretense for since she's his girlfriend and all, but whatever). They peer over the top of a pallet of shrink-wrapped pipes and wait. A couple minutes later, Grunkle Stan appears at the other end of the aisle with Headsy tucked beneath one arm and makes his way
over to them. He's covered in dust and his hands are almost black with accumulated grime.

He smirks at them. “Never thought I'd see a Northwest get their hands dirty,” he comments.

“Have yours ever been clean?” Pacifica shoots back, hands at her hips.

“Heh. You got a mouth on you, kid,” Grunkle Stan says, giving her an approving finger gun. He looks to Dipper. “Is Ford getting this show on the road?”

“He should be about to start,” Dipper replies.

“Good. I know I'm not the cleanest guy around, but this place is somethin' else. I think my sinuses are packed with cobwebs.”

Dipper looks down at his blackened pants and grime-streaked shirt. “Yeah... We're doing more than just getting our hands dirty.”

Pacifica is holding herself stiffly, like she doesn't want to touch her own clothes. “Why can't monsters just show up at the mall?” she complains.

Dipper doesn't have an answer for that. Though, he supposes the next anomaly could be at a mall. It could be anywhere, really.

They all jump a little when the crane suddenly lurches into motion, signaling the start of the final stage. Dipper mentally crosses his fingers. If this doesn’t work, the alternatives are sure to be even messier.
As the crane starts to move, Dipper, Pacifica and Grunkle Stan all back away from the shelf to get a better look.

Slowly, the slack line of the hook retracts until the shelf begins to creak. Once it's tight, the bell chimes again, signaling the motion of the crane's arm. It glides overhead towards the aperture, and soon the hook goes taut with a steely bang. The shelf rattles and the back legs start to lift, grinding against the bolts in the floor. It tilts a few more degrees before the first pallets tip off. Dipper covers his ears as heavy metal objects smash into the concrete in deafening concert. Crates burst on impact, scattering debris and shaking the floor. The Thing seems to grow agitated, whipping through the air with greater alacrity.

Shelves emptied, the crane reverses until the hook is directly overhead. The up and down motion is slower than the side to side — it takes several long seconds for the hook to retract enough to lift the empty shelving unit off the bolts. Freed from the floor, the bell rings out and the shelf begins its journey towards the glowing tear. Once it's over the cluttered remnants of the pallets, it lowers again until it scrapes against the floor.

“If this doesn't work, I'm not gonna go over there and push,” Grunkle Stan says.

With a sound not unlike nails on a chalkboard, the shelf is dragged across the concrete until it reaches the depression in the floor where the Thing twists and shudders. There's a momentary pause as the crane lowers a little more so the shelf rests at the proper height. Then the bell starts up and the shelf lurches forward.

When the shelf makes contact with the Thing it's not moving fast enough to really be called a 'hit'. It gently bumps into the pulsing creature and then goes horizontal, beginning to drag across the top of the Thing. Grunkle Ford (or Mabel; Dipper isn't sure who's controlling the crane) halts progress before the shelf touches the aperture. At rest, it slides back down the Thing until the lowest shelf catches and goes underneath. The Thing is now caught between the first and second tier of shelves. Its spines rattle and hiss, pushing down and springing back up where they brush against the shelf.

Gradually the hook climbs upwards, taking the shelf and then the Thing with it. It's only now, as it begins to elevate, that the Thing seems to realize its predicament. It lashes out from side to side, battering the shelf. It wraps itself around the second set of orange beams and squeezes like some bizarre, eyeless boa constrictor. Dipper holds his breath, half expecting the shelf to fold, but aside from the sounds of stressed metal, there's no visible damage. He relaxes slightly; the Thing is strong, but not that strong. It can't bend the steel beams.

The Thing is now caught in their makeshift snare and the crane inexorably moves further towards the back of the room. The crane's motor makes sounds of distress and it crawls along the wall like it's going uphill. But despite its size and apparent strength, the Thing cannot completely halt the crane's advance. It thrashes violently, rocking the shelf and making the entire crane arm shudder against its rails. The warehouse thrums with the noise; it's like being an ant in a tin can.

“It's working!” Dipper says excitedly. The Thing is disappearing back into the aperture by inches.
He looks at Pacifica and finds that she's already looking back at him, her eyes alight with triumph. He's just about to grin at her when he sees something he doesn't understand: The hair at the top of her head is floating upwards, streaming towards the aperture. He blinks, confused. What—

Oh.

He wraps his right arm around her and his left around the steel column of the shelf. “Everybody hold on!”

The Thing is no longer perfectly lodged in the tear (which, how does that work? The edges are uneven, but the portion that must actually ‘transfer’ is smaller than that?). Pacifica's hair is reacting to a current that's about to become a deluge. Wind is rushing towards the tear, now, bellowing. The Thing slides further into the tear, but the shelf isn't moving. The Thing wiggles, retracts a bit more; its spines grate across the floor.

Then, like some kind of macabre, disembodied bullet, Headsy comes spinning out of the darkness and smacks straight into the Thing. And just like a cork coming out of a bottle, the Thing flies back into the aperture and disappears.

The howling that ensues drowns out every other sound. The air in the warehouse rips past in a violent, unending surge. Dust comes off the floor, the walls and the shelves in a whirling funnel cloud, twisting into the tear like water down a drain. Bits of pipe, nuts and bolts, empty pallets, loose papers and slivers of wood; all of it whips forward in a deadly storm of debris. It's the wall of a hurricane localized to a single focal point and the entire building shakes with the fury. Dipper holds onto the shelf and Pacifica with every ounce of strength he possesses, flattened against the side of a crate that he's fervently hoping is too heavy to be moved. It's impossible to breathe. He buries his face in Pacifica's hair and closes his eyes and just waits for it to end or for both of them to be sucked into the unknown.

Finally, the pressure begins to die down. The howl of the wind changes pitch, growing higher and higher until it's less of an all-encompassing roar and more of a distant rush. Dipper risks taking a peek over the top of his cover and sees that the aperture is shrinking. Soon it's just a pinhole, air flowing through it with the squeak of a deflating balloon. Then it disappears completely with a sharp crack as air rushes into the gap where it once existed.

Silence falls over the warehouse.

Dipper spends a couple seconds trying to catch his breath. The warehouse is far from being impermeable, but the air is thin and will probably remain that way for little while. “Are you okay?” he says hoarsely, loosening his grip around Pacifica's torso.

She takes a shaky step back; her hair is a windblown mess and about twice its usual size, strands free-floating with static. She brushes the strands away from her face, looks at them in disgust, then looks at her filthy hands and dirty nails in disgust, and then looks at him (though, thankfully, not with disgust). “You're taking me to a spa.”

Grunkle Stan is shaking his fists at the crane cabin. “Ford, you knucklehead! Are you trying to get us killed?!”

“That was unanticipated!” Grunkle Ford shouts back as he leans out of the cab. “But it worked, didn't it?” With Mabel gleefully riding piggyback, he grapples his way down to the floor. “You've never been one to argue with results, Stanley.”

“That was cray-cray! All the air was like WOOSH!” Mabel says as she hops off Grunkle Ford's
back. Then she makes a mournful face. “Poor Headsy…”

Ford pats her on the shoulder. “He's in a better place. Or a very different one, anyway.”

“I'll remember him forever: Headsy Headington Pines. He died doing what he loved — crashing into things.”

“I guess that Thing lived in a vacuum?” Dipper wonders.

“Not necessarily, but it definitely came from a significantly differing atmospheric pressure,” Ford says.

“Shouldn't it have been crushed by ours?”

“If it were you or I, yes, we would have suffered some very unpleasant effects, vacuum or not. But, nature makes some things harder than others. Whatever it was, it was tough enough to survive, if not adapt.” Ford scribbles a few notes into his journal. “A truly fascinating anomaly. I only wish we could have studied it more closely.”

Dipper looks over to where the aperture had been. The floor has been scoured, cleaned of the loose particles of dirt and grime, but it's still marked by scratches from the large red quills. “…I think that was as close as we'd want to be.”

“You're right, of course. How frustrating that it was needlessly hostile! Ah, well. Some creatures defy easy observation. Most, actually.” Ford closes his journal with a decisive snap. “Well done, everyone! Now we should leave the premises. Quickly.”

That sounds like the best idea to Dipper. With Pacifica's hand in his, he hurries for the exit. Everyone piles back into the truck and Grunkle Stan hits the gas hard. It feels more like a getaway than the end to the successful pursuit of an anomaly, but Dipper supposes that's what happens when major property damage is incurred. Unintentionally, sure, but he doubts whoever owns the place will care that their stuff is jacked up for the sake of science. Not that any of them are to blame for a giant Thing being there to begin with… It's just that removing it ended up being a messy endeavor. Still, if they hadn't intervened it could have been a lot worse. It’s not saving the world again, but they just saved a small part of it, probably.

As the truck grumbles its way down the roads and streets of Piedmont, Grunkle Ford turns on the screen for his Weirdness Emission Spectrometer again. He nods with satisfaction once the monitor is lit. “You can see the influence is already diminishing. In fact, I should take some readings for comparison, try to get a baseline for the fall off rate…” He grabs a pad of paper from somewhere in the pile of equipment and begins making notations.

Dipper is immediately interested but is also aware that Pacifica probably isn't eager to be forgotten again in the rush to study weirdness (it's sort of impossible to not be aware of her presence: Her hair is drifting all over the place, having reached a whole new level of dispersal thanks to their little brush with rapid decompression). Weirdmageddon aside, she's not used to this kind of taxing adventure the way the rest of them are. Which isn't to say he thinks she's weak or incapable; he knows better than that. But a monster hunt and a near-death experience rolled up into one probably isn't her cup of tea.

But when he turns to look at her, he finds her tired, yet triumphant. Her mouth is plumped with the kind of self-satisfaction she used to take from lording it over the town. “We did it!” she declares.

He grins, equally ecstatic. “Yeah! Wasn't that amazing? And that Thing, that was crazy!”

“This is what you did all summer?” she asks.
“Well, I mean, not all of it. But… sort of,” he concedes.

She takes a second to mull that over. “What did you think when I showed up?”

He's confused. “Uh, I thought that you were all messed up because of Weirdmageddon, and I understood that because—”

“Not that time,” she cuts him off. “When I asked you for help with the ghost.”

“Oh, that.” Dipper doesn't want to go into detail. His thoughts towards Pacifica hadn't been very kind in that moment. “I thought it was weird you would come to me, for starters…”

“It was my dad’s idea,” Pacifica tells him. “There was that picture of you in the paper. I think you were fighting a big bat or something.”

He'd been rather proud of the picture, thinking at the time that it painted him in a flatteringly heroic light. Which had made him feel better about the whole thing because it actually hadn't been his finest hour; he'd been trying to photograph the bat, only to nearly become its prey in the process. He'd eventually been able to drive it off with a taser he'd taken from a terrified Durland and Blubs but had trudged home (he'd thought) without evidence. The picture had been a welcome surprise, though his encounter had soon become irrelevant in the face of Grunkle Ford's return and Weirdmageddon.

Funny that was what had brought Pacifica to the Mystery Shack's door. “I always thought you wanted me to help because of the mini golf thing.”

“What, that?” she scoffs lightly. “You didn't even do anything.”

Ouch. That's a minor blow to his pride, but he can't really argue the point. He'd played second fiddle to Mabel for that little misadventure. “You two seemed like you had a handle on it,” he says with as much nonchalance as he can muster.

“Yeah, well… maybe you suck at mini golf. But, you are pretty great at this paranormal stuff,” Pacifica says thoughtfully. Then she adds, “So I guess my dad had one good idea.”

“Hey, you're right. If it hadn't been for the party…” He trails off, imagining an apocalyptic meeting at the Shack during which they were barely on speaking terms, and he kind of hates everything that implies. “I guess it all worked out.”

She seats herself on a bulky CPU, starts to rest her hands on her knees and then jerks them back up when she remembers her pants are coated with several layers of accumulated filth. “Next time, how about we look for monsters somewhere that won't ruin our clothes.”

He smiles at her, just happy she said 'next time'. “Sounds like a plan.”
It isn't until they are about halfway home that Mabel, still flying high on their adventure and non-stop chatting with Grunkle Stan, begins to feel like she's forgotten something. And it isn't until they turn onto their street that she suddenly remembers what that is.

“Uh oh,” she says, heart sinking.

Grunkle Stan glances at her. “What?”

“Oh, poop, my parents!” she gasps. “They could be back by now!” She hops on to her knees and seizes Grunkle Stan's shoulder. “Grunkle Stan, you gotta con our way out of this!”

“Whoa!” Grunkle Stan pushes her back into her seat. “Yeesh, relax. I'm your Grunkle; it's not a crime for me to take you out for an afternoon of safe and family-friendly fun.”

“Yeah, okay,” Mabel quickly agrees, latching onto the excuse. She's not a fan of lying, but this strikes her as an emergency. “We went to the zoo and saw animals and the Space & Science Center and saw planets and ate ice cream shaped like animals and planets!”

“First rule of any lie: Keep it simple. We drove around Piedmont because me and Ford wanted to see the town. End of story,” Grunkle Stan advises.

Mabel's eyes widen. “Grunkle Ford…”

Grunkle Stan shrugs fatalistically. “He wants to see your mom and dad, anyway.”

Far be it from Mabel to keep her Grunkle from reuniting with his family, but she can't quite suppress a selfish urge deep inside her that twinges whenever her summer vacations in Gravity Falls may be at risk. “Is he going to tell them about Bill?” she says, worried for her summers, yes, but also worried about her parents.

Grunkle Stan's right eye twitches slightly at the mention of the evil geometry that had once come so close to destroying him. “Nobody is going to talk about that thing,” he says with a note of warning, and Mabel immediately nods in agreement. Grunkle Stan relaxes a bit. “Besides, you know my brother's all annoying and secretive.”

“He does love his science-y secrets,” Mabel concurs.

“That's government work for ya.”

Their house comes into view. There's no sign of her parents' cars in the driveway, but they could be in the garage (or at least one of them could be; half of it is packed with junk). Grunkle Stan parks across the street from the house. Mabel jumps out of the cab as soon as the truck comes to a stop and runs to the keypad for the garage door. Her tension ratchets as it slowly grinds its way open, but she needn't have worried. It's empty.

“They aren't home yet!” Mabel shouts to Grunkle Stan as she passes the cab on the way to the back of the truck. It's opening just as she reaches it, Dipper stepping down from the interior. ”Mom and
Dad aren't back yet,” she tells him.

He looks relieved. “Then we might have enough time to clean up.”

“Finally!” Pacifica says, hurrying for the house. “I get the shower first.”

“Okay, Mabel you can use the one in the master bedroom and I'll get ready for my turn,” Dipper says, checking his watch. “I don't know how much time we have. I'll, uh, see if Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford brought some clothes with them.”

Mabel shoots up the stairs and tears through her closet, grabbing whatever is closest at hand rather than trying to put together an outfit. There's a timer ticking down and she has no idea how long it'll be before Mom and Dad come back. They're already overdue, going by their usual weekend schedule. She jumps into the shower in the master bedroom and tries to wash her hair, scrub the gunk out of her nails and wipe the smudges of grease from her legs all at the same time and ends up nearly slipping.

She exits the shower and trots down the hall, toweling off her hair. She finds Grunkle Stan in front of her collage of the Shack.

“You know, I kinda miss the place,” he muses. “It was my home for thirty years. I guess that's gotta count for something.”

“I bet Soos kept it just the way you left it,” Mabel assures him.

“Of course he has. He loves that old dump even more than I do.” He steps away from the collage and Mabel notes that he's changed clothes and made himself somewhat presentable. It's a reminder of what he's here for, and it makes her nervous again.

“Do you think my parents will be mad?” she blurts out.

“Probably. I sometimes have that effect on people.”

“But you didn't do anything!”

“Mabel, as much as I appreciate that, it ain't the truth.” Stan shakes his head. “Sides, it's the nothing I did that's part of the problem.”

Mabel wilts a little. Sure, Grunkle Stan messed up. But that was like a bajillion years ago, and he totally made up for it! He saved everyone. Doesn't that count for something? Well, not if they can't know about it…

He must be interpreting the look on her face because he sighs and places a hand on her shoulder. “I know there's a lot of stuff we can't talk about, and I don't want to get you kids in hot water. So let's keep our mouths shut and let Ford do the talking, alright?”

Mabel would rather let Grunkle Ford hide them all behind his semi-official, government-type science-y secrets than lie directly. Of course, she'd rather they just all be honest. But a part of coming to terms with last summer is realizing that you just had to be there to understand. Someday, when Grunkle Ford is famous for his theories and McGucket's inventions are commonplace, there won't be any more hiding. They won't have to.

But that day isn't now. And who knows when it'll be.

“Being more grown up really stinks sometimes,” she tells Grunkle Stan.
“Hey, you're telling me. Just wait 'til you get old — it's the worst!”

Still, she feels a little better with his steady presence as a reminder that she's not alone in this. The future can be scary, but she doesn't have to feel scared. They're all together.

Then the floor starts buzzing beneath her feet and she realizes the garage door is opening.

“What? Why is your room humming?” Grunkle Stan says, looking at his feet in confusion.

On a different occasion she would have jumped at the chance to make fun of him for not recognizing the feel of a garage door motor, since he's a weird old man; however, now is not the time.

“They're here!” She rounds on him. “Okay, Grunkle Stan, this is it! You gotta save our summer vacation or I'll be texting you pictures of this all year,” she tells him, making her eyes all big and dewy and sticking her lower lip out in a pout.

He recoils slightly. “Yeesh. Turn it down a notch. Some people prefer subtlety, you know.”

“What people?”

“Beats me. Come on, let's go watch Ford lie to your parents.”

“Grunkle Staaaaan, don't say it like that…” Mabel groans.

“Fine. Let's watch him sort of tell some of the 'truth',” Grunkle Stan says, complete with air quotes.

Not much better, but with him she'll take what she can get.

Pacifica was still in the shower last time Mabel passed the bathroom; she knows better than to try and hurry the other girl along because it's always pointless. Pacifica's grooming rituals are a long and complicated collective process and she never compromises, no matter how worried Mabel is that they'll miss all the awesome movie trailers.

When Mabel steps out into the hall again she finds Pacifica (fully dressed and perfectly styled, as if she'd never been to a dirty warehouse at all) at the top of the stairs, looking hesitant. She glances over her shoulder when she hears Mabel. “Your parents are back,” she says.

“Okay, Pacifica: put on your game face,” Mabel says, waving her hands in front of her own face and feeling serious. “We gotta talk our way into our vacation! Let's go earn a magical summer!”

Pacifica seems dubious. “Um, right.”

“Not this time, kiddo,” Grunkle Stan says as he moves to block the stairs. “This is an old problem made by a couple ‘a old men. You need to let the grownups talk.”


“No buts except yours outta the line of fire. This has been a long time coming, and it's something me and my brother need to do.”

“But you said we should let Grunkle Ford do the talking!”

“Yeah, and he will anyway, because it's Ford,” Grunkle Stan says with a slight roll of his eyes. “Look, Mabel: I know you did a lot of growing up last summer, but you're still a kid. So go be a kid and weasel out of this while that's still a good excuse.”
“We lied, too…” Mabel almost whispers, fingers twisting a lock of her hair in agitation.

“Keep it up for another thirty years and maybe we'll be even,” Grunkle Stan grunts. ‘I'm not sayin' you shouldn't jump in at some point… You know, cry a little or something; pretend you love me, take some of the heat off with your sad little faces.”

Mabel jumps forward and wraps her arms around his middle. “I'm not pretending!”

“I know,” Grunkle Stan says fondly, patting her head. “Just hang back for now, okay?”

Mabel sniffs and reluctantly releases him. “Okay… But if you get into trouble, I'm totally crying.”

“That's my girl.”

Mabel camps out on the landing, hands wrapped around the wooden bars of the railing that overlooks the living room. What's going to happen? Are Mom and Dad really going to be that angry (assuming no one tells them about the whole nearly-dying, world-almost-ending dealie)? They are getting a new uncle, after all. An awesome uncle with science! That has to count for something.

Pacifica sits down next to Mabel. “So this will be okay, right?” she says, sounding a little worried, which makes sense because this is her home, too, now.

“Oh, yeah, it's… Pfft, it's fine,” Mabel says with an unconvincing gesture of dismissal. “My Grunkles have got this under control.”

“So it's going to be a disaster,” Pacifica observes.

“Probably.”

Though, even as Mabel says that she knows she has more faith in her parents to be reasonable people. They won't like being lied to, but once it's all explained, won't they understand? Grunkle Stan hadn't been trying to hurt them. Grunkle Ford had disappeared when they were just kids (which is so weird to realize, that her parents had been her age, once) and Stan had been lying for so long because he had to, because he was trying to get his brother back, because no one could help him or even believe him.

Mabel believed him, when it had mattered the most. She just wants everyone else to give him that same chance.
Dipper had been so caught up in the impromptu monster hunt-slash-anomaly search that he hadn’t taken the time to consider the logistics of coming home right after adventuring. It’s something he’d done plenty of times at the Shack, but he hadn’t been about to see his parents there and Grunkle Stan was generally indifferent to the twins’ hygiene, anyway.

Luckily, his Grunkles had come prepared for the trip, so they won’t have to talk to his parents in attire covered in warehouse grime. Dipper showers as quickly as he can, his motions mechanical as his mind sticks to that thought. Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford are going to talk to his parents. And it’s not about *him*, Dipper knows that; this is family history, Dad’s history, and Grunkle Ford has the right to know his nephew. It’s just that there are ways this could end badly, which could happen if too much truth is revealed and if too little truth is revealed. Grunkle Ford is circumspect when it comes to the portal and a lot of his research, but his tendency to keep secrets clashes with his predilection for being unfortunately blunt. Dipper is hoping Ford can explain his sudden reappearance without getting into any of the more dangerous details. Grunkle Stan, Dipper doesn’t need to worry about. Stan lies out of sheer habit, never mind when it’s actually necessary (though, given what Dipper knows and what he read in the journals, Ford is more like his brother than he would probably admit).

The thing is, a lot of what happened last summer isn’t secret just because it could put Dipper and Mabel’s vacation at risk; there are secrets that are legitimately dangerous to everyone, knowledge that nearly brought about the end of the world. Dipper isn’t the kind of person who believes that ignoring extra-dimensional threats is the way to go, and someday humanity must confront the Nightmare Realm and everything else beyond the borders of what’s considered reality — but, preferably, in a gradual way and at a government level, under the guiding hand of Grunkle Ford. Maybe Dipper will be a part of that, in the future. For now, though, it stays under wraps.

He's clean and dressed and not ready for what comes next, but he goes downstairs anyway. Grunkle Stan is nowhere to be seen and Dipper assumes he's using one of the bathrooms. Grunkle Ford is seated on the couch. He's not doing anything but sitting, staring up and out the window high in the wall above the TV. This is striking to Dipper because he's sure it's happened before, but he can't recall a moment in which Grunkle Ford was just sitting, doing nothing. Most of the time it feels like Ford is doing calculus even in his sleep.

Dipper goes over and seats himself next to his great-uncle. Grunkle Ford looks over and smiles slightly. “Nerve wracking, isn’t it?” he says conversationally. “You know, I spent many years thinking this moment would never come. After a while, it was easier to accept that I wouldn't see home again.”

“Didn't you ever find some place that you wanted to stay?” Dipper asks.

“A few,” Grunkle Ford says, eyes distant with memory. “Thirty years is a long time, even when you're hopping dimensions so often that 'time' ends up being a malleable concept. But, I'd sworn to destroy Bill. In the end, no matter how tempting a locale, it was just another source of parts for my Quantum Destabilizer.”

Dipper doesn't really understand that kind of obsession. His preoccupation with Journal 3 is the
closest thing he can relate, and he knows it's not equivalent. Grunkle Ford has lost so much that Dipper can't wrap his head around it. How do you talk about thirty years wasted on a failed weapon? Ford is so matter-of-fact and Dipper is stuck trying to slip a response around all that weight.

“Well, it was pretty cool,” he says eventually, feeling utterly inadequate.

“That it was,” Grunkle Ford says fondly, and Dipper relaxes a bit.

The sound of the garage door rumbling through the walls of the house makes him tense up again. “Okay, so that's gotta be Mom or Dad or maybe both—” he stammers.

Grunkle Ford's hand falls on his shoulder, quieting him. “It'll be alright. I've actually been looking forward to this.”

Dipper swallows whatever else he was going to say and looks at the floor for a second. “…Just, please don't tell them we almost died?” he says plaintively.

“I will use the utmost discretion,” Grunkle Ford promises. “I can't have my apprentice banned from Gravity Falls, now, can I?”

Dipper is just beginning to swell with the joy of having his title confirmed again (apprentice! For real!) when the door to the garage in the laundry room opens. “Kids, come help carry groceries!”

He jumps to his feet and stations himself in the short hall to the laundry room, not sure what he's going to do when his parents come in. He just doesn't want to do it sitting down. Should he make introductions? That would go over great. 'Hey, Mom and Dad, welcome back. Here's an uncle you didn't know you had until just right now.' Yeah, perfect.

He's standing there like a deer in the headlights when Mom comes through the laundry room door with a paper bag tucked under one arm. “Didn't you hear me?” she says, seeing him there. “Go get your sister and Pacifica and carry in groceries.” From the way she then stops and stares, Dipper knows she's seen Grunkle Ford. “Stan?” she says, eyes widening in surprise.

Dipper is certain there's no quick or easy way to explain this. He's still going to try. “Um, Mom, this is—” he turns around to (badly) introduce Ford, only for his mouth to snap shut when he realizes it is Stan. “Uh…”

“Hey!” Grunkle Stan says awkwardly, spreading his arms in greeting.

“When did you get here?” Mom asks. “If I'd known you were coming I would have—”

She's cut off when Dad comes in behind her and blurts out, “Uncle Stan?”

“Hey, how ya doin’?” Grunkle Stan asks with a smile that's closer to a pained grimace.

“Good!” Dad says, shutting the door behind him. “Didn't know you were coming down to visit, you should have said something.”

“Kind of a spur of the moment type thing,” Grunkle Stan says. He rubs at the back of his neck and glances away. “So, listen… did your dad ever talk much about my brother?”

Dad frowns. “No, not much.” He looks at Dipper, probably debating if any of the kids should be around. “I know he passed away and there was some trouble before that, but I was pretty young.”
“He told you he died, huh,” Grunkle Stan says, sounding surprised.

Dad's expression turns pensive. “Well… not in so many words. That was always the impression I was given, though.”

Stan sighs and then straightens up like he's bracing himself. “Look, there's a lot of baggage in this family that nobody talks about, but… well, it's complicated. But there's someone here who really wants to meet you. How about we all sit down and talk a bit, huh?” He takes the groceries from Mom and sets them on the counter just inside the kitchen doorway, then gestures them forward.

When Mom and Dad enter the living room Ford is standing there, hands clasped with the kind of nervous posture Dipper hasn't seen in him before. Mom and Dad stare at him, taken aback.

“Hello,” Grunkle Ford says, clearing his throat. Then he looks at Dad more closely and his eyes soften. “You didn't look so much like your father, when you were younger. But it's quite the resemblance now.”

“…Uncle Stan?” Dad breathes, utterly perplexed.

“Yes. And, no. I was away at college for a great deal of your childhood, then researching, then… well. Gone, for the rest. I don't believe we've spoken since Christmas 1978, wasn't it? A long time. Too long.”

“I don't understand,” Dad says weakly.

“There's a great deal to explain,” Grunkle Ford tells him. “Please, sit. I'll tell you as much as I can.”

As they all seat themselves Dipper remains standing to one side and can't decide if he should sit down, too, or if he's better off stepping away. He's been all set to defend his Grunkles, but it really feels like his input isn't necessary and might even make things worse. This is the adults talking, about things that happened before he was born.

He looks up to where Mabel and Pacifica are peering out at the proceedings from behind the bars of the railing on the upstairs landing. As quietly as he can, he backs away from the adults and goes up to join the girls. He sits next to them and immediately wonders if he's made a mistake, if he needs to go back down and jump in. He doesn't know what he'll do, but… At least the kids have one ace up their sleeve; judging by the way Mabel is blinking, she's priming the tear pump. Grunkle Ford has a rough start ahead of him, since before he can even start to explain his science (or the parts of it he can, anyway) he must account for his existence. Mom and Dad are stiff in their seats, dumbfounded by the two nearly identical men before them. Ford is trying to start from the beginning but keeps having to slow down to add detail.

Mom looks between the two of them like she expects someone to jump out with a hidden camera. “How can you possibly have a twin we didn’t know about?” she says accusingly to Stan. “This is ridiculous!”

“You got that right. I couldn’t make this stuff up. And I make stuff up all the time!” Grunkle Stan says.

“Er, I did know about it…” Dad says sheepishly, momentarily drawing Mom’s ire. “Just not as much as I thought I did, apparently.”

“I never could keep your side of the family straight,” Mom huffs. “I thought it was just you being vague.”
Dad shrugs apologetically. “That too.”

“We weren’t ever that close knit,” Grunkle Stan says reflectively. “Even when we were growing up, never kept in touch much with cousins or nothin’.”

“My disappearance muddied the waters considerably, but it was hardly the only factor,” Grunkle Ford agrees.

“So, you disappeared?” Dad says, stuck on that part (and not without reason; Dipper also recalls being stuck on that part).

“There was an accident,” Grunkle Ford hedges. “A malfunction. Human error, you might say.”

“It was my fault,” Grunkle Stan says grimly.

“Not entirely. I’d made more than a few mistakes of my own to get to that point. The specifics are highly technical and, frankly, dangerous. The technology my partner and I were researching was extremely experimental and under a number of NDAs. I'm sure you understand.”

Dad works for a software company, so he reluctantly nods his understanding. Mom is less discreet. “I still don't understand. Where did you go?” she asks.

“I can't discuss that,” Grunkle Ford says sternly. “Please don't press me any further. There are too many aspects of my work that remained classified for very good reasons.”

Mom grudgingly lets that go, only to focus on another line of inquiry. “But why did Stan take your name?”

“Convenience, among other things,” Grunkle Ford says airily, as if he's speculating and Grunkle Stan isn't sitting right next to him. “Someone had to pay my mortgage, after all. If the government had discovered my absence they might have tried to seize my work. They did pay for a great deal of it, after all. Stanley was able to pacify them by gradually doling out a few of my side projects and eventually declaring my 'retirement’.”

“After the first ten years I just stopped talking to them. They wouldn't give me another grant, but they didn't try to take the house at least,” Grunkle Stan adds.

Grunkle Ford eyes him. “You would have applied for another grant,” he mutters, before continuing in a lighter tone, “His quick thinking kept my equipment in the right hands until the matter could be resolved.”

“After thirty years?” Mom says in disbelief.

“I didn't say it was a timely or ideal solution,” Grunkle Ford says blandly.

“So, you didn't have much of a choice, then,” Dad says to Grunkle Stan.

“Yeah, more or less,” Grunkle Stan says shiftily. “I, uh, was also dragging around a few loose ends that I was happy to tie up.”

“I'm sure,” Grunkle Ford dryly agrees.

“And you just happened to come back while the kids where there?” Mom says.

“A fortuitous coincidence,” Grunkle Ford tells her, casually glossing over the convoluted chain of events the twins had set in motion that resulted in his return. “I can't tell you how pleased I was to
“I know the feeling,” Dad says, and in his shy smile Dipper can suddenly see an echo of the child Dad once was.

“I’m glad to see you again,” Grunkle Ford says genuinely. “It's fantastic that you've done so well for yourself.”

“I just wish my father could be here right now,” Dad says regretfully.

That makes Ford falter for a second. “I, as well. Learning of that was… quite the blow.”

There’s a moment of heavy silence; then Dad looks at Grunkle Stan. “You know, I always used to wonder what happened to the science whiz Dad used to talk about sometimes. And you always told me you got older and got tired of it.” By the end of the sentence his tone is reproachful.

“Hardly,” Grunkle Ford scoffs.

Grunkle Stan shrugs uncomfortably. “What can I say, kid. I had a lot of secrets to keep.”

Dad shakes his head. “All this time…”

Grunkle Ford sits forward in his seat, eyes intent. “We can’t change the past. Believe me, that’s a lesson I’ve learned the hard way. Let’s not waste our time regretting what’s done — let’s talk about our future!”

“We've been looking forward to having Dipper and Mabel this summer,” Grunkle Stan says. “They're good kids.”

“Wonderful children! You should be proud,” Grunkle Ford says (next to Dipper, Mabel puffs up with delight). “They truly helped me put my life back into perspective. And Dipper has taken such an interest in my work! He's very gifted, you know. Reminds me of myself, at his age.”

“Speaking of the kids,” Mom says, throwing a chiding glance towards the stairs to show she's aware they’re listening in, “they didn't say a word about any of this.”

“Entirely at my — at our — behest,” Grunkle Ford assures her. “I wanted to meet and speak with you in person, both of you. You deserved nothing less.”

“This was our mess and my lies,” Grunkle Stan says. “I wanted you to hear it from me.”

“Yes, don't punish the children for our deception. It was done with the best of intentions, and they did it for us.”

“I LOVE YOU GRUNKLE STAN AND GRUNKLE FORD!” Mabel shouts down the stairs, making Pacifica jump.

“In indoor voices, Mabel,” Grunkle Ford calls back. “And we love you, as well.”

“I wish we had been told a little sooner. but… it's good that the kids got to know you,” Dad says. “I'd like to get to know you again, too.”

Grunkle Ford smiles. “I'd like nothing better.”

“I'm still feeling a bit behind,” Mom interjects politely but firmly.
Grunkle Ford nods amiably. “Yes, I'd imagine so. I'm happy to answer any questions, provided they don't directly involve my classified research. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, it would be incredibly irresponsible for me to discuss the specifics of my work.”

The conversation continues as both Grunkles take turns spelling out a sanitized version of the twins' summer. Dipper stops listening so closely, slumping with relief. The worst part is over, he's pretty sure. Grunkle Ford's appearance is obviously a tremendous shock, though his parents have handled it better than he did. A calm discussion in a living room is a better venue than a partially collapsing secret laboratory surrounded by government agents right after a cataclysmic anomaly, it turns out.

He knows there will be more questions and probably delayed anger in the days and even years to come. They don't seem that upset at Grunkle Stan, which just means the extent of his deception hasn't really set in yet. It had been different for Dipper because his loss of faith in Grunkle Stan had come before Grunkle Ford's reappearance, a side effect of the effort that rescue had required. And it was that successful restoration that had also restored Dipper's faith. For his parents, the events are simultaneous. They'll have a lot to sort through.

Still, as he listens to the adults talk it out, at least he knows it's on the path to being settled.

Except for, you know, the whole Weirmdageddon thing and all the harrowing realizations that come with it.

He'll just push that thought down and save it for a night spent staring at the ceiling.

Just after bed time, he's lying in bed (not staring at the ceiling, though) when Dad comes in and sits on the edge of the mattress. “Sounds like Uncle Ford's going to be teaching you some things, huh,” he comments.

Dipper grins in the dark. “He's so cool! He's like a scientist and an explorer, and he wants me to be his apprentice!”

“Sounds pretty exciting,” Dad says.

If only he knew. “You should come up someday, to see the Shack,” Dipper suggests, aware of all that might entail.

Dad nods. “I told Stan I'd like to see it. Maybe next year, huh?”

“Maybe next year,” Dipper repeats. So many possible outcomes, good and bad.

Dad pats him on the knee and then stands up. “You should talk to your mom tomorrow, okay? She doesn't really know what to make of this.”

“I know. Grunkle Ford coming back is really weird.”

“Well, not just that. You're already growing up and now she finds out you want to be a scientist with your great-uncle. Makes her a little worried, you know. And excited for you, too. But why don't you talk to her, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay,” Dipper says quietly.

Dad goes back to the door and pulls it halfway shut. “Night,” he whispers.

“Night.”
Dipper is left alone with his thoughts. They run in circles for a while and then he falls asleep thinking of a looming future that is as exciting as it is unknowable.
The sun is just beginning to dip over the Bay area, tinting the horizon with spectrum layers of orange and red and the first hint of purple at the lowest edge. The neighborhood is mostly still; the faint sound of children playing echoes out from the park about a block over. Dipper knows he isn't that far removed from those days, technically, but it still feels like a lifetime ago. Like someone else's lifetime ago. It’s incredible to think of the effect a single summer has had on his perspective. He's not grown up yet, he knows that. But he can't see the world the way he used to, either.

Pacifica's hand is warm where it rests in his. This is an entirely new experience, being hand in hand on the sidewalk. Dipper has never really thought of Pacifica as the kind of girl who would be openly affectionate in public, and sometimes that's been true. Other times, though, she's seemed utterly unconcerned with what anyone might think of her relationship with Dipper. Still, he isn't exactly into PDA, either. Even after all this time (all this time? It hasn't been that long, it just feels like it), when he takes her hand he feels like someone — who, in his imagination, looks vaguely like Preston Northwest for some reason — is about to call him out on it, make fun of him for thinking he could.

No one says anything, though. They don't get a second glance. They're just another young couple on the sidewalk in the warm evening air.

The peace of the community almost feels like a congratulation. It's like, it's not because of him that there is peace to begin with, but he had a hand in its continuation. And it's such a good feeling that he knows, with a clarity he's rarely matched, in a way that he's so infrequently known anything, that this is something he wants out of life. He wants to thwart the powers that threaten his universe; he wants to save people, even if they don't know about it. He wants to study and plan and catalog and learn from Ford. The weight of Journal A in his vest pocket is a promise, a bound paper pledge.

There's another promise that's far more immediate. Summer vacation looms ahead, the boundary about to be crossed. Soon he'll be on a bus headed north, scenery shifting into evergreen hues. It's so close he can hardly stand it. His body might be rooted in Piedmont, but his heart flies ahead.

As for Pacifica, her excitement has been difficult to gauge (not so with Mabel, who is practically bouncing off the walls). Dipper had thought that what's going to happen this summer didn't need to be stated, but maybe it does.

He looks over at her. She's as perfect in profile as a movie poster: Delicately pointed nose, full lips, elegant cheekbones and long-lashed dark blue eyes. It's the kind of face that recalls shadow portraits, makeup ads and glamorous actresses in black and white. Not for the first time, he wonders if he is permanently out of his league. Then again, Mabel's been growing up pretty well if the attention she's been garnering from boys is any indication, especially in the last third of the school year. And they are twins, so… at least he'll be pretty? Great. He scratches his chin and wonders if he can grow a beard.

He squeezes Pacifica's hand lightly, gaining her full attention. “Okay, so, I know we haven't talked about it, but you do want to go back to Gravity Falls with us, right?”

“I thought I had to,” she says noncommittally.
“Mom and Dad would let you stay, if you wanted,” he says, though he's hoping that's not the case.

She looks at him sideways, and even though they're having a serious and necessary conversation he can't quite keep his gaze from darting to her lips. Their allure is substantial. “Do you want me to go?” she asks.

“Yeah, of course! I mean, it's your…” He fumbles the phrasing. He was going to say it was her home, but that's not quite right. He says instead, “Don't you want to go back?”

She looks away. “I don't know why you want me to. It's not like you have a lot of great memories of me there,” she says with a subtle tinge of disgust.

He knows it's self-directed and it makes him frown. “That's not true. You were a part of it too, Pacifica. You were with us.”

“Oh only because I had to be,” she retorts.

He doesn't buy that for a second. “Hey, you volunteered. Don't act like I don't remember.”

Her mouth twists slightly. “Maybe,” she allows.

He stops in the middle of the sidewalk, bringing her to a halt as well. “If you don't want to go, no one's going to make you,” he says, disappointment filling him.

It must show on his face, because she crosses her arms and averts her gaze guiltily. “No one wants me to go back,” she mutters.

“I do! I just said I did!” he says disbelievingly. “And you know Mabel wants you to come with.”

Her cheeks turn red, eyes narrowing. “Of course you want to go back.”

“I— what?”

“Of course you guys want to go back!” she explodes. “Everyone wants you to go back, you're heroes or whatever! Well, guess what, I'm not! I'm the girl everybody wants to forget about!”

He's taken aback. “That's… not—”

“Not what? Not true? Yeah, right! Maybe because I'm your girlfriend you forgot what a jerk I am, but I bet they haven't!”

He doesn't miss the use of present tense. “You aren't like that anymore,” he tries.

“So? Why should they care?” she huffs. She turns away from him. “Just forget it. I'll stay here.”

His vision of a summer spent with her is rapidly disintegrating. “Come on, don't say that,” he stalls.

“Sometimes it is too late,” she says heavily.

He doesn't believe that. “Pacifica, you've already shown Gravity Falls how different you are. You really think they forgot you saved them from Bill's throne? You proved yourself!”

“They want to forget about that, too.”

He falters, remembering 'Never Mind All That'. “Well… too bad for them, because they can't. I don't care what the Mayor said, Gravity Falls is as weird as ever and now the Blind Eye is gone.” When
she doesn't respond, he adds, exasperated, “Come on, it really isn't so bad. Remember me and Mabel's birthday party? No one tried to make you leave, no one said they didn't want you there. I thought you had fun.”

“It was fun, but…”

“Look: Last summer, I learned that you can't make someone like you the way you want to be liked. But this last year, I learned that people can change, and I learned that from you. All you can do is be who you really are. You proved you were sorry and you tried to change, and you did. And if Mabel and me can see that, what makes you think no one else will?”

“You guys are different,” she argues.

“Fine, maybe some people won’t want to let it go. But you wouldn't want to be friends with those people anyway,” he counters.


“Man, I don't know!” he says defensively. “I just want to spend the summer with my girlfriend…”

“And how are we going to spend that summer?” she inquires, suddenly stepping closer to him and bringing herself into kissing range.

“Oh, well,” he stammers, voice cracking on the ‘w’, “you know… Monster hunting, anomaly seeking, other… types of adventuring…”

“Making out?” she suggests.

He laughs nervously for much longer than he wants to. “Ah-ha, heh, um, yeah, that would be… totally.”

Her teasing demeanor falls away as quickly as it appeared. “You really want me to go?”

“It wouldn't be the same without you,” he says honestly, hope mingling with anticipation.

“You just want to make out all summer,” she accuses.

“No! I mean… sort of? That’s not the only reason,” he denies.

She looks vulnerable in the light of evening. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Me and Mabel have been looking forward to this all year and we don’t want to leave you here. I don’t want to. I want you to go with.”

For a moment she stares back at him, face etched with emotion. Then she brushes her hair back over her shoulders and places her hands on her hips in a confident pose. “Okay, I'll go.”

“Yes!” he exults. “It's gonna be so great!”

They resume walking, Dipper with a spring in his step. He's so close to going back. He can practically smell the ever-present sharp hint of pine sap, hear the wind brushing through the boughs of the forest. There's an attic roof with knotted beams and a painting of a sailing ship waiting for him, just six hours away. Except now when he imagines himself in front of Grunkle Stan's old TV, unwinding with some Gravity Falls Public Access after another long summer day, it's not just Mabel and Grunkle Stan there with him. Grunkle Ford is there, making notations and observations while watching the show out of the corner of his eye; and there on the floor, close against Dipper's side,
Pacifica sits with the shifting colors flickering across her face. It's an image he wants to live, and it's within reach.

The crickets are just beginning to sound as they reach the top of a hill. Piedmont may be very normal, but it is not without its charms; especially on such a nice evening. Dipper doesn't know precisely what the future holds. He only knows that if he's spending his summers in Gravity Falls (and he will do everything to ensure that is the truth), then he'll be spending the rest of the year here, with Mom and Dad. And he's made his peace with that. Piedmont isn't such a bad place to be. Besides, if recent events have taught him anything it's that his life is going to be weird no matter where he is.

He just wishes he knew if Pacifica is going to be a part of that life, in the summer or any other season. Her situation has stabilized, but for how long? Her parents will work things out eventually, one way or the other, and then she'll be pulled back into whatever's left of her old life. He doesn't want that for her any more than she does. But he also can't see any way around it. It's not up to him.

He reaches out and takes her hand again, as if he can keep her with him by physical anchor.

He must be holding her hand a bit tighter than usual because she looks at him in question. “What?” she says.

“I'm just…” He tries to put his anxiety into words without sounding fearful. “You'll keep in touch, right, if you have to move out? Maybe we could still meet in Gravity Falls over the summer.”

She scowls. “I don't want to leave.”

“I don't want you to leave, either.”

“So I won't,” she says with finality.

He grins, amused by the imperious lift of her chin. “I don't know if it's that easy.”

“You just watch. They can't tell me what to do anymore,” she says, and there's no question as to who 'they' are.

Dipper could easily argue otherwise, but he doesn't really feel like it. “I think it's gonna be a great summer,” he says instead.

“Well, duh,” she scoffs, leaning into him. “You're spending it with me.”

They walk over the crest of the hill as the setting sun gilds the undersides of the clouds with a gloss of gold. There's a future ahead of them they can't see yet, but they'll reach it together, joined and hopeful, hand in hand.

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joined and hopeful, hand in hand
It's about ten in the morning and the house is in a state of total chaos. Mabel is frantically piling things on her bed, ostensibly in an attempt to separate what she's taking with her and what she's leaving behind; as is usually the case, she's having a hard time with the 'separate' part of things. She has so much useful and awesome stuff! She can't go to Gravity Falls without her glue gun or her stickers or her Bezazzler (which is broken, but, the memories).

Dipper runs into Mabel's room, hat askew and face flushed. “Mabel, have you seen Wendy's hat?”

“It's on top of your desk,” she tells him while she digs through her closet in pursuit of her hidden scrapbook from last summer.

“No, it's not! I looked in my closet and under my bed. You didn't take it, did you?”

“I wouldn't take your hat, bro,” she says, finally hauling the heavy pink book out from under some older scrapbooks. “I bet it fell behind your desk.”

His face lights up. “Oh, yeah!” He disappears back into the hall.

Mabel goes to her door and looks out into the hallway for a moment, checking to make sure Mom and Dad are both downstairs. She knows she needs to keep packing; she just can't quite resist the siren song of nostalgia and her parents don't need to see some of the things in the Gravity Falls scrapbook. The world just isn't ready to learn about Weirdmageddon and she's going to follow Grunkle Ford's lead until he says otherwise. Still, she feels the familiar pull of guilt.

Thing is, it's just her parents; not the whole world. Mabel isn't sure if she is agreeing with Grunkle Ford because he really does know best or if it's just that much easier. She can't lose her summers in Gravity Falls. She just can't.

But if her parents still don't know by the time she turns eighteen, she'll tell them. Heck, by then maybe the entire world will know, anyway!

She's gazing fondly at the macaroni interpretation of her first day emotions when she hears someone in the hall and quickly stuffs the scrapbook under the clothing in her suitcase. It's just Pacifica, though. She's looking very trendy in a white and teal summer ensemble. She looks like she's going to play tennis at a resort, not ride in a smelly bus for six hours.

“You're not really bringing all of that,” she says, less a question than a statement.

“But I have so many new sweaters!” Mabel protests, gathering up an armful of them and hugging them protectively to her chest.

“The bus has limited carry-ons. I checked,” Pacifica says with a sniff, her tone implying that, were it up to her, she'd be traveling in something more private and carry-on unlimited.

But Mabel's parents aren't made of money. Of course, neither is Pacifica, now. “The bus isn't so bad,” Mabel says. “We can play Name That Stain!”
The look on Pacifica's face speaks volumes. “I'm flying to Portland,” she says, turning on her heel.

“You'll still have to ride a bus from Portland!” Mabel shouts after her. “You won't like a bus ride without me! Every bus ride needs a Mabel!”

Mabel turns back to her pile of sweaters, knowing she has to pick and choose but also knowing she has too many favorites. This isn't actually her biggest worry at the moment; she's simply choosing not to think about the other one. She's dead set on taking Waddles back to Gravity Falls despite repeated reminders from her parents that animals aren't allowed on the bus, and this time she won't have her Grunkles to threaten the bus driver. She's hoping sheer force of personality will suffice, but she doesn't know what she'll do if it won't.

Wendy's old hat must not have been behind Dipper's desk, because Mabel can hear him talking about it with Pacifica in the hall. “Pacifica, have you seen my hat?” he asks.

“Um, yeah. You're wearing it,” she says.

“No, my other hat, the one Wendy gave me. You know, the lumberjack-type one?”

“Are you saying I took it?” Pacifica says sharply. Mabel pauses in her packing, anticipating some minor drama at the mention of Wendy.

“You didn't, did you?” Dipper says like a complete idiot.

“Why would I even want your stupid lumberdork hat?” Pacifica snaps at him.

“I was just asking…”

“I haven't seen it,” Pacifica says brusquely, and then Mabel can hear footsteps going down the stairs.

“I was just asking!” Dipper repeats with exasperation.

Oh, poor Dippingsauce. Will he ever get a clue? Lucky for him, his sister is a certified love expert. Time to work some magic and smooth things over.

“Kids! You got forty-five minutes or you're not going!” Mom yells up the stairs.

Whoops. Mabel will have to work her magic quickly. She runs out of her room and down the stairs; the thumping of her feet draws Mom's attention.

“Mabel, you had better be packing up those sweaters,” Mom calls after her as she runs past.

“I totally am!” Mabel replies as she heads for Pacifica's room.

Pacifica is sitting on the edge of her bed, flanked by two neatly packed suitcases. “Is it time to go?” she asks when Mabel comes in.

Mabel doesn't have time to be anything but direct. “You know Wendy is just Dipper's friend, right?” Pacifica crosses her arms. “Yeah, whatever. I know.”

“Really, though. She gave him that hat after she turned him down. It's a friendship hat!” Mabel stresses.

Pacifica rolls her eyes. “Okay, I get it. Are we going or not?”
“Just making sure it's smooth sailing for the SS Padippica! HONK HONK!” Mabel intones in what she thinks is a pretty great impression of a foghorn. “She's a grand old ship!”

“You are so weird sometimes I don't even know what to say to you.”

“How about, 'you're the best, Mabel!' Or, 'thanks for helping out, Mabel', or, 'I can't wait until we're sisters-in-law, Mabel!’”

“As if!” Pacifica retorts, but they're both laughing.

Mabel is distracted by a sudden ring from the doorbell. “I'll get it!” she shouts.

She goes to the front door and opens it, only to be confronted by a dark green mass that blots out her vision. It takes her a second to look up and realize it's Soos.

“Soos!” she exclaims, delighted.

“'Sup, hambone?” he says, as if he shows up on her porch all the time. He extends one fist and Mabel is quick to pound it.

“Ker-plow!” she exults, dutifully widening her hand in an explosion gesture. “Why didn't you tell us you were coming?!”

“Dude, I tried! I totally texted you and called a couple times, but you didn't answer.”

Mabel gasps in realization. “I left my phone downstairs!”

The previous night, she and Dipper had been sending funny texts to make each other laugh during the movie they were watching, since they had both already seen it. Pacifica had not, and it didn’t take too long for their constant giggling to tick her off. She had taken their phones from them and tossed the devices onto her bed. By the time the movie ended the twins had forgotten about it.

Soos shrugs, unperturbed. “No biggie. I figured I'd just get here before you left. Either that, or I'd get into a rad bus chase.”

Soos means no more bus ride… Which means no more sweater limit!

“Soos, you are the bestest!” Mabel declares, jumping up and swinging with her arms around his neck until he hoists her onto his shoulder.

“Better than a bag of gummy koalas?” he asks with a grin.

“Better than _ten_ bags!” She kicks her heels against his arm and he lumbers into the house, shutting the door behind him.

“Mabel, who are you— oh.” Mom stops, eyebrows slightly raised at the sight of Mabel mushing Soos forward. “Mabel don't _kick_ him!”

“It's alright, Mrs. Pines, I'm tougher than I look. I mean, I'd sort of have to be, right?” Soos supposes.

“She still shouldn't play so rough,” Mom says with a note of warning. Mabel prudently hops down from her perch.

“Is that Soos?” Dipper yells from upstairs. Pacifica's curious head emerges from her room.

“Pterodactyl Bros in the house!” Soos shouts back, raising his fists in triumph.
Dipper comes thumping down the stairs. “Soos! What's up, man, what are you doing here?” He trades a one-armed hug and a thump on the back with his older friend.

“I came to get you guys, remember? I'm you're ride, dude!”

Dipper slaps a hand to his forehead. “Agh, I forgot, my phone is—”

“Here,” Pacifica says, approaching to hand it back to him.

Mom stands in the doorway of the kitchen, observing the reunion. “I take it I won't be buying any bus tickets,” she says wryly.

“Nope, ’cause Soos is here to save the day,” Mabel declares.

She zooms back upstairs, ready to finish packing now that the restrictions have been removed. She crams her haphazard pile of sweaters into a variety of boxes and bags and all the crafting supplies that had been set aside before are brought back into the fold. There's an entire truck bed waiting to be filled!

As she scurries around the room nabbing everything that catches her eye, Mom comes in to check on her progress. “You'd better be sure Soos can bring you back,” she says.

“Well, if he couldn't we might have to miss school or something. I mean, who knows, that would be so crazy…” Mabel conjectures.

“Nice try. If you forget anything, good luck convincing Stan to mail it back,” Mom says on her way out.

Mabel knows Grunkle Stan is a big ol' softie when it comes to her, so she's not too worried. Still, she's close to packing up most of her belongings when it occurs to her that Gravity Falls has its own memories; she doesn't need to import any. Why bring her own sheets and comforter when she knows she'll just miss the sort of cruddy but familiar ones at the Shack?

Decisions made, she leaves her luggage in the middle of the room and goes across the hall to see how Dipper is faring. He's on his floor, pulling all kinds of junk out from under his bed while Soos looks on.

“Dude, check it,” Soos says, holding up an empty Pitt can. He smashes it against his forehead with a hollow thunk, leaving a painful-looking imprint in his skin. The can bends a little, but that's about it. “Ow. Wait, that was actually kind of lame. You got another one of these?”

“You'll have to show me later,” Dipper says distractedly. He makes a sound of frustration. “Come on, where is it?”

He must still be searching for Wendy's hat. “Did you check in the laundry room?” Mabel asks. Mom sometimes tires of Dipper's exceedingly slow laundry cycle and just gathers it up for him, hat included if it was on the floor.

“That's gotta be it,” Dipper says, and goes to check.

“How 'bout you? You ready to roll?” Soos asks Mabel.

“You ready to move my stuff?” Mabel says, poking him.

“You know it, dude.”
They go into her room and each grab a box. “So why isn't Wendy here to help drive?” Mabel wants to know.

“She's working the counter today. I didn't want to leave Melody to do it all while I was getting you dudes, and both Mr. Pines'es are still unpacking all that science stuff.”

Mabel feels the pinch of anticipation in her gut. Wendy, both her Grunkles, Candy and Grenda — all waiting in Gravity Falls, just another six hours away. She's so close to the start of the new summer. She can't pack the truck fast enough. All the work flies by in the face of her excitement.

It isn't that long before everything is snugly stacked and tied down in the truck. She and Soos survey their work with satisfaction.

“Now we have to fit Dipper's stuff in here,” Soos remarks.

“And Pacifica's,” Mabel reminds him.

“Dude, good thing I've played so much Tetris.” Soos wipes at his forehead. “Hey, has Pacifica said anything about the look for this summer? I still have all my w-necks.”

Mabel doesn't know if Pacifica even cares about that anymore, but it's not really the time to ask. “We can ask her about it on the trip. Come on, let's make Dipper be faster!”

Dipper isn't in his room (though Mabel notes that Wendy's hat is now on top of his suitcase). Instead she finds him in Pacifica's room, where he is pulling one of her suitcases out into the hall. He's in the middle of relating one of the less discussed adventures from last summer.

“So then we find out that he's some kind of candy gestalt made out of all the loser candy everyone throws away,” Dipper explains.

“A candy what?” Pacifica says.

“Gestalt. Like, sort of a collective consciousness. Or, maybe he was more like an elemental, all that rage taking physical form.”

“What, you didn't interview it for your book?”

“Pfft, I wouldn't 'interview' it. Maybe I'd ask it a few questions, but that's not… Well, it's sort of… Huh.”

“You always try to talk to things that want to kill you.”

“There's nothing wrong with a little scientific curiosity,” Dipper says sententiously.

Mabel darts into the room and grabs a makeup bag. “Is this it? Are you ready?”

“What, you didn't interview it for your book?”

“Pfft, I wouldn't 'interview' it. Maybe I'd ask it a few questions, but that's not… Well, it's sort of… Huh.”

“You always try to talk to things that want to kill you.”

“There's nothing wrong with a little scientific curiosity,” Dipper says sententiously.

Mabel darts into the room and grabs a makeup bag. “Is this it? Are you ready?”

“Be careful with that,” Pacifica commands.

Mabel ignores her, scooping up a few more things. “Come on, let's go!” She shoves the items into Dipper's arms and grabs hold of the suitcase. “Dipper, get your stuff!”

“It's still six hours, no matter when we leave,” Dipper tells her, but he goes back upstairs with celerity.

With Mabel as a driving force it isn't long before everything is jammed into the truck with unexpected neatness (Soos' Tetris skills really are impeccable). As Soos pulls the bed cover over the
luggage, Mabel sprints back inside to make sure she hasn't forgotten anything. Her grappling hook is safely hidden, wrapped in multiple sweaters, and her scrapbooks are stowed under the truck seat. Waddles is standing by the front door, sensing, as pets do, that the commotion is out of the ordinary and could involve him. And now she doesn't have to figure out how to sneak him onto the bus, which is a relief.

Satisfied that her work is done, she pauses to take in the collage of the Shack on her wall before she leaves her room. It's been a welcome collection of memories, but now she's going back to the real thing.

Downstairs, Dipper is saying goodbye to Dad. Mabel waits until he steps away and then jumps forward for her own hug.

“Have a good summer,” Dad says. “And tell Uncle Stan and Uncle Ford I still want to come up and visit sometime soon, okay?”

Mabel dutifully promises to tell them, wondering what a trip with Dad would be like. What would he think of Gravity Falls’ innate weirdness? There's a part of Mabel that wants to share that with her parents, that's always been true, but she must wonder how well they would take it. Not the weirdness itself so much as the danger that often goes with it.

Someday she'll have to deal with that. Just, not yet.

She lines up at the door with Dipper when Mom comes in for her goodbye. Mom hugs Dipper and plants a kiss on the side of his forehead. He shuffles his feet in minor embarrassment but knows better than to protest. “Don't grow up too much without me this summer, alright?” she tells him. “And have fun. But not too much fun,” she adds with a pointed finger. “Don't think you and Pacifica can get away with anything just because I'm not there, I already talked to your great-uncles.”

Dipper tugs his hat down to cover his face. “Oh, come on…”

“Hey, I'm just telling you how it is. Did you hear me, Pacifica?”

“Yes, Mrs. Pines,” Pacifica says, cheeks slightly pinked.

“Good.” Mom turns her attention back to Dipper. “Try not to outgrow all your clothes and call us if you need anything. And,” she says, tilting his chin back up with her hand, “I'm proud of you. Don't you know that?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Dipper says.

Mom turns to Mabel. “Have a good time, sweetheart,” she says, gathering Mabel close for a hug. “How about you write me a little more this time, hmm?”

Mabel accepts the mild admonishment. Last summer had been so crazy she hadn't devoted much time to her letters (and lost a very important one due to Weirdmageddon, but Mom doesn't need to know that). She can do better this time, so Mom and Dad don't have to worry. “I'll write you every day!” she says.

“Sure you will,” Mom says wryly. “How about we try for a couple times a month?”

“Once a week,” Mabel haggles.

“If you're not busy,” Mom says, kissing Mabel's cheek. “Which you will be. And I'm very proud of you.”
Mabel hugs Mom with every ounce of love and energy she has (which is considerable).

Mom pats her on the back and gently disengages. “Have fun and stay safe.” Then, she turns again and wraps her arms around Pacifica, who goes still with surprise. “You, too, honey. Have fun and I'll miss you,” Mom says. Then she says more quietly, near Pacifica's ear, “I'm so proud of you, too.”

Pacifica stiffly returns the hug without much obvious emotion, but her eyes are suspiciously shiny.

Mabel hears sniffling behind her. She looks over her shoulder to see Soos standing just outside the screen door, hat in hand and tears in his eyes. “Oh, man. I'm tearing up, dude,” he says thickly. “This is hitting me right in the feels.”

Half an hour later and they're in the truck, racing up the highway. Mabel folds her legs up on the seat and leans forward as if that will get her there faster. She jokes with Soos and shouts things to Dipper and Pacifica in the backseat and the miles turn beneath the wheels.

She's almost home.
It's evening when Dipper hops off the step below the door of Soos' truck just after it has arrived at 618 Gopher Road in Gravity Falls, Oregon. It feels like the first breath after coma.

The air is redolent with the scent of the pine trees, an ocean of rustling green that stretches away to either side until the horizon meets with the hillsides. He knows these woods, their paths and contours. Below the first purple notes of night and the just risen moon, the trunks of the evergreens stand like soldiers, trunks fading into the dark of the undergrowth. There are secrets there, in the wooded place; signs and wonders. He can't wait to find them again.

The Shack looks pretty much just like he left it: slightly dilapidated, tacky, anachronistic; home. There's long grass beneath his feet and a clear sky above and summer unfolds before him, beckoning, welcome.

He's back.

He walks forward as if in a trance, vaguely aware that Mabel and Pacifica are with him. Soon, he is running. The wooden panels of the old porch thump beneath his feet and he throws the door open. There's the stairs, crooked and warped and so familiar he can feel them shift beneath his weight without taking a single step. He moves inside and smells the wooden walls, oak and pine and hints of cedar. The TV sits in front of the armchair, dinosaur skull still in its place. Somewhere far beneath his feet, he knows, might be living dinosaurs. It's been awhile since he could think that.

Exiting the living area, he goes to the gift shop. And there's Wendy behind the counter, face buried in a magazine, as if it's just another day last summer, as if he never left. Her head raises when she hears him come in. She drops the magazine and springs to her feet.

“Hey, you're back!” she says, delighted. “Dude, I thought you'd be another hour, at least!”

“Yeah, Soos was speeding, like, ninety percent of the time,” he tells her, and then he's accepting a hug and it's not awkward or weird; it's wonderful and steady.

Mabel comes running into the room at full tilt. “Bring it in, Shack Crew! Bring it in!” she exhorts. Soos comes in behind her and puts his arms around all of them, squeezing until they make sounds of protest.

“I'm so stoked you guys are back,” Wendy says, stepping away with her hands in pockets, as cool and easygoing as ever. “Hey, Pacifica.”

Pacifica is standing by the door, witnessing their reunion. “Hey,” she says neutrally.

“I'll go make sure I didn't leave anything in Pacifica's room,” Soos says. He and Melody have moved out of the Shack and are renting a small house in town, so Pacifica gets Ford's old room. “You should tell Mr. Pines you're here. I mean, both of them.”

“I'm supposed to be moving stuff out of Stan's truck,” Wendy says, jerking a thumb over her shoulder towards the door and rolling her eyes. “He knew I'd be here after work 'cause of you guys. Talk more when you're done?”
“Definitely,” Dipper says.

The door to the shop opens and Grunkle Stan comes in, carrying a box. “Wendy!” he shouts. “Why aren’t you carrying this box for me? What am I paying you for?”

“Oh, cool, you’re paying me overtime?” Wendy says sarcastically, though she does take the box from him.

“Get a union,” Grunkle Stan tells her. It’s a good thing Wendy took the box, though, because a second later he has to catch Mabel as she throws herself at him.

“Guess who's back for the summer?!” Mabel grins up at him manically.

“You know I just saw you, right?” he grumbles, patting her on the back.

Dipper goes over to give Grunkle Stan a (brief, manly) hug, but his attention is fixated on the vending machine set against the far wall. Below the hidden stairway is his other Grunkle and a laboratory that he can't wait to see again. This time he knows it's there, he'll know it for the whole summer, and there will be so much to do and see and discover.

Pacifica notices where his attention lies. “Just go,” she says, rolling her eyes at him.

He does, running over and punching in the code. The machine swings open and he ducks inside.

“Hey! If you're already going down there, at least take a box with you!” Grunkle Stan yells after him. Dipper keeps going, figuring between the stairs and the closing vending machine he has plausible denial as to whether he heard or not.

The laboratory is lit up, consoles blinking; the space is underpinned by the deep hum of the ventilation system. The air is cool and dry, and Dipper is assaulted by so many memories that he has to stop for a second and sort his thoughts out. The most momentous occasion of his life started down here.

Grunkle Ford is just ahead, surrounded by instrumentation. “Dipper!” he says jovially when he spots his nephew. “I've been parsing the data from our last excursion, in between unpacking. The implications are certainly interesting, but I'd like a larger sample space. Up for finding some more anomalies?”

Dipper only has one possible answer. “Yes!” he says excitedly. “Where do we start?”

“Tomorrow, I should think,” Grunkle Ford chuckles. “Let's not get caught up in the work just yet. Tonight, family first, Dipper.”

Dipper knows that's a lesson that Grunkle Ford learned the hard way. Excited as he is to get started, his great-uncle is right. Tonight is a night for settling in and seeing each other. “Sure, tomorrow, then,” he says, and he can't be that disappointed because there will be a whole summer for science.

Soon after, he's sitting on the floor with Pacifica leaning against his side. There's a terrible black and white horror movie on Gravity Falls Public Access. Mabel is sitting on the chair with Grunkle Stan, saying something that's making him laugh as she furiously texts Candy and Grenda (Dipper knows they'll both be at the Shack bright and early tomorrow). Soos and Wendy heckle the movie from their borrowed kitchen chairs, scornig the special effects (Soos goes off on a tangent by suggesting they could make a better movie and soon they are trading ideas). And Grunkle Ford sits in his own chair, scribbling notes in his journal. Although he isn't joining in the mockery of the film, he seems content to just be there.
It's Dipper's imagined image of this moment, brought to perfect life.

Next to him, Pacifica makes a sound of disbelief. “You can see the microphone,” she says, pointing at a boom mic floating over an actor's head.

Her observation brings everyone's attention back to the film and soon they are all laughing as the boom mic goes in and out of frame what must be five or six times in the same scene. Even Ford chortles at the sight.

“And that was their best take!” Wendy cackles.

Dipper rests his head back against the fabric of the armchair and just feels it, all of it, everything and everyone around him.

***---~**~---***

It's late evening. Soos and Wendy have gone home, promising an early return the next day. Dipper is sitting on one of the lawn chairs perched on the roof of the Shack. The sun has sunk behind the pines, the town's water tower backlit with every subtle shade of orange. It looks like a postcard, but he's here, not looking at it on a spinning rack or someone's shelf of memorabilia. This is his, this instant. And there will never be another exactly like it.

He's spent the day trying to keep his feelings from overwhelming him. But this, finally — the wind in the evergreens, the old dirt road and lot, the feeling of the warm, scratchy shingles beneath his bare feet — this makes it all real. He's here. He's home. Summer is before him and he hasn't even begun to tap its potential.

It's a life he hadn't conceived of a year ago, and now it's a life he can't imagine not wanting. This is what he is meant for: this town, these anomalies, this new science. It's his future, laid out in adventure and danger and journals. Grunkle Ford has so much to teach him.

And Mabel will be there, too. He's sure of it.

A sudden noise interrupts his thoughts and he turns to see the next object of his musings climbing the ladder. Pacifica pauses to take in the view, then carefully descends the slope and occupies the other lawn chair.

“It's kind of weird to see the water tower from this side,” she says.

Dipper looks at it, wooden slats tinted by the light of the evening. “I guess Robbie's explosion didn't make it through the reset.”

“Explosion?” Pacifica says, confused. “Wait, that graffiti? I thought that was a muffin.”

Dipper laughs, each heave of his chest made propulsive by the giddy joy thumping away in his ribcage. He's lighter than air. “It totally was a muffin!”

They laugh, Pacifica's giggle high and bright in the gathering twilight; as they taper off it suddenly strikes him that he hadn't even known who she was at this same time last summer. If at some point, somehow, he had known that he would be here, laughing with her on the roof of the Shack… Well, that would have been the weirdest thing of all.
“So what's it like, being back?” he has to ask.

“I don't really know yet,” she says.

He knows she must be thinking of the town, a place that might prefer to forget her and her family name. She has nothing to prove to Dipper and Mabel, obviously. It remains to be seen how anyone else feels about it (though Wendy and Soos don't seem to hold a grudge, and Grunkle Stan is slowly coming around).

“It'll be great,” he promises her. “And you can track mud wherever you want.”

“Oh, wow, just what I always wanted,” she says sarcastically.

He just grins at her. “Come on. A whole summer with me and Mabel, adventuring? How could it not be awesome?”

“Well…” She looks out into the sea of trees, a rustling wonderland of pines and the endless enigmas beneath their boughs. “Since it's us… yeah. It has to be awesome.”

It's them; it's everyone. It's the evergreens and ever-ready hearts, monsters and mysteries, the light and the laughter, the dim and the dark, the secret spaces and quiet truths. It’s the start of the summer at the near-end of the world. It's the next great frontier wrapped in the sleepy layers of a little logging town. It's where he found new friends, new family, found himself, and found her.

It's Gravity Falls.

He reaches down and takes her hand between the chairs. Together, they watch as every rendered hue of purple paints itself across the empyrean and stars slip out of the fading light, somewhere above their next true experience.

***---~*~---***

That night, he crawls into his bed; scratchy sheets, lumpy pillow, scents of lumber and mildew. It's not exactly his well-furnished, modern drywall room back in Piedmont, but it's not worse, either. It's just different, in the best of fashions. It fits him in a way that's hard to describe. It's a better extension of his skin, his self, who he is and who he's becoming.

Outside, the crickets serenade the Shack. The moon casts its rays through the window and lights upon the floor, beaming through the air in a way that gives it physicality, catches on the same specks of dust and dancing pollen that filter through Dipper's lungs. His heart sings in time with the crickets and the wind in the trees.

Across the room, Mabel rolls over in her bed to face him. She must be smiling because he can see the glitter of her braces, and the sight sends a spark of recognition careening through him, like it's a painting of a place he's been before.

“Dipper,” she whispers loudly.

“Yeah?” he says, the word floating up in the darkness to rattle around the rafters, darting through the moonbeams.
“What are we going to do tomorrow?”
He smiles, sinking back into his pillow. “I bet we'll think of something.”
She rolls over again, clutching Waddles to her chest. “Goodnight, Dipper.”
“Goodnight, Mabel.”
He closes his eyes, and he knows that when he opens them again he'll be exactly where he wants to be.

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0: Anyway, I've Been There by Camber (Deep Elm, 1999)
1: Home, Like Noplace Is There by The Hotelier (Tiny Engines, 2014)
2: Day Three of My New Life by Knapsack (Alias, 1997)
3: I Wrote The Last Chapter For You by Edaline (Law Of Inertia, 1999)
4: Nothing Makes Sense Without It by Kind Of Like Spitting (Slowdance, 1999)
5: Decisions Should Be A Desert, Bright And Clear by Amalthea (Ape Must Not Kill Ape, 2009)
6: All I Could Find Was You by Dowsing (Count Your Lucky Stars, 2011)
7: Something to Write Home About by The Get Up Kids (Doghouse, 1999)
8: (Don't Forget To) Breathe by Various Artists (Crank!, 1997)
9: These Are Not Fall Colors by Lync (K, 1994)
10: You Can Just Leave It All by Prawn (Topshelf, 2012)
11: Chemistry for Changing Times by The Blacktop Cadence (Keystone-Ember, 1997)
12: The Lack Long After by Pianos Become The Teeth (Topshelf, 2011)
13: Nothing Feels Good by The Promise Ring (Jade Tree, 1997)
14: Don't Be A Let Down by Messes (Paperweight, 2015)
15: ‘Let Me Keep This Memory’ from Dreamer On The Run by U137 (Deep Elm, 2013)
16: I'll Keep You In Mind, From Time To Time by Moose Blood (No Sleep, 2014)
17: I Blame The Scenery by Reubens Accomplice (Slowdance, 2000)
18: Catastrophe Keeps Us Together by Rainer Maria (Grunion, 2006)
20: At The Window Of Vulnerability by Julia (Bloodlink, 1994)
21: The Comfort and The Confusion by Merit (Boom Blast, 2016)
22: Welcome Home, Kiddo by Our Sunday Affairs (Not On Label, 2011)
23: The Pull Of Gravity by Young and Heartless (Mayfly, 2014)
24: On Long Distance and The Ties That Held Us Together by Brave Season (Ronald, 2015)
25: Sun You've Got To Hurry by Reno Kid (Defiance, 1999)

26: Everything That I Was Afraid of Happening, Happened by Saintly Rows (Not On Label, 2013)

27: Maybe You, No One Else Worth It by Brave Bird (Count Your Lucky Stars, 2013)

28: Moving Mountains by The Casket Lottery (Second Nature, 2000)

29: For the Love of the Wounded by Split Lip (Doghouse, 1993)

30: What It Takes to Move Forward by Empire! Empire! (I Was A Lonely Estate) (Count Your Lucky Stars, 2009)

31: Our First Taste of Escape by Penfold (Milligram, 2001)

32: Are You Driving Me Crazy? by Seam (City Slang, 1995)

33: If They Do by Elliott (Initial, 1999)

34: Hide Here Forever by Strictly Ballroom (Waxploitation, 1997)

35: Two Conversations by The Appleseed Cast (Tiger Style, 2003)

36: Start Here by The Gloria Record (Broken Circles, 2002)

37: Mend, Move On by Trophy Eyes (Hopeless, 2014)

38: Farewell To Introductions by Maya Shore (Music Fellowship, 2000)

39: Today Puberty, Tomorrow the World by Native Nod (Gern Blandsten, 1995)


41: It Tired Me All The Same by arrows in her (Broken World, 2016)

42: Spelling The Names by Ethel Meserve (Tree, 2000)

43: These Last Days by Evergreen (Gravity, 1997)

44: Guilt Beats Hate by Benton Falls (Deep Elm, 2003)

45: If Arsenic Fails, Try Algebra by Pop Unknown (Deep Elm, 1999)

46: Departures and Landfalls by Boys Life (Headhunter, 1996)

47: Fate's Got A Driver by Chamberlain (Doghouse, 1996)

48: Under The Pretense Of Present Tense by Engine Down (Lovitt, 1999)

49: RE: Dereliction by Acrobat Down (Atact Musicalities, 1999)

50: Leave it to Science to Solve All Your Problems by My Winter Nerve (Not On Label)

51: Real Stories of True People, Who Kind of Looked Like Monsters… by Oso Oso (Soft Speak,
52: *Tell Me About the Long Dark Path Home* by The Newfound Interest in Connecticut (We Are Busy Bodies, 2005)

53: *Don’t Need Regret* by The Pine (Alone, 2005)

54: ‘At The Top Of This Hill’ from *Departures* by Message To Bears (Dead Pilot, 2009)

55: *Take Care, Take Care, Take Care* by Explosions in the Sky (Temporary Residence Limited, 2011)

56: *EndSerenading* by Mineral (Crank!, 1998)

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Anyway, I've Been There Playlist by IdriveaTARDIS
The wooden floorboards are cool beneath Pacifica’s feet as she stands on her toes and pushes open the stained-glass window at the top of the wall. With a squeak, it opens out and upwards, allowing the pine-scented air of the night inside.

It’s either very late or very early; she isn’t sure without checking her phone. She can’t sleep. Her new bed is stiffer than her old one (though even her ‘old’ one is new, really) and the creaking of the Shack as it settles is unfamiliar and sometimes startling. But it’s more than that.
The night sky is clear. With the moon shining down she can see the tree line across the ragged lawn, only the first few rows of trunks visible before the shadows darken and blot out any detail. She remembers standing at her window in the manor, looking out from a different angle at the same dark woods. It’s a memory that drags with it less-defined phantoms, including the wispy traces of who that girl was, looking out a different window in a different time at the same Oregon pines. Past shades of Pacifica, blurred by time and intent and built of all the pieces of herself she’s tried to leave behind.

Who she was, who she is, and who she’s trying to be. Like a puzzle with a million pieces. She can’t help but think she’s missing some. She doesn’t like the way Gravity Falls makes her feel. Everything she was in this place is everything she wants to leave in Malibu.

But Dipper and Mabel are so happy here. She can see it as clear as day, even in the brief few hours between arrival and bedtime. And this is where she started to turn it around, isn’t it? The girl who came to the Mystery Shack looking for help with a ghost problem became a ghost herself. Perhaps it was before that; a humbling at the hands of old documents, frights and friendship at a miniature golf course.

Maybe she’s just afraid that she’ll trip over all the fragments of that other Pacifica still strewn around this town.

Or maybe, the more hopeful side of her thinks, Dipper and Mabel will hold her up.

An owl hoots in the distance. A breeze sends the pines shuddering, whispering their secrets in the wake of its passing. Pacifica goes back to her bed and closes her eyes. Whatever happens next, it won’t be what happened before. It surprises her how easy it is to believe that, but it makes sense.

Everything is different now.

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Pacifica’s eyes snap open in time to a wooden thud, loud and unfamiliar. She pushes herself into a sitting position, squinting against the morning light. It’s far from the first time she’s awoken to unaccustomed surroundings, though this time she isn’t greeted with Mabel’s garish sense of interior décor or the bland accoutrements of a motel.

She’s beneath a slanted wooden ceiling surmounting a room that is a bit different from the rest of the Shack. She’s fine with that. She doesn’t have any desire to wake up encircled by horrifying taxidermy. According to what she’s been told, her room has been through several variations in the last year before she came to stay in it: Ford’s old bedroom became Dipper’s, became Soos’ breakroom, became Ford’s bedroom again, became Soos and Melody’s bedroom, became Soos’ breakroom again, and now becomes her guest room (and still Soos’ breakroom). Soos has removed most of his personal items, but there are tools on the walls and a keyboard laid across a row of filing cabinets and an extremely odd corner-mounted flag of a dinosaur backed by dayglo colors.

Pacifica doesn’t know what woke her, but a moment later the door to her room opens slightly and Mabel’s beaming visage pokes through at an odd angle.

“You’re already awake!” Mabel exclaims, throwing the door wide open. “How’d you like Grunkle Ford’s old room? I guess he’s sleeping down in the lab, like a mole person.” She makes a weird
whiskery motion in front of her mouth that Pacifica assumes is meant to signify mole people.

“It was fine,” Pacifica says neutrally. She glances to her left, where the window is still open. Her thoughts from the previous night seem distant and strange, far removed from the light of the day. Then she’s struck by another thought. “There aren’t actually any mole people, are there?”

“WHO KNOWS?!?” Mabel’s sheer volume is clear indication that she’s in full-blown Manic Mabel Mode, high on life and probably half a box of sugary cereal. “It’s our first day back! Get dressed, Pacifica, ‘cause this is the best day EVER absolutely for all timeeeeee—”

She disappears into the hallway, sweater sleeves flailing joyfully. Pacifica sits in bed, feeling a pressure in her chest that no amount of Mabel’s exultations can dispel. The other girl might be eager to see the town and its people, but what is that going to mean for Pacifica? She knows how Gravity Falls remembers her. It’s the same way she remembers herself.

Well, that’s not fair, she thinks as she goes into the small, unadorned bathroom and brushes her teeth. She was there for Weirdmageddon. She’d helped build the robot, sort of, reluctantly, and she’d opened the gate and let the whole town party! She is the party girl! That has to count for something, right? Don’t they remember her freeing them from Bill’s morbid throne? Maybe they don’t want to remember… Okay, fine, but she is still the party girl. That party had been legendary.

She finishes putting on her outfit for the day and sighs. This is all in her head. She hasn’t even seen anyone in Gravity Falls, never mind gauged their reactions. Besides, who knows how the day is going to go. Dipper and Mabel just got back to the Shack, after all. They might want to spend the day with their great-uncles.

Pacifica wanders out of her room and follows the sounds of other people through the confusing wooden hallways. It seems like there are doors everywhere, half of them obstructed by old tourist attractions, piled junk and memorabilia. Eventually she comes across the living room, where she finds Mabel halfway through a joyous, highly kinetic reunion with her two friends whose names Pacifica still can’t remember. She turns around and walks the other way, not wanting to intrude and figuring she isn’t welcome, anyway, even if Mabel would pretend she is.

There’s a staircase by the front door so she goes up that with the vague thought that she’ll find Dipper. But the door to the twins’ attic room is ajar and there’s no one inside. Feeling more lost by the minute, she once again retraces her steps. Finding herself back in the hall outside her own room, she goes the other way and ends up in the gift shop.

There’s a disappointing lack of Dipper. In fact, there’s no one there at all; the Shack must not be open yet. She remembers, then, that there’s a strange hidden basement somewhere down below. She looks over at the vending machine and sees that it’s slightly open, yawning away from the wall.

She starts to approach, then hesitates. Isn’t it supposed to be a secret or something? But half the town knows, anyway, so it probably doesn’t matter.

The elevator doors open and she’s nearly deafened by the ugly squealing of metal scraping across concrete. There’s a room ahead full of consoles and equipment, reminiscent of all the junk that Ford had piled into the back of the moving truck. To the right it opens up into a much larger space than she was expecting. There are large pieces of metal stacked on top of each other, along with what she thinks is much of the science stuff from the truck. Dipper and Ford are dragging a console to one side, pushing it against the wall.

“Good enough for now,” Ford says, letting his hands drop. “With the portal dismantled, I’ll have more space than I need.”
“Until the next big project,” Dipper says, sounding hopeful.

“True. At least my power demands will be modest for the time being. Still, I’m considering adapting the power source from the Quantum Destabilizer to supply the Shack. It will take some work, but I think it’s feasible.”

“Is that something I could work on?” Dipper asks eagerly.

Ford scratches his chin thoughtfully. “I don’t see why not… save for the risk of molecular disintegration. With a little training and some practice on a few of my less daunting generators, there’s no reason you couldn’t be of help.”

Dipper’s smile can’t get any wider. Then he glances down at his watch and his eyes widen, too. “Oh, man, I promised Mabel we’d go exploring today. You know, first day back and everything…”

“Ah, when I was your age, I had an equal enthusiasm for field study! Still do, come to think of it…” Ford muses. “Go on, spend some time with your sister, get some fresh air. No point in staying cooped up in this dusty old lab when there’s a whole weird world out there!”

“I’ll be back this evening, okay?” Dipper says, beginning to leave.

“Don’t worry about me, Dipper, I’ve got an entire workspace to rearrange. Go have fun and be sure to record any interesting observations. Now, where did I put that crowbar…”

Dipper is heading for the elevator when he spots Pacifica loitering in the antechamber. His face lights up. “Hey!”

She’s just as glad to see him. Or she was, up until she found out he is running off with Mabel. “You’re, what, adventuring? With Mabel?”

“Yeah! Yeah, she wants to go out and see the woods again.”

“But… I thought you wanted to see your uncles, and, like, all your friends from town,” she says, nonplussed.

“We did see Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford. Besides, they’re still busy unpacking right now. We spent most of last summer with just the two of us, running around the woods or hanging out here. I just… I want to get back out there,” he says, a glint in his eye. “I need to. I guess that probably sounds weird.”

“Duh. You are weird,” she says, but she sort of understands where he and Mabel are coming from. He’s good at this. They both are. She resigns herself to an afternoon of crummy TV. “When will you get back?”

Dipper blinks. “Aren’t you coming…?” He immediately misinterprets her surprise. “I mean, you don’t have to, I know it’s the woods and you don’t like getting dirty—”

“Shut up,” she tells him. His mouth snaps closed and he looks a little wounded before she steps closer and puts her hands on his shoulders. Their eyes lock and he swallows whatever he was going to say next. “It just depends who I’m getting dirty with,” she says with a pert twist of her lips. She thinks that’s a pretty clever thing to say right up until the next second when his eyes widen and then hers do, too, when she realizes the other connotations. She jumps back from him like he’s just scalded her. “Okay, wait, no, I— that was not, no, I didn’t mean it like—you shut up!”

He doesn’t stop laughing. “Finally!” he crows. “Finally, it’s someone else!”
“Don’t you flipping dare tell Mabel about this!” she commands.

About an hour later, she’s eaten breakfast (it’s really more of a brunch at this point) and is outside on a beautiful, windy day. What she had initially thought was going to be a twins-only outing has turned out to be quite the excursion. Dipper, Mabel and Pacifica have been joined by Wendy, Soos, Grenda (Mabel’s big friend) and Candy (Mabel’s small friend; Pacifica will remember this time). The group is excited, to say the least, a furor of overlapping greetings and exclamations of eagerness. Soos and Mabel, especially, are beside themselves.

“Okay, guys. Guys!” Dipper shouts, gaining everyone’s attention. “Alright, so, I have a plan.” He extracts his journal from his vest and flips it open. “Last summer I found a really cool cave not too far from here, but I never had the time to check it out. I propose that we go back and see if we can find anything anomalous. All in favor?”

“Wooooooooo, caving!” Mabel cheers at the top of her lungs.

“It’s called ‘spelunking’,” Candy says, eyes bright.

“WOOOOOOO, SPELUNKING!” Grenda bellows.

“We should have, like, a codeword or something in case there’s another shapeshifter,” Soos recommends. “I want mine to be ‘straight blanchin’”.

“What if one of us is already the shapeshifter?” Wendy counters.

Soos pales slightly. “Dude, Mabel: If I was a shapeshifter, I would know it, right?”

“Let’s test,” Mabel says before jabbing him repeatedly in the stomach. “Beep bop!”

Soos snorts with laughter and doubles over, arms going down to protect his midsection.

“He checks out,” Wendy confirms.

Pacifica stays close to Dipper while all this is happening, not sure how she feels about it. She is painfully aware of how she would have reacted a year ago and doesn’t want that, but she’s also not sure how to join in or if she even wants to. Dipper is grinning at the antics of his friends, and, she has to admit, it is kind of funny. They’re a bunch of chaotic weirdos, yeah, but… they all like each other and they’re having fun.

Maybe she should, too. This is what she wants. Maybe not just like them, not exactly what they have, but her own thing. With Dipper, and Mabel, and even the rest of them, too.

“If you get us lost, I’m voting we eat you first,” she tells Dipper with a haughty raise of her nose.

He laughs and grins down at her (he’s getting so tall). “Come on, I’m super stringy!”

“That’s woodland justice, man,” Wendy tells him.


“We aren’t getting lost!” Dipper holds out his journal again. “See, I made a map. Totally accurate.”

And wouldn’t you know it, he’s actually right. They find the cave pretty much right where he said it would be. It’s another outing into a dark and decidedly grody venue, but at least this time her flashlight works. She still sticks close to Dipper, though.
For the first twenty minutes or so it seems like a regular old cave, or so she assumes. Not like she
knows much about caves. It’s damp and gross, though not quite as gross as she’d been expecting.
Once they get deeper, things become more interesting. There are stalactites and stalagmites and she
doesn’t know which is which but she’s too proud to ask.

“This is a strange formation,” Candy says, pointing out one such pointed cone of rock.

“I got five bucks for the first person who licks it,” Mabel tells everyone.

“I’m gonna make out with it!” Grenda wraps her arms around the rock, but is stopped by Dipper.

“This *is* weird,” he says, looking at it more closely. “It’s almost like it’s… manmade.”

“Oh, Dipper?” Wendy is a bit ahead of the rest of the group, flashlight pointing down at something
on the floor. “Is this another of Ford’s hideouts or whatever?”

She’s standing over the scattered pieces of a crude wooden ladder. There are a few other signs of
habitation, too; an old iron bucket and a pickaxe that looks like it came right out of the Gravity Falls
Museum of History.

Dipper looks disappointed for a second, but his expression becomes interested once he examines the
objects more closely. “This doesn’t look like Grunkle Ford’s stuff.”

“It’s not science-y enough,” Mabel opines.

“Did you guys hear that?” Soos asks.

“HEAR WHAT?” Grenda says, the echoes of her voice resounding through the small space.

Everyone winces.

When silence finally returns they all remain quiet, listening. Pacifica doesn’t know if she’s imagining
it, but it sure sounds like something is rhythmically scraping down below. It’s a soft, steady sound.
Someone… digging?

“It’s coming from down there!” Wendy whispers, pointing at a smaller tunnel that descends to the
left.

Dipper hoists his flashlight and heads for the tunnel, only to stop when Pacifica catches his arm.

“Wait,” she says.

“Yeah?” he says.

“If there’s, like, a big disgusting monster down there, I want you to promise you won’t try to talk to
it,” she says, poking him sharply in the chest.

Mabel laughs somewhere behind him. “She’s got your number, bro-bro!”

“Whipped, dude,” Wendy jeers.

Dipper flushes. “I wouldn’t try to… Well, what if it talks first?”

A deep rumble from below interrupts them. The vibration buzzes against the bottoms of Pacifica’s
shoes and she catches Dipper’s shoulder to steady herself.

“That is a very scary sound,” Candy says with wide eyes.
Dipper straightens his hat, his stance and expression such a clear echo of a similar moment in Malibu that it’s almost like they’re all back there, about to go down and face the Boss-Lobster.

“Ready?” he asks Pacifica.

She’s not sure she can be, but she’s going to try. She feels a familiar excitement build up, an intoxicating cocktail of tension and terror. She understands this, now. The adventure is its own reward.

“I’m ready,” she says, tightening her grip on her flashlight.

Soos picks up the mining pick and brandishes it. “Let’s do this, dudes.”

The tunnel goes down a long way, sloping into the darkness. The air is cold and dry, and Pacifica is shivering in her light summer ensemble. She wishes she had been told they’d be underground before she got ready.

Up ahead, Dipper suddenly stops.

“What is it?” Wendy whispers from just behind Pacifica.

“I thought I heard something,” Dipper says. “I—"

There’s a deep crack from below and the floor vanishes. Luckily, they don’t fall very far. Pacifica manages to land on her feet, though she loses her balance and hits the uneven floor. Dipper lands next to her, flashlight skittering across the stone. Dust hisses and rocks clack all over; then everything is still.

Dipper coughs and says, “Is everyone okay?”

There’s a variety of disgruntled groans and grumblings, but everyone seems to be in one piece. Pacifica pushes herself to her feet and bends down to grab her flashlight.

“Thanks, Dipper,” Soos says.

Dipper, in the middle of dusting off his clothes, looks up at Soos. “What, Soos?”

“For kicking over my flashlight,” Soos says, waving it.

“I didn’t kick your flashlight over…” Dipper says slowly.

“Oh. Heh, well, somebody did,” Soos says with a shrug. He turns his flashlight in that direction and the beam lands on something huge and hairy.

Pacifica is pretty sure her heart literally stops for a second.

Mabel’s arm comes up and she points at them. “Oh my gosh MOLE PEOPLE!!!” she shrieks.

It’s pandemonium. All the humans are screaming and the mole people are screaming and Pacifica finds herself running up the rubble pile into the tunnel above in an instinctual attempt to get the high ground. She turns back around and is ready to… something, she doesn’t know, maybe whack a mole
person with her flashlight if she has to, but by then it’s over. Dipper is turning in a circle, flashlight tracing the room. The mole people are gone.

“Well,” Wendy says, breathing hard, “I guess they were scared of us, too.”

“Dude; it’s like, we’re the real monsters,” Soos says.

Mabel, who is standing back to back in a defensive triangle with Candy and Grenda, looks up. “We did wreck their roof…”

Dipper, of course, is scribbling frantically in his journal. “Mole people! I can’t wait to tell Grunkle Ford.”

Pacifica decides if no one else is going to say it, then she will. “Okay, that’s great and all that maybe we’re the monsters or whatever, but we should go.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to be around if they decide to get angry about all their nice rocks or something,” Wendy agrees.

Dipper is clearly reluctant to leave, but he acquiesces to reason. They make the trek back up to the surface and soon enough the sunlight is stabbing their eyes. They all stumble out, blinking, into the woods. The sun is still high on the horizon and for a moment everything that just happened seems like a dream.

“Goodbye, mole people!” Mabel yells into the cave. “Heh. That’s a fun word to say. Mole. Moley-moley-mole-mole.”

“Let’s get celebration milkshakes at the diner!” Grenda declares.

“Milkshakes! Milkshakes! Milkshakes!” Mabel chants, getting Soos and Candy to join her.

“I could go for a milkshake,” Wendy says.

As a chattering crowd, they move off back towards town. Pacifica sits down on a fallen log for a second, her legs shaky as the adrenaline fades. The forest is warm and somehow more real after the sensory deprivation of the cave. The air feels humid on her skin and the breeze blows past in waving ripples of green. Dipper finishes writing in his journal and snaps it shut, tucking it away in his vest.

“Just give me a second,” she says, assuming he’s about to follow the others.

“We don’t have to go,” he says.

She looks up at him. “What?”

He sits down next to her, hands rubbing awkwardly on his knees. “I mean, if you want, we can just stay here. If you’re tired or whatever… I know you don’t want to go to town yet. We don’t have to, we can go to the Shack or just… stay here. Just you and me?” he says, voice cracking slightly.

For a boy who just took her into a terrifying confrontation with previously unknown mole people, he’s really thoughtful sometimes. She wants to take him up on his offer, to spend time with just him, but she also wants to be a part of the group, since, for the first time, it seems like a possibility.

“For a minute,” she says, taking his hand. “But I do want a milkshake.”

“There’s nothing as sweet as a survival shake,” he says, smiling.
A few minutes later they hurry forward to catch up with the others. Dipper’s hand is in hers and even though the town is just ahead, it’s hard to be afraid. What’s a little possible scorn compared to mole people? Besides, she doesn’t know. She doesn’t know how the rest of summer is going to happen.

But she’s had one heck of a first day.

***---~**~---***

i mean, if you want, we can just stay here
Mabel doesn’t know what she’s looking at, but it sure is a cool and super science-y device.

“What is it, Grunkle Ford?” she asks. She puts her hand on the humming part of it and grins as the vibrations travel through her body and her vision blurs.

“It’s a mass spectrometer of my own design,” he tells her proudly. “A bit more compact than what you’ll find elsewhere.” He cups his chin, eyes narrowing in thought. “Or it used to be. I suppose these days they’ve either caught up or exceeded it.”

“W-w-w-w-hhhaaa-t-t-t a-a-bbbbbout-t-t-t thi-i-i-i-s p-p-p-aart-t-t-t?” Mabel buzzes as she shakes with her eyes crossed.

“That’s the power supply. Obviously, it needs some rebalancing,” he says, making a note in his journal.

Mabel removes her hand and staggers woozily away from the machine. “Let’s put something in it!”

Grunkle Ford tucks his journal away. “Yes, that’s the plan. If I’m going to adapt my Quantum Destabilizer as a power supply, I’ll need to identify and isolate certain anomalous materials. Luckily, I already have a few in mind.”

Mabel looks at him, grin turning uncertain. “Ha ha… It’s not more unicorn hair, right?”

“Absolutely not. If I never see another unicorn, it’ll be too soon,” he says brusquely. He goes over to one of his new cabinets and starts setting things out on the metal table nearby. “The valley of Gravity Falls was created by a crashed alien ship and it’s still there, beneath the ground. I used to pirate it for spare parts years ago, and I don’t see any point in letting it go to waste now.”

“Oh, yeah, the aliens.” Mabel remembers Dipper telling her about the ship. “I bet Dipper went crazy over that.”

“He was excited when we went,” Grunkle Ford recalls with a small smile. Then the smile vanishes. “He saved my life that day. And in return, I asked him to uproot his life. I told him it was for his sake, but… in truth, it was for mine. I saw so much of myself in him. Too much, I think, that isn’t there. Things he’s better off without.” Grunkle Ford shakes his head. “Besides, my claim that your parents would be happy to lose their son so he could stay here and apprentice with me was… presumptuous, to say the least. I dread to think how that conversation might have gone.”

Even so, Mabel isn’t proud of the way she had handled it. “I’m sorry I ran away with your rift thingy. I was really dumb about it.”

“We both were,” Grunkle Ford sighs. “If I’d just told you all about the rift instead of keeping secrets, the whole thing could have been avoided. We each played right into Bill’s plan. And I can’t even say it was for the first time.”

Mabel can’t stand to see her Grunkle like this. She hops forward and wraps her arms around his right arm, looking up at him. “It’s alright, Grunkle Ford. It all worked out!”
It works: he snaps out of it and ruffles her hair. “That it did. Anyway, I’ll have to figure out some means to move the materials back here. Stanley sold my truck years ago.”

Mabel brightens. “Soos has a truck! He’d totally let you borrow it.”

“He does strike me as the accommodating type.” Grunkle Ford piles a bunch of gizmos into a duffel bag and hoists it over one shoulder. “Tell Stan I’ll be back this evening, assuming all goes well.”

Mabel hesitates. She knows this sort of science expedition is Dipper’s thing, but, does that mean it can’t be her thing sometimes, too? So maybe she isn’t super interested in mass spectromo-whatsits or aliens. They are cool, sure, aliens are neat and all the stuff in the lab is, too, even if she doesn’t understand all of it and knows she’ll just get bored if someone tries to explain. But she is into adventuring and she is into family and Grunkle Ford is family and why should he have to adventure alone?

“Can I come?” she asks, making her eyes big and pleading because that usually works.

Grunkle Ford looks a little surprised, but says, “Sure, if you’d like. The spacecraft is very impressive if you’ve never seen it before. After I was attacked and nearly imprisoned, it’s lost some of its luster for me,” he says, mouth turning downward. Then, as if remembering she’s still there, he adds, “But I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

“Who’s ready for a niece-and-uncle alien thingamabob hunt?” she says with a smile, pointing a thumb towards herself. “This gal!”

They go upstairs with Grunkle Ford’s equipment and Soos tosses them his keys without hesitation as he takes a group of tourists deeper into the Shack. They drive through the town, shopfronts and houses rolling past. Mabel waves to Durland and Blubs, waves again when she spots Tambry coming out of the hair salon, and even waves to Bodacious T (though she avoids making eye contact).

The buildings end quickly and soon they are driving down dirt and gravel county roads. The cliffs of the valley loom on either side and ahead. Pine trees dot the fields in clusters and long lines, the forest proper beginning at the far sides of the crops that bracket the road, rising up the elevating terrain like a timbered tidal wave perched over the pastoral plains. They pass the petting zoo and the mudflap factory. Mabel puts her hand out the window and swims it up and down through the warm summer air.

“I call it ‘Crash Site Omega’,” Grunkle Ford tells her as they wind through the countryside. “The ship’s Hyperdrive is what powered the portal.”

“And that’s what Grunkle Stan stole all that goo for,” Mabel says.

“Precisely. But, as I don’t wish to keep stealing radioactive waste whenever the town’s power grid is insufficient, an alternative is needed. Now, I believe Dipper and I encountered the last remnants of any active security countermeasures, but we still need to be careful. Stick close to me once we’re inside, alright?”

“Like white on rice!” Mabel promises.

About twenty minutes later she’s standing on a wide green hillock nestled square in the middle of farmland. She stamps on the ground experimentally, but it doesn’t sound hollow. Maybe the dirt is too deep?

Grunkle Ford moves a large rock and uncovers a metallic passage that sinks down below into the
dark. “It’s an exhaust shaft,” he explains.

“Wow!” Mabel says, suitably impressed. “Did you fall down that?”

“No, though I came closer than I would have liked.” His flashlight reveals the wooden ladder hanging against the strange metal of the shaft. “Be sure to hold on tight. It’s a very long drop.”

As they descend, Mabel takes in the size of the thing. It’s an eerie space made of metal that reflects the light oddly. There are enormous symbols etched all over. The aliens might have been good with technology, but they’d been terrible at decorating.

“Grunkle Ford,” she says, breath jolting as she climbs down the ladder, which is stupid long, “why didn’t they ever come back for their stuff?”

“That’s a good question. Honestly, I don’t know,” he tells her. “This craft is roughly thirty million years old. One can only assume if a search party was coming, they would have been here by now. But keep in mind that it’s a very big universe. Things that get lost out there tend to stay lost. I’m lucky to be an exception.”

It’s spooky inside the ship, but Mabel’s been in worse places. Once they reach the floor, her flashlight illuminates curving walls and bulkheads, fluid architecture that’s hard to mentally arrange into rooms and passageways. She walks over and traces one of the symbols with her finger. The metal is rough in some spots and smooth in others, and the shape of the lines is weirdly compelling.

“What do all these shapes mean?” she wants to know.

“Fiddleford and I were never able to make too much progress with their language. Some of the carvings seem to be decorative, some were for instrumentation that’s long gone, and I believe others are much like what you would find on a human ship, such as directions, or warnings.”

Mabel looks upward; the ceiling curves like an abstract sculpture and folds into another part of a wall, which narrows into a column. The effect is dizzying, like vertigo. “Bleh... This place is making me all pukey.”

Grunkle Ford is noting something in his journal. “Yes, the design isn’t anything humans would find comfortable. Now, I need some of the craft’s wiring for my generator project, but there’s a problem. The metal here is far superior to anything currently used on Earth, but it’s been exposed to oxygen for so long that it’s starting to corrode anyway. I need to find a sealed room, somewhere the damage has been minimized.”

Mabel isn’t listening. Still dizzy, she goes over to lean against the wall, only to see a little symbol that looks like a puking alien. “Ha ha ha! Gross! Grunkle Ford, look, I’m throwing up like this alien! Bleaaaaarrrg!”

He looks more concerned than amused. “Sit down for a second and take a few deep breaths,” he advises, coming over to her.

“No, Grunkle Ford, I’m just kidding. See? This alien is totally losing its lunch.” She points at the symbol, grinning widely.

Humoring her, he leans over to look. “Hmm. It does look like it’s vomiting. Could be coincidence. Or...” He presses his hands to the wall and slides them back and forth. His fingers find divots on both sides of the section.

There’s a loud crack and a hiss and the section springs upward and disappears into the ceiling.
Through the new passageway is a small room with a round, almost conical design that’s sort of like looking into a seashell. It’s filled with pipes that disappear into the far back and a big metal contraption that’s sunk into the floor.

“Mabel, you’re a genius!” Grunkle Ford exclaims. “You’ve found a hidden bathroom!”

Mabel stares at the ominous machine. “Wait, this is where aliens poop?”

“And how!” Grunkle Ford pulls out a screwdriver and begins prying at some of the curving wall panels. “Corrosion is limited, excellent!”

Mabel goes over to the alien toilet and tries to figure out how it works. Failing to make any sense of it, she does a handstand over the central pipe, hair dangling downwards. “Mom was wrong; I can do a handstand on the toilet.”

“Careful not to drop anything. There’s no telling where that pipe leads,” Grunkle Ford says absently as he extracts a long greenish wire from the wall.

Mabel amuses herself by pushing various buttons while Grunkle Ford gathers up everything he needs. The fact that this thing is an alien toilet is both awesome and disgusting (disgustingly awesome?). She tries to get it to flush, but either it doesn’t work at all anymore or it never flushed in the first place.

“Too bad it doesn’t work. Dipper would be totes jelly if I pooped in an alien toilet,” she remarks as they leave.

“I’d say go for it, but I’ll probably be coming back,” Grunkle Ford tells her with a chuckle.

It takes him a few trips up and down the ladder to move all the salvage he’s collected. Mabel helps as much as she can, but after her second trip up she’s exhausted. They pile it all in the back of Soos’ truck and then they’re driving on the county roads back into town, dust and gravel rumbling crunchily beneath the heavy tires. The sun has almost set; the world dims beneath low violet light and the dark shadows of the cliffs. Mabel’s head droops towards her chest. The steady rocking of the vehicle and the low grumble of the engine sends her eyelids fluttering closed as the toil of the day overcomes her innate energy. She leans over until her head is resting on Grunkle Ford’s coat. He is warm and smells like metal shavings and oil.

She floats away; then, she floats up, closer to consciousness but not quite there. She’s somewhere else, with the same coat smells but not the same air or engine sounds. There are arms beneath her.

“She fell asleep on the drive back,” a voice says, tones warm and precise. “I thought it would be best not to wake her.”

“Big day, huh?” another voice says. This one is rough and acerbic, but still familiar and pleasant to her.

“Very. Thanks to Mabel, I found exactly what I was looking for. I should be able to get us off the grid within the month.”

“The kids are like that. Either getting you into trouble, or getting you out of it. Or both. Usually both.”

There’s the soft thump of shoes on old wooden stairs and the creak of a door. She settles into cool sheets and sinks until she’s gone again.
Maturity is Overrated by Dikembe (Jeremy, 2015)
It hadn’t been Dipper’s intention to end up where he currently is. Things have a way of happening in Gravity Falls that subvert expectation and intent. Events carry him like they don’t in Piedmont, and it usually isn’t worth the effort to fight the crazy flow.

He had headed out into the woods bright and early, wanting to sketch the sunrise from one of the nearby hills. He’s been working on improving his artistry with the thought of one day being able to fill his journal with the kind of vivid illustrations Great-Uncle Ford does so well. He wants to be able to capture his subjects that way. Landscapes are a part of that process, so he’d trekked into the forest with journal in hand, his shoes and socks soaking up the morning dew from the long blades of grass.

Not too far into the trees, he’d run into Chutzpar. The Manotaur had been delighted to see his old pal ‘Destructor’ (Weirdmageddon apparently being all the proof of manhood required) and the two of them talked for a while. Dipper ended up in the Man Cave, swapping tales of apocalyptic heroism, eating beef jerky and enjoying the kind of acceptance he’d once so urgently craved.

An hour later, he somehow finds himself charging recklessly through the woods on the back of the Multi-Bear, howling in unison with a Manotaur hunting party as they pursue a buck which has had a run in with a height-altering crystal and now weighs at least a ton. The deer has already collapsed someone’s back porch, stepped on the mayor’s car and crushed two of the water tower’s struts, leaving the edifice’s already dubious structural integrity in even more question.

Also, Dipper is wearing nothing but a loincloth.

It’s absolute madness and he’s having the time of his life. The Multi-Bear crashes through a stream and plows into the underbrush, all heads roaring. Chutzpar punches his way through a grove of thistles and out of the corner of his eye Dipper sees Testosteraur headbutt a sapling. They are an unstoppable tide of muscle and behind them is a wake of carnage; they are the world’s manliest stampede.

“To the left! Straight up that ravine!” Dipper shouts. The Multi-Bear lunges that way and the Manotaurs spread out around them, forcing the fleeing buck towards what Dipper knows is a dead-end at the foot of the cliff. The desperate animal skids to a halt, its massive hooves kicking up mounds of dirt. It has nowhere to go. It’s big enough that it could charge right through their perimeter, but it doesn’t understand that; it’s instinctually terrified.

Gravely, Dipper takes the small leather bag that hangs around his neck and opens it. He reaches inside and raises a single, gleaming crystal. With great ceremony, he holds it up directly in the rays of the rising sun. A pink beam shoots out with a flash and the buck begins to shrink. When it returns to its regular size, Dipper places the crystal in the bag and stands up on the Multi-Bear’s back.

“Go, my brother!” he tells the deer. “Run and be free!”

The deer spots the Manotaurs moving aside to make a path and darts out of the clearing.

“Good chase. Good chase, everyone,” Dipper says, going down the line of Manotaurs and exchanging high fives and bro fists. “Pituataur, up top! You were on fire, man. Beardy, you’ve got a
bird nest in your— oh, on purpose? Right on. Good chase.”

“Ha ha! A fine chase, Destructor!” Chutzpar booms, clapping one massive hand on Dipper’s shoulder and nearly driving the boy to his knees. “Multi-Bear, good to see you.”

“Likewise. Hey, are we still shooting hoop on Saturday?” the Multi-Bear asks.

“You know it, bro. Bring your A-game!”

The Multi-Bear turns to Dipper. “Do you need a ride back to town?”

“You know what, I think I’ll walk back,” Dipper says. “See you later, man.”

“Peace out,” the Multi-Bear rumbles, disappearing into the brush.

Dipper is filthy, half-naked, covered head to toe in tiny cuts and abrasions, and couldn’t be happier with how the morning has gone. Adrenaline still pumping through his veins, he runs through the woods as if he’s still on the mission, vaulting over logs and gullies. He retrieves his journal from a hollow log by the road and then, finally feeling tired, follows the road back to the Shack. About halfway there, he realizes his clothes are still at the Man Cave. Oh, well. He’ll have to get them back later.

The Shack has only been open for business for a couple hours by the time he gets back. Tourists usually show up in the afternoon after a morning of driving from wherever they’d been staying the previous night, so the parking lot is empty. Dipper goes into the gift shop, expecting to see Grunkle Stan or Soos stocking for the day. Instead, Mabel is manning the counter.

“Wow!” she says, starting to laugh. “Did you join a family of forest-apes when I wasn’t looking?”

“Ha ha. I’ll have you know that I was being a man with the Manotaurs,” Dipper says with great dignity.

“A weird, naked man in a washcloth diaper,” Mabel chortles.

“It’s a loincloth, I was training! Come on, look at these muscles!” Dipper makes a fist and curls his bicep. “See? Okay, that’s not, you know, a lot, but…”

Mabel just keeps grinning. “Wait ‘til Pacifica sees this!”

Dipper’s eyes bug out. He hadn’t thought of that. He’d been so caught up in reliving part of last summer that it hadn’t even occurred to him. “I’m gonna go change.”

Then he freezes in place when he hears Pacifica’s voice. “Dipper?” she calls from what sounds like the living room. “Are you in the gift shop?”

He panics. “Don’t come in! You can’t come in!”

He can see her feet beneath the swinging ‘Employees Only’ door. “What? Why?” she asks, clearly annoyed.

“Because, I, ah, you just can’t, okay, just… give me a second!” He looks frantically to Mabel.

Mabel’s eyes are deeply conflicted, but her empathy wins out over her mischievous impulses. “Um, yeah, you can’t come in.”

“Why not?” Pacifica snaps.
Dipper begins backing up towards the front entrance, hoping he can swing around the house and get upstairs before he’s seen. “Because—"

“He’s naked!” Mabel finishes. “Yep, he’s totally naked, all over the place. It’s gross.”

Dipper buries his face in his hands. “Really?”

A long silence from the other side of the swinging door. “…Why are you naked in the gift shop with your sister?”

He drops his hands. “I’m NOT! I’m not naked, it’s a whole thing, just— never mind! I’ll be right back, just don’t—”

Too late. Pacifica pushes open the door and storms in with her eyes flashing, no doubt concluding the two of them have been messing with her. “What the heck, you—” she stops dead in her tracks when she sees him.

Dipper doesn’t think he’s ever blushed this hard in his entire life. His face is scarlet; he can feel it burning as if he’s inches from the fireplace. “Hey,” he squeaks.

Pacifica’s expression defies description. “…What are you wearing?”

“Uh…” He looks down at himself. “It’s a Manotaur thing…”

She won’t stop staring at him. “It’s a what thing?”

“Manotaur. You remember those big half-man, half-bull guys, right? Hiding out at the Shack…?” He takes another step back. “I need to go change. So…” He takes a few more awkward steps backwards and then, unable to stand the scrutiny any longer, he turns and scurries back outside.

He bolts up to the attic and slams the door to his room behind him. Oh, man. He’d looked like a total idiot. If it had to happen, why couldn’t it have happened after he had the chance to fill out a little? Like, in a year or two, or maybe never. He is still working on his muscles, carrying on from last summer, and they haven’t gone away, but he’s growing so fast that sometimes he feels like he is nothing but skinny limbs and a big head.

He’s never going to live this down.

Glumly, he gathers up a change of clothes and goes to the bathroom to shower. His scratches burn in the warm water, though it’s not a bad feeling because there’s accomplishment attached to them. He dresses and wonders if he can get away with pretending the whole thing never happened.

Taking a deep breath, he goes back downstairs. He tries to put things into perspective. As embarrassing as this is, it’s got nothing on the moment he confessed his crush to a Wendy who not only wasn’t seriously injured, but wasn’t even Wendy. That had been traumatic on many levels. He debates internally how being seen in a loincloth by Pacifica compares to being seen by Wendy in a lamb costume. He concludes they are equally bad as a baseline, but Wendy was his cool older crush and he had wanted her to think he was cool, too, with an almost unbearable desperation. Pacifica, though, is his girlfriend and they’ve been through some serious stuff together and while he does want her to think he’s cool, he also knows she’s seen the real him already.

So that makes him feel a little better about it.

But just a little.
He’s slinking into the kitchen, suddenly aware that he’s ravenously hungry after his woodland escapades, when he sees Mabel already digging through the refrigerator. She extracts her pitcher of Mabel juice and begins pouring a glass, plastic dinosaurs and all.

“Hey!” she says when she spots him. “Soos is fixing up the golf cart so we can do donuts in the parking lot! Oh, and Wendy called and said she’s going to be late today. But tonight’s movie night!”

After the morning he’s had, he’s okay with hanging around the Shack. Riding on the Multi-Bear hadn’t been the smoothest experience and he’s starting to ache. “When’s the Duck-ective premier again?”

“Next week. Me and Soos are writing a one-act play based on our fanfiction for the premier party: Who do you want to play, the Constable or Steve?”

“Uh… I’ll get back to you,” Dipper says, hoping he can remain behind the scenes.

Mabel finishes her juice in three huge gulps and slams the glass down on the counter. “Ambrosia!” she breathes, and Dipper swears he can see the exact moment the sugar hits her system. “Dipper, I just remembered there’s something I want to show you.”

“In a minute. I am really hungry,” he says, stepping around her to get to the fridge. “Hey!”

She drags him back by his shoulders. He’s quite a bit bigger than she is, but she’s still surprisingly strong. “No, Dipper, right now! Come on, it’s over here.”

He looks longingly at the fridge but allows Mabel to drag him forward by the wrist. She’s taking him deeper into the house, through one of the halls. “Mabel, where are we going?” he whines. “The wax museum? Come on, I want to eat!”

They come to a sudden halt. Mabel puts her hands on his shoulders and looks him straight in the eye. “Dipper, this is for your own good.”

A chill runs through him; he’s heard her say something very similar before. “Wait, what—”

She rams him bodily through the nearby open door and slams it behind him. “FOR YOUR OWN GOOD! I LOVE YOU!”

Oh. Oh, no. He’s in Pacifica’s room. He tries to open the door, but Mabel is holding the knob on the other side. “MABEL!”

“I’m not letting you avoid each other and get all moody!” Mabel yells back. “We’ve got too much fun to have, bro-bro!”

“Mabel, open the door right—”

“Dipper?”

That’s not Mabel. Resigned to his sister-engineered fate, he turns and faces Pacifica, who has just emerged from her bathroom. He can already feel his cheeks turning red. “Hey…”

To his surprise, her face is equally red. “Hi,” she says shortly.

“Oh, Mabel locked me in here, and—”

“I heard. And Mabel, this is not okay!” she says, raising her voice.
“Right. Of course you did.” He swallows hard, and decides to just get it over with. “Look… I’m really embarrassed about earlier, and—”

“It’s not a big deal,” Pacifica interrupts. “Right? I mean, you weren’t naked or anything. You were being a huge dork or whatever and completely ridiculous, but I didn’t see… Well, I saw, you know…” She’s getting redder by the second. She’s looking everywhere but at him.

But it is a big deal, for reasons Dipper can’t articulate. Maybe it shouldn’t be a big deal, but that doesn’t change that it is. He thinks that it has something to do with where they are in age and where they are in their relationship, and if they were just a little younger or a just little older maybe it wouldn’t matter at all, but right now it does. It’s so weird and so awkward and he can’t talk past it. And he hopes that soon this will all be hilarious, but he can’t get there yet. She didn’t even see anything, at least not anything she wouldn’t see if they went to the pool, though context can be everything (that’s always been a weird thing Dipper’s noticed, how you can go to the beach wearing next to nothing but go to the store like that and you’ll get arrested). But she’s blushing like she did, or like…

…like she liked it.

He just isn’t ready for this. Her face says she isn’t, either. He can’t push it. He can’t do this, he doesn’t know how. They can flirt, and they can dance around the edges of their attraction, but to directly confront this deeper, adult-shaded portion is beyond them. Whatever they are to each other, they haven’t reached this point. Maybe in a year, or a few months — or maybe even in a few weeks, who knows? But not right now.

“Sorry I was being so weird,” he says in a rush as his brain mercifully unknots. “I had this whole thing with the Manotaurs training me last summer and I ended up hanging with them again. It’s kind of a long story.”

She shrugs, brushing her hair back in a flippant gesture he remembers well. “So tell me about it sometime. But, no more loincloths. You can’t pull that look off. It is not you.”

He laughs, mostly out of relief. Anything to get past this moment. “Nope, definitely not. But you were in a potato sack at one point, remember.”

“You wish you looked as good as I did in a potato sack,” she fires back.

“We should trade sometime and find out,” he jokes.

Her eyes widen. He doesn’t know why until she says, “You want me to wear that?”

“Huh?” Wait, that would mean she wouldn’t be wearing anything from the waist— oh, geez. And he was trying to get out of this mess. “Uh…” He turns around and frantically bangs on the door.

“Mabel, we talked! Let us out now!”

The door opens to reveal Mabel smiling beatifically. She evidently hadn’t been able to hear the whole conversation. “See, that wasn’t so bad! Let’s gooooo!”

Mabel rushes off to wherever the golf cart is. Dipper and Pacifica follow a bit further behind. Dipper risks a glance at Pacifica and finds her looking back at him despite her reddened cheeks.

“Now we’re even,” she says haughtily.

Dipper remembers laughing at her ‘getting dirty’ slip; his sense of victory had been premature. He nods ruefully. “Okay, we’re even.”
“I’d look good in anything, though,” she brags abruptly.

“No way. No one looks good in tie-dye.”

“Anything,” she reiterates, jabbing him with one neatly manicured nail.

“Fine, if we go to the Woodstick Festival then you have to prove it.”

“You watch me. I’ll be fabulous,” Pacifica states with absolute conviction.

He’s just eager at the thought of going to the festival with her, win or lose. And he’s definitely not thinking about her wearing a loincloth, because that would be creepy. Nope. Never, ever going to think about it.

…Man. And he thought he’d been awkward and sweaty last summer.

***---~**~---***

*The Aesthetics of No-Drag* by **Regulator Watts** (Dischord, 1997)
Pacifica has been to Lake Gravity Falls before. This, however, is the first time she isn’t on the deck of a luxury boat.

It’s bright out and the weather has taken a turn for the warmer end of the spectrum. The sun is climbing towards high noon and the water sparkles with dazzling intensity in the eddies where it ripples and rolls. Pacifica is seated at the back of a trawler that smells powerfully of diesel and has a collection of dents and scrapes that tell a history of hard use. The engine is pushing the craft slowly but surely towards the center of the lake, not far from Scuttlebutt Island.

It’s the first day of fishing season. In what seems to be a tradition, Soos and Stan have closed the Shack for ‘family fun day’ so everyone can go out on the lake in the Stan O’ War II. Pacifica only caught part of the story, but the boat is the one Stan and Ford had taken out into the Arctic Ocean in search of anomalies, which explains its rough appearance. She isn’t sure what happened to the boat that her parents kept at the lake. Probably sold, at some point. It was much nicer than the boat she’s currently on, but she’s still happy to be included. It is a ‘family’ bonding day, after all (though Soos is here, so maybe it’s not such a literal use of the word).

The occasion still doesn’t explain the ridiculous hat Dipper is wearing.

It’s a floppy fisherman’s hat with ‘DIPPY’ emblazoned on it in brightly colored, poorly stitched felt lettering. She’s trying to listen to his story, but it’s hard to get past how stupid he looks.

“—and then it turned out that it was just a robot McGucket built for attention,” Dipper concludes. “Which was pretty amazing, actually, but not an example of cryptozoology, so I didn’t think the magazine would go for it.”

Pacifica nods absentmly, wondering how she can get him back into his regular hat. Maybe if she pushed him overboard he would want to wear something dry?

The engine cuts out and the boat begins to glide to a stop. “Alright, this looks like a good spot!” Stan says as he steps out from the helm. “Plenty of fish and not a cop in sight. And guess who brought the joke book!”

Dipper winces. “Uh— oh, hey, Grunkle Stan, can you teach me how to weight my hook?”

Pacifica isn’t much interested in fishing. She’s looking forward to swimming at the beach later. She leans over the side of the boat and swishes her hand through the cool water, savoring the feel. It’s getting too hot out for her comfort, and if she’s going to be baking on this boat for the next couple hours then she’s going to sit inside, out of the sun. There’s no way she’s risking her complexion.

Mabel’s smiling reflection appears in the water next to Pacifica’s own. “See any cool fish?” she asks.

“We should go swimming,” Pacifica says, well aware that’s on the itinerary for later but wanting to speed things up.

Mabel makes a sympathetic face. “We promised Grunkle Stan we’d go fishing with him. Come on, you might like it!”
Pacifica imagines handling a slimy fish and curls her lip. “Fish are gross, Mabel.”

“Not as gross as that,” Mabel giggles, pointing to where Stan is trying to get Soos to put his shirt back on. “Ha ha! You’re a free spirit, Soos!”

Pacifica leaves the four of them happily ribbing each other and tossing their lines into the lake. She’s about to go inside the boat and read on her phone when she sees Ford at the bow, lowering a cord into the water. She hesitates; Ford is a bit intimidating and she doesn’t know either of the great-uncles that well, but whatever he’s doing looks like it might be at least a little interesting. More interesting than staring at her phone for hours, anyway.

She goes inside to touch up her sunscreen and then makes her way to the front of the boat, curious. Ford hears her approach and glances over his shoulder.

“Ms. Northwest. Or, do you prefer Pacifica?” he says genially.

“Pacifica is fine,” she says. The formality attached to her last name just reminds her of her parents, and that’s a reminder she can do without.

“Well, Pacifica, are you enjoying our day out on the lake?” he asks, turning back to whatever it is he’s doing.

“I don’t really get fishing,” she admits.

“Never cared for it myself; too much sitting around. Why wait for the fish to come to you, when you can do this?” Ford holds up a small device attached to the cord and flicks a switch.

Pacifica reaches out and grabs the nearby railing, startled by a deep thump that comes from somewhere beneath her. A few seconds later an entire array of fish float to the surface of the water and bob in the gentle waves. Ford scoops several up and tosses them into a nearby bucket.

“Done and done,” he says cheerfully, wiping his hands on a rag. “I just caught more fish in five minutes than they will all afternoon.”

Pacifica thinks he’s kind of missing the point, since the others seem to be enjoying the company more than the catching fish part. She’s on Ford’s side, though, so she doesn’t argue. Fishing is boring and they could be spending time together swimming instead of waiting on the fish.

Ford’s gaze is fixated on the mistier side of the lake, where the fog of the falls obscures the opposite shore. “Scuttlebutt Island,” he says, pointing it out. “Have you ever been?”

Pacifica can recall going past it on the Northwest boat during parties, but she’s never set foot there. “No. People say weird things about it, though.”

“And the lake in general. I suspect that there’s an ancient creature living in these waters, often referred to by the locals as the Gobblewonker. The circumstantial evidence is significant enough to justify further study.” He tilts his head ruefully. “I just never found the time. There were other avenues to pursue, and an aquatic hunt in any body of water is time consuming, to say the least.”

“Dipper said that thing was just a robot, made by McGucket,” she tells him.

Ford’s eyebrows raise. “Fiddleford? He always was a genius with biomechanics. But sightings of the Gobblewonker predate whatever contraption Dipper encountered. I don’t doubt Fiddleford is capable of creating such an automaton, but my suspicion would be that he based it on the real thing.”
Pacifica is suddenly less enthused about swimming. “Great, another monster. Just what this town needs.”

“I don’t think there’s any reason to be concerned. I never found any reports of anyone being eaten. Or even nibbled on.”

She still keeps her hands out of the water for the duration of the fishing trip.

Fishing drags on longer than had been promised, of course. She eventually gives in and tries fishing with a borrowed pole (it’s exactly as boring as it looks). As the sun begins to dip towards the water, the other boats out on the lake start to thin out. Bonfires spring up on the shore as the light fades; they are flickering points that dance in the distance, reflected in long, shimmering lines on the lake’s surface.

They bring the boat back to the docks and swim in the shallows. Dipper, Mabel and Ford seem briefly concerned about the ‘Tooth Island’, whatever that is. There must be no sign of it because they soon relax.

She forgets about the Gobblewonker and splashes around with the others. Mabel’s swimsuit is bright yellow and covered in blue stars, and it looks like she customized it herself. Dipper’s boardshorts don’t quite cover up the wide pink scar on his hip, a vivid reminder for Pacifica of what he risked to help her (Mabel immediately begins teasing him about the few sparse hairs just beginning to sprout from his chest). Pacifica looks great in her fashionable swimwear, and she knows it. Judging from the way Dipper doesn’t seem to be able to look directly at her, he knows it, too. She takes his hand and wades into the lake, enjoying the chilly water lapping at her knees, leaching away the heat of the day. There are some gross-looking weeds, though, so she refuses to go any further in.

Her reluctance is quickly overcome as Dipper and Mabel pick her up and throw her into the deeper water; she surfaces squealing indignantly. She has her revenge when she puts a handful of sand down the back of Mabel’s swimsuit and gets Dipper good when she pretends to lean in for a kiss, only to dunk him thoroughly (Stan, especially, enjoys that maneuver, roaring with laughter from his folding chair near the fire). Mabel challenges everyone to a chicken fight, which is straight up unfair because she has Soos as her base and no one can knock him over. Dipper finds their weakness; he pokes the older man in the stomach. Soos snorts with laughter and bends forward to protect himself, sending Mabel face-first into the drink.

Dipper does a victory lap through the shallows with a triumphant Pacifica on his shoulders. She is drenched and a little cold and she’s got sand in places she doesn’t want to think about, but she’s smiling and laughing and when she slides off his shoulders, she wraps her arms around him and puts her head against his chest. They stand together with the water bobbing at their ankles. She listens to his heartbeat as she looks out over a lake dyed purple and orange beneath the sunset, and she’s happy.

She’s happy.

They wrap themselves in towels and gather around the fire. Ford cheerfully hums an odd tune to himself as he mans the portable grill; the smell of sizzling fish makes Pacifica’s stomach rumble. Stan is trying to read from a dog-eared book of ghost stories, but Dipper and Mabel are heckling him mercilessly, denying any attempts to set the mood. It’s almost fully dark. The sun has sunk behind the cliffs of the valley and the moon fades in and out behind scrolling clouds. If she stares out across the water long enough it’s like she’s sitting at the edge of night, the only island of light in a vast, dark sea.

“And that’s when she realized… the cat was coming from inside the house! Wait, ‘cat’? …Oh, it’s
call. Wait, that still doesn’t make any sense. Maybe I skipped a part. How am I supposed to tell with this stupid tiny print?” Stan complains, squinting at the book.

Dipper is leaning back on his elbows, looking thoroughly unimpressed. “Grunkle Stan, literally anything would be scarier than this.”

“You could tell us about your colonoscopy again, Stanley. That gave me nightmares,” Ford jeers from over by the grill.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Stan retorts, tossing the book into the pile of fishing gear. “I don’t hear you offering to do better!”

“I’ve got a tale of terror,” Mabel says, leaning forward with her fingers wiggling ominously. “It’s called: That Time Grunkle Stan Told Me All About Puberty and Wouldn’t Stop Even When I Screamed’!”

Stan gives her a look of confusion. “Is this something I don’t remember ‘cause Ford blasted me? I’d call that a bonus.”

“You probably remember. I was just in Dipper’s body at the time,” Mabel states, like that’s no big deal and not worth explaining further.

“I dodged a bullet that day,” Dipper says reflectively.

“Waddles’ body was really great at rolling in the mud,” Soos adds. “I tried it again after, but it just wasn’t the same.”

“You should have known better than to let the kids play with one of my experiments, Stanley,” Ford chides him.

“I shouldn’t know better?” Stan says incredulously. “Who leaves a mind-switching machine laying on their bedroom floor?!”

Pacifica leans in closer to Dipper as his two great-uncles continue the argument. “Do I even want to know?” she asks.

“Soos found Grunkle Ford’s old room and there was this electron carpet experiment still in there, except we didn’t know it was an experiment,” Dipper tells her. “Me and Mabel were fighting over who got the new room, then we switched bodies and then other people did and it was a huge mess. You’re lucky you missed it.”

Probably. But there’s still a part of her that thinks of all the moments she wasn’t there for last summer, all the things she didn’t take part of because she was too busy living the life her parents wanted her to, and she isn’t glad she missed them. How can she be, when she knows how much good would have gone along with the weirdness?

“Maybe,” she says with a shrug, not sure if she can or even should articulate what she’s thinking.

“Usually Gravity Falls is weird in an interesting way but being in Mabel’s body was more weird than I can handle.” Dipper shudders, his mouth turned downward below a thousand-yard stare. “I wonder if McGucket has any more memory guns…”

Okay, so Pacifica probably shouldn’t feel bad about missing out on that particular day.

They eat under the low moon and first bright stars of late evening. Pacifica carefully consumes her
fish with a plastic fork and knife, which is horribly uncouth but still better than using her hands like the twins. After a day on the lake she’s so hungry she doesn’t care that the food is a bit plain.

By the time they finish eating and are basking near the fire, tired and content, the stars are fully out. Pacifica lies on her back, soft towel beneath her as she stares up into an ocean of tiny lights. The moon catches the edge of the sparse clouds, lining them with silver. Her eyelids are heavy. She starts to drift off.

She’s just about to tip over into sleep when she hears something. Her eyes fly open. She listens closely, trying to hear over the sound of Dipper and Ford’s conversation. She must have imagined it, right?

But there it is again: a strange, sharp chittering sound that is disturbingly familiar.

“Hey, did you hear that?” Dipper says, and Pacifica knows it’s not just her.

“That was Soos,” Mabel laughs.

Soos chuckles sheepishly. “Heh, sorry, dudes. This fish is hitting me like dynamite.”

Dipper shakes his head. “No, I heard something else.”

Pacifica hears it again. She jumps up to her feet, heart pounding. It can’t be. What are the odds—

Oh, why even ask herself that. This is Gravity Falls.

As is amply demonstrated by the gross, slimy, stupid Boss-Lobster that has emerged about halfway from the surf, a partially eaten fish dangling from its dumb face.

“Boss-Lobster!” Mabel shouts in alarm. “Kill it with fire!!”

Pacifica thinks that’s a pretty good idea. She’s just about to find something to throw when she stops, spotting a detail that makes her jaw drop.

The Boss-Lobster is missing an eyeball.

Pacifica swells with pure, unfettered rage. “Oh my god did you follow me you CREEP?” she shrieks at the creature.

The monster’s eyestalks turn in her direction. Its shell segments retract, clicking together defensively. With a wild, buzzing screech, it rears on its hindlegs, spins around, and scuttles back beneath the waves.

Breathing hard through her nose, Pacifica turns back towards the fire to see everyone else staring at her.

Mabel is the first to break the sudden silence. “More like Baby-Lobster, am I right?!”

“What a marvelous creature!” Ford exclaims. “Good work scaring it off, Pacifica.”

“It had better be scared,” Mabel gloats. “Pacifica owned that Boss-Lobster! She’s the Boss-Lobster Boss. The Boss-Boss-Lobster!”


“Boss-Lobster.”
“Boss… Lobster?”

“The Boss-Lobster. He’s the Lobster Boss, the Boss of all Lobsters and maybe other Boss-Lobsters, I don’t know. I’m not a Boss-Lobster.”

Stan puts his hands to his head like he’s trying to contain the crazy. “You’ve said boss and lobster so many times that they have lost all meaning.”

“Was that really the same one?” Dipper says incredulously. “I thought it was a saltwater anomaly… Man, I was way off.”

“It must be a euryhaline organism,” Ford says.

“It’s a stupid organism,” Pacifica seethes. “What a wad. I can’t believe it would follow me.”

“Judging by its hasty retreat, I doubt it planned on encountering you here,” Ford says dryly. “My guess is it just came home.”

Just like the rest of them, Pacifica supposes. The realization dims her anger. Stupid, gross and jerky though it may be, the Boss-Lobster is a part of Gravity Falls, same as they all are.

They put out the fire and head for the cars. Soos and Mabel are the only ones in the group who still have any energy, and the two of them run ahead to pile their stuff in the back of Soos’ truck.

“How do they decide which Lobster is the Boss one?” Soos asks Mabel. “You think they, like, take it to a vote, or is it more of a hierarchical meritocracy?”

Pacifica climbs into the back of Stan’s beat up sedan. The interior is a far cry from the vehicles she was once accustomed to, but it’s comfortable enough. And it suits her just fine so long as Dipper is sitting next to her. She leans into his shoulder, closing her eyes and rocking with the motion of the car. It’s not far to home, and then bed, and then who knows?

There’s a whole new day of summer, just past the night.

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_Countless Hours Making Waves_ by **Days in December** (Mighty Atom, 2004)
Dipper really should have expected this. But he’d spent most of the previous day down in the lab, helping Grunkle Ford with the prototype generator. He hadn’t been around to see the tables being pulled out of storage, or Soos sprinting with childlike glee to retrieve his keyboard. He’d been blissfully ignorant. Still, though. He really should have seen it coming, if only because of the offhand comment Grunkle Stan had made while they’d been eating in front of the TV.

Dipper can’t remember the name of the film, but it’s in black and white and near the end there’s a scene of a crowd cheering. Everyone had been more concerned with eating and talking to each other than watching whatever was on the screen. Still, that part must have sparked something in Grunkle Stan’s mind.

“This town loves you two knuckleheads,” he’d announced to Dipper and Mabel. “I get asked about you all the time. It’s annoying.”

“They love you too-ooooo, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel sung.

“Yeah, but they always loved me. I’m Mr. Mystery! Or, I was?” Grunkle Stan said, looking slightly perplexed.

Dipper shrugged modestly. “We helped save the town. That has to count for something.”

“Two sets of twins, saving the town and saving the world,” Mabel added. “It’s kind of our thing.”

“We’ve earned our share of good will,” Grunkle Ford agreed absently as he altered some equations.

“You’re right, Ford.” Grunkle Stan’s eyes had narrowed thoughtfully, never a good sign. “We have earned our share of good money…”

All of which is why Dipper is now wearily hoisting his can of glow-in-the-dark spray-paint yet again, wishing he’d picked today to disappear into the woods.

“Yes! More glow-in-the-dark everything!” Grunkle Stan demands from his perch at the top of the steps overlooking the Mystery Shack’s largest room. “I want that wall to look like the 90s!”

Dipper half-heartedly sprays what’s supposed to be a heart but looks a lot more like a butt. Grunkle Stan has decided that another party is just what’s needed to rake in some easy cash. This time the theme is the return of the ‘conquering heroes’, an excuse for Stan to glorify himself and his family and squeeze every possible cent out of Gravity Falls’ youth scene.

Dipper thinks it’s a good idea in the sense that it will probably bring in a lot of money for a marginal investment. The part he doesn’t like is the part where he has to help set it up and then attend. He knows that Grunkle Stan will keep the twins very present and very visible to maximize public interest. Stan has even somehow talked Ford into making a brief appearance.

Soos practically begged Stan to be allowed to DJ again, not that there was ever any question that he would since he works for free. Dipper is a bit confused as to how the business structure of the Mystery Shack functions now, and he’s pretty sure he’s not alone. When Stan had left, he’d...
seemingly passed the Shack off; but had that passing of the mantle been intended to be temporary?

Soos had been Mr. Mystery for almost a year. He and Melody had kept the place afloat, but there is no getting around the fact that profits had been down. Soos just doesn’t have Stan’s killer instinct and near-total lack of ethics when it comes to profit, nor does he have the older man’s innate hucksterism, that ability to give a gullible public exactly what they want. Stan had been running the Shack for thirty years, perfecting his craft over decades of experience. Soos has promise, but he’s still learning.

The return of Stan and Ford has left the status of the Shack’s organization an open question. Technically, Ford still owns the building itself. Stan owns most of what is inside. Soos is no longer a dedicated handyman and is, theoretically, now at the management level.

The thing is, Soos idolizes Stan. Dipper remembers the trip back to Soos’ childhood and understands why (and why Soos had been so eager to get to know Dipper and Mabel; they are, to him, a brother and a sister). There is no real chance that Soos will ever fully take charge while Stan is still around, and it doesn’t help that Stan slid right back into his old role the second he returned, handing out orders to Soos and everyone else. And, really, maybe it’s better this way. Soos has a lot to learn and Stan obviously isn’t ready to retire.

It’s nothing official, but Dipper thinks that Soos is comfortably fitting into a new role at the Shack: apprentice.

“Dipper!” Grunkle Stan barks, startling the boy from his contemplation. “What are you staring at? Less staring, more spraying!”

Dipper complies, albeit with reluctance. He is definitely the least enthused of the Mystery Shack’s occupants: Soos can’t wait to DJ again, Mabel is hotly anticipating another dance party with Candy and Grenda, Wendy is always down to clown, and Pacifica has been walking around the Shack getting opinions on different dresses. Apparently, her anxiety over being seen by the townsfolk has taken a backseat to her need to be the queen of any party.

For his part, Dipper doesn’t see the appeal this time. He’s not a dancer, and it’s not like he’s looking to impress Wendy. He already has a girlfriend.

He freezes, spray can paused in mid-exclamation point. Wait a minute — he has a girlfriend. A girlfriend who loves parties and music and fashion. A girlfriend who is, with absolute certainty, going to want him to dance with her.

Oh, shoot.

Does he even know how?

He is not doing the Lamby Dance for everyone’s amusement. Never.

He sets down the spray paint and manages to make it up the stairs and out of the room while Grunkle Stan is shooting down Mabel’s many party suggestions, all of which would cost more money and therefore won’t be enacted. Dipper starts heading up to his room, but he realizes that’s the first place Grunkle Stan will look, so he changes direction and ends up in the gift shop.

Melody is behind the counter. Dipper starts to approach her, then hesitates. He doesn’t know Melody very well. Their first meeting was marred by a homicidal AI and then she’d gone back to Portland before Dipper had been able to get to know her. This summer she’s mostly been busy renovating the house she’s renting with Soos, since Wendy is available to work the counter between school years. All Dipper really knows about her is that she likes animatronic pizza joints (or used to), has family in
Portland and sells a lot of homemade arts and crafts stuff online. She seems nice, though. And if she’s dating Soos, she must be the patient type. Hopefully, patient enough to help Dipper out.

“Hi, Dipper,” she says. “Finish setting up for the party? Or just taking a break?”

“Just taking a break,” he says. He takes a deep breath. “Melody, do you know anything about dancing?”

“Just what I’ve picked up at weddings,” she says. She looks at him more closely and starts to smile. “This is about Pacifica, isn’t it? You two are so adorable together. I remember having the biggest crush on Mark Gramercy in eighth grade. I wanted to ask him to dance at one of the formals, but never had the nerve.” She straightens up and walks around the counter. “Well, you aren’t going to make the same mistake.”

“So you’ll help me?” Dipper says in relief.

“I’m not an expert, but I know the basics. At least I can teach you not to step on her feet. Girls don’t like that, trust me. I’ve had way more than my share of bruised toes.”

Dipper hadn’t even thought of that. He can just imagine the look on Pacifica’s face if he scuffs up her dress shoes.

Melody messes with her phone for a second and then sets it down on the nearby display of bobbleheads. A slow, jazzy song starts playing from its tinny speaker. She approaches him and takes his hands. “Okay, the important thing is the slow dance; put your left hand here, just above my hip, and your other hand holds mine up here. Good, now follow with me: sway, and step. Sway, and step.”

Dipper stumbles a little at first and has to keep looking down, but after a couple circles around the bobblehead display he’s getting the hang of where to put his feet and when. He’s eventually able to look Melody in the eye as they move; she’s a bit taller than he is, so when he dances with Pacifica he’ll be looking down more, which should help.

“See? It’s not so bad,” she tells him as they slowly rotate.

His feeling of imminent doom has slowly receded. “I guess not,” he says, surprised by that.

Her eyes are bright and amused. “I think it’s so cute that you’re doing this. Save a dance for me?”

He tentatively agrees, starting to feel marginally better about the whole thing.

Grunkle Stan catches up with Dipper soon after and one curt command later he’s outside, hanging a banner with Wendy.

“I kinda thought you’d be more excited,” Wendy says. She’s ascending a ladder with her usual Amazonian grace while Dipper stands on safer, lower ground, holding his end of the banner.

“I guess parties just aren’t my thing,” Dipper replies.

“Really? I remember you being all gung-ho for the last one of these,” Wendy remarks.

Dipper grimaces. He sees no reason to enlighten her as to why he was so ‘gung-ho’ for the previous summer’s first party. “The afterparty was kind of fun,” he recalls. He and Mabel, Candy, Grenda and Wendy had goofed around on the empty dance floor while Soos DJed to his heart’s content.
“So just be like you were for the afterparty for the actual party,” Wendy advises. “You and Mabel are town heroes. Roll with it!”

“And you’re a flippin’ Corduroy,” he says, thinking of just how awesome she’d been at the end of the world.

“Heck yes,” she says, winking at him. “Seriously, dude, we’ve been through the most messed up junk. Don’t let a little party freak you.”

Easier said than done. In his mind he can see Pacifica in a perfect party ensemble with her perfect dance steps and her obsessive need to be the perfect Party Queen and he knows, he’s seen, that so much of this comes from her parents. And she’s doing better all the time. But as much as she’s changed, there’s still a lot of her that’s the same person. A better person, yeah, but not a completely different one. Pacifica is possessive and competitive and driven to excel and he’s going to get dragged along in her wake like a nerdy accessory.

At least he won’t be stepping on her feet.

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It’s late evening. With the sun down behind the cliffs, the young people of Gravity Falls have begun to gravitate towards the Shack, gathering in the parking lot. The sound of laughter echoes off the trees as kids tell jokes and shove each other playfully, collecting into groups of good friends and waving to new arrivals. Clearly, last year’s early summer party is fondly remembered, and this time attendance looks to greatly increase.

Grunkle Stan is looking at all the kids outside with his nostrils flared, like he can smell the money in their pockets.

He turns around and addresses his assembled family and Shack employees. “Okay, crew: this time, I’m running the ticket table. No more of you slackers running off and leaving valuable customers hanging. Wendy, you watch the snacks. If anything gets low, refill it. But don’t refill it too much. And see if you can get away with charging for napkins.”

Wendy sketches a lazy salute, no doubt already set on ignoring everything Stan’s told her to do. “You got it.”

“Soos, you already know what you’re doing.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Pines, I got the sickest beats around,” Soos promises.

Grunkle Stan briefly pinches the bridge of his nose. “Ugh. Mabel, you work the floor. Bring ‘em in and keep ‘em there. You know, be the life of the party, etcetera. Be yourself.”

“You can’t spell Mabel Party without Mabel,” Mabel says with two thumbs up.

To Dipper’s surprise Grunkle Stan then addresses Pacifica, who’s been standing at the edge of the group looking bored. “Northwest, you were really popular, for some reason. I want you with Mabel. And no stupid competitions or afterparties somewhere else this time. Let’s not forget what’s important: making lots and lots of untraceable cash.”

“Knock yourself out. Dipper—”


“What? No, you’re my ice guy. I don’t need you scaring people off with anomaly talk or your sweating problem. Just keep an eye on the drinks and for the love of all that’s holy, don’t talk about Weirdmageddon.”

Dipper wilts a little. “But, I thought my journal would be a great conversation starter. Right? Aren’t mole people super interesting? It’s not that weird. Right? …Right?”

The silence is deafening.

Dipper slouches his way towards the door. “I’ll go get the ice,” he sighs.

“Yeesh,” he hears Grunkle Stan say as he leaves the room. “Alright, I’m going out front. Soos, get started.”

“It’s gonna be off the chain!” Soos proclaims loudly.


Dipper glumly goes into the kitchen and hauls a bag of ice out of the freezer, carrying it towards the party room. He knows he’s never going to be the life of the party, and he supposes talking about Weirdmageddon is a good way to get tased by Blubs and/or Durland. But he’s still a town darling, isn’t he? This is his chance to be cool for once. While Mabel and Pacifica work the dancefloor, he can be on the edges, trading high fives and anecdotes.

He turns the corner and runs straight into someone. The bag of ice crashes to the floor and promptly bursts. He stares down at the rapidly melting contents and wonders if Grunkle Stan is busy enough outside that he can get away with just leaving it.

He’s collided with Pacifica. She’s standing in the hall by the bathroom, gazing at the door which leads to the party. “Pacifica?” he says, wondering why she’s not getting the party started. He’s just bumped into her and nearly dropped a bag of ice on her feet and she barely seems to notice.

“Watch it,” she says belatedly. “If you ruin these shoes, you’re paying for them.”

He rolls his eyes and half-heartedly pushes some of the ice back into the busted bag with his foot. “I thought you’d be out there already,” he says, indicating the doorway.

Maybe it’s the light, but she looks pale. “I am! In a minute. I’m… getting ready.”

“Pacifica, you’re standing in the hall.”

She bristles at that. “You wouldn’t understand,” she snaps.

Actually, he’s starting to get the feeling that he would. From his angle relative to the doorway he can see a portion of the dancefloor. Mabel is there, already bopping around to the music and drawing a crowd with her irresistible enthusiasm. Last summer, if Pacifica had walked out there she would have immediately been surrounded by people who at least wanted to pretend to be her friend because of all the benefits involved. Now she doesn’t know what’s going to happen, if she’ll be accepted or rejected or totally ignored. That’s the problem.
He wants to tell her it will be okay, but he doesn’t think lying is going to help. He doesn’t know if it’s going to be okay any more than she does. So, he’ll tell her the one thing he does know. “You’ll always have Mabel and me, even if there’s no one else,” he says.

Her look towards him is grateful. “You’ll come dance with me, right?”

“Definitely,” he tells her even as he internally winces because there’s no way out of it now. “Go on, it’s your party, too.”

She squares her shoulders and raises her fine chin, posture instantly regal. “Okay. But you’d better not leave me hanging, Dipper.”

“No way,” he says, though he’s pretty sure she’d just hunt him down if he decided to bail.

As if reading his mind, she fixes him with a gimlet eye. “I mean it. I want to dance with my boyfriend at our party.”

He nods in surrender. “I’ll be there. I promise.”

Her eyes soften in reply. She strides out into the party with the confident strut he remembers from another party, not so long ago. He blows out a shaky breath and makes a mental note to try and catch Melody for some extra last-minute dance practice, if he can. He needs all the help he can get.

He awkwardly shovels the spilled ice back into the broken bag and tosses it into the garbage. The floor is still wet, but he doubts anyone will notice. He makes his way through the gift shop to the porch outside to retrieve a second bag from the icebox. The lid drops down with a thunk and he’s just turning to go back inside when he’s suddenly grabbed from behind, hands wrapping around the backs of his arms. For a second time, his bag of ice goes crashing to the ground as he yelps and falls backwards.

He’s dragged around the corner of the porch into the shadows under the eaves of the Shack. “Hey! Get—off—” He lunges forward and breaks free, spinning around to confront his assailant.

He finds himself blinking in astonishment, facing two mirror images of his past self.

“Three? Four?”
Dipper blinks in astonishment, not at all prepared for what he’s seeing.

It’s his paper clones, the two who had stolen Robbie’s bike and then fled into the woods when he had confronted them after the party, fearing that he would melt them. He had assumed they’d long since been destroyed by inclement weather, if not simple humidity. But, no, here they are. They’re dirty and a bit crinkled beneath their voluminous ponchos, but intact.

“We have names, remember?” Three says. He points to himself. “I’m Tracey, and he’s Quattro.”

“That’s… cool?” Dipper says uncertainly.

“Tyrone was already taken,” Quattro says. “But that’s not important now!”

“He’s right. This is our chance!” Tracey declares.

Dipper is still trying to come to grips with the fact that he has surviving clones. “…Man,” he says, looking down at them, “I was short.”

“Paper doesn’t grow, Dipper,” Tracey says impatiently. “Look, we’ve finally got a second shot, and we’ve already devised a plan.”

Dipper is extremely confused. “A plan for what?” he asks.

“What do you think? To get with Wendy!” Tracey pulls an enormous wad of folded paper out from somewhere in his waterproof gear. “We saw Grunkle Stan is throwing another party. With Robbie out of the way, this is the perfect opportunity to show Wendy just how much we’ve matured.”

“We?”

“Fine, you.” Tracey is still unfolding the plan, which looks to be about twice as big as the old list and includes several graphs. “Wendy is sixteen now, so that’s, you know, a bit more ambitious, but we are almost fourteen and that’s not even technically-a-teen, that’s a hundred percent teenager. With the right plan, our odds have never been better.”

Quattro nods eagerly. “Now, obviously the last plan was fatally flawed, but this time we’ve accounted for everything.”

Dipper is seeing himself in a very unflattering light. Had he really sounded this crazy? “Except for the part where you haven’t,” he tells his doppelgangers. “Wendy already turned me down, man. It’s over. And it doesn’t matter anyway, because—”

“It doesn’t matter?” Quattro gasps.

“Whoa, wait, she rejected us?” Tracey interjects, eyes wide with chagrin. “When? Why? Don’t tell me you blew it!”

At one time, Dipper had been convinced he had, in fact, blown it. The further he gets from it, though, the more he realizes he never had a chance with Wendy to begin with. And that isn’t even a
new thought; he’d come close to expressing just that to Tyrone after the disaster of the first party. He’d felt like he was losing the race when he hadn’t been competing at all.

“I came clean and she was as cool about it as she could possibly be, but she was never into me like that,” Dipper says bluntly.

The clones look like they’ve been told Christmas is cancelled.

“Guys, it’s okay,” Dipper hastens to add. “Really. Wendy is an awesome person and an awesome friend and that’s what I really need from her, I was just… I was being unrealistic,” he settles on saying. Over the past year he’s done a lot of picking at the tangle of hormones and admiration that make up his confusing feelings for Wendy, and he knows which parts are the important ones.

“You bite your tongue!” Quattro hisses, appalled.

Tracey shakes his head in bafflement, or maybe in sheer denial. “What are you even saying? You’re gone for a year and you just forget that Wendy is the love of our life? You’re right, she is awesome; that’s why we have to be with her!”

Dipper is literally looking at himself, twice, and he does not like what he sees. “Man, I really was crazy,” he mutters.

He hopes that these clones have degraded after a year spent subsisting in the woods and aren’t fully representative of his last summer self. If he’s being honest, though, he suspects they’re more accurate than he wants to admit. Turns out, first crushes are brutal. He still doesn’t understand why Mabel actively chases the feeling.

He makes an effort to reach Tracey and Quattro. “Guys: Last summer, I learned that you can’t make someone love you. You can only try to be someone worthy of being loved,” he says, figuring if that line worked on Gideon then maybe it will work on them. “Wendy was never going to be my girlfriend. And maybe I had to learn that the hard way; maybe that was the only way it was ever going to sink in.” He shrugs self-deprecatingly. “But I did, and it’s over, and it’s okay. I moved on.”

“Moved on?” Tracey scoffs. “We just saw you hanging around with her!”

“As a friend,” Dipper stresses. “Come on, we were working on party stuff! Besides, I have a girlfriend.”

That stops Tracey and Quattro cold.

“We have a girlfriend?” Quattro says, jaw dropping.

Tracey, however, is suspicious. “Oh, yeah? Then who is it? Let me guess: she lives in Canada.”

“Pacifica,” Dipper tells them.

Quattro’s face goes slack. “…Pacifica?” he says weakly.

Tracey’s reaction is a bit more lively. “Are you completely insane?!” he rasps, eyes wild. “Pacifica is the biggest, most vapid tool around!”

“She’s the worst,” Quattro adds emphatically

Dipper gets angry so quickly it surprises even him. He finds himself jabbing a finger in Quattro’s face. “Hey, you don’t know her!”
“Know her? What’s there to know?” Tracey scoffs. “She’s a self-centered rich brat who was a total jerk to Mabel for no reason.”

But there were reasons. And now that Dipper knows them, he can’t see Pacifica’s behavior in the same light. She was a jerk, yeah, but she can’t take it back. Instead, she’s spent a year trying to make up for it. Dipper watched her do it; he helped her do it. She fought her way free of the quicksand of her former life and is only just now learning to breathe.

He gets why Tracey and Quattro still see her the way they do; it’s the way she first presented herself. But they weren’t there for the last year and they don’t know her like Dipper does. They don’t know anything.

Dipper is done with this conversation. “Shut up. You don’t know her, and you never did,” he says tightly. “And, you know what? Wendy is all yours. That’s one less Dipper to compete with. You’re welcome.”

Tracey tosses his hands up in exasperation. “Fine! You’ve obviously lost your mind, so our plan can only benefit with you out of the way. We just need you to photocopy yourself a couple more times.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” Dipper turns away and walks back towards the porch. “You do it yourself. I’m going to dance with my girlfriend.”

Two pairs of hands latch onto his arms yet again, holding him in place. “We’ve tried copying ourselves, it doesn’t work. A copy of a copy is too degraded to function,” Quattro says. “Besides, Wendy is expecting a thirteen-year-old Dipper.”

Dipper angrily rips free of their grasp. “Too bad, I’m not making any more copies! You guys are enough crazy to deal with already. The last thing I need is more of me running around.”

“That’s right, I almost forgot: You’d rather melt us,” Tracey snarls.

Dipper sighs and briefly closes his eyes. “I didn’t mean to melt anyone. And Tyrone melted himself on accident. Okay? It was an accident.” He turns back to them. “If you thought I was going to melt you, why even come back?”

“What else are we supposed to do? Sit around in the forest until something else melts us?” Tracey has a look in his eye that’s almost feral, and it makes Dipper wonder if paper clones just aren’t meant to live this long. “You left us here!”

“What else was I supposed to do? You ran off and disappeared!” Dipper argues. “You’re a twelve-year-old paper clone of me! I don’t even know if you’re real, or just some kind of echo. It’s not like I can take you back to Piedmont. In fact, I bet you anything you can’t leave Gravity Falls. Either you won’t be able to cross the Weirdness-Magnetism barrier, or you’ll die in the process, or it will just pull you right back in. This is the only place you can exist, and… I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made you. It was selfish and dumb.” He sighs and ducks his head for a moment. “Maybe I can get you a real tent, or… McGucket has a ton of extra rooms. He’s a good guy, he’d probably let you stay there.”

“Sure, but that’s not important,” Quattro says.

Dipper looks up at him in bafflement. “What?”

Tracey’s arms are crossed and he’s nodding emphatically. “He’s right. What matters is the mission. We can’t lose sight of the mission.”
Dipper just stares at them helplessly. “Guys... Wendy is not into me that way.”

“Of course she isn’t,” Tracey agrees. “You’re not even trying anymore!”

It’s now that Dipper realizes he made these clones for a single purpose, and that purpose is the only thing they know. He’s not sure if it’s built into them, a frame of mind that was copied and implanted along with everything else, or if a year spent subsisting in the forest has broken their grasp on whatever little paper sanity they possess. He suspects it’s the former, but can’t rule out the latter. Either way, he’s got a sinking feeling that the night is going to end with some more melted clones.

He just can’t bring himself to do it, though, not unless they make him. Even if they aren’t really alive, they seem like they are. And he doesn’t know for sure.

He takes a deep breath and steadies himself. “Listen to me: I’m not going to help you. End of story. If you want to date Wendy, then do it yourself. I already told you, I’m taken.”

He turns away and has almost reached the porch when the next thing he knows he’s back on the ground with his arms wrenched behind him. “Wait, are you tying me up?!” he yelps in outrage right before the tape gets slapped over his mouth.

“This is for our own good,” Quattro tells him.

He struggles mightily, making their job that much harder as they carry him into the Shack and through the hall to Stan’s office. When they set him down on top of the copier he tries to roll himself off, but they hold him in place.

“Do you think this will still work with the ropes and everything?” Quattro asks before he hits the button.

“If the new clone comes out tied up, we’ll just untie him,” Tracey says reasonably.

The machine shudders to life and the green scanning bar slides underneath Dipper’s struggling form. He can’t see what’s happening above his head, though he can hear the paper slide out of the machine and into the tray.

“Oh, no, not another one,” he groans into the tape over his mouth, turning his head to the side to watch the paper wiggle on the floor and a new clone come to sudden life.

The new clone rises up, towering over the old ones. This is a clone of thirteen-pushing-fourteen-year-old Dipper and it shows. Dipper immediately thinks of him as Tyrone-Two.

Tyrone-Two points over to where Dipper is still lying bound on top of the copier. “Is that really necessary?” he asks with concern.

“Extreme measures, I know. But we are so close to getting Wendy to date us, so it’s justified,” Tracey says. “It’s not our fault he’s gone crazy.”

“Original Dipper is crazy?”

“You have no idea,” Quattro tells him. “He’s dating Pacifica Northwest.”

“Huh,” Tyrone-Two says noncommittally.

“We’ll deal with that later,” Tracey says. He starts unfolding his and Quattro’s master plan again. “Now that we have you, we can enact our plan to dance with Wendy and then date and eventually
marry her, maybe. Anyway, the first step is to get you downstairs and ask Wendy to dance before someone else does. We don’t have enough time to go over the whole plan right now so let’s get that done and go from there.”

“Pacifica is down there, too,” Tyrone-Two says thoughtfully.

Quattro slaps a hand to his forehead. “That’s right! And she’s probably expecting Dipper!”

“She could ruin everything!” Tracey fumes. “Okay, new plan: we have to get rid of Pacifica first. Big Dipper, you go downstairs and get her alone and break up with her. Just make her go away as fast as you can. Tell her she’s the worst.”

Tyrone-Two leans against Grunkle Stan’s desk. “I don’t know, man. I got a problem with that plan.”

Tracey sighs impatiently. “I know it’s not perfect, but we’re really on the clock. What’s your problem with it?”

“Well, the thing is,” Tyrone-Two says, bringing a half-full water bottle out from behind his back, “Pacifica is actually the best.”

With a sweep of his arm, he splatters the contents of the bottle across Tyrone and Quattro.

“Traitor!” Tracey gasps, his chest and left arm beginning to bubble away. “What are you doing?! You’ve ruined everything!”

“Sorry, man. But you guys are out of line,” Tyrone-Two tells him.

“Us? Us?! He’s dating PACIFICA. Do you hear me?!” Tracey is now almost entirely muck, nothing left but his head and part of his right shoulder. “He gave up on Wendy to date Gravity Fall’s biggest b—…” Whatever he’s going to say dissolves into gurgling.

Tyrone-Two and Dipper both look at Quattro, who’s melting a bit slower. The second clone looks back at them and shrugs as his torso spreads against the floor.

“I’m actually okay with this,” Quattro says calmly.

A few seconds later and there’s nothing left of Dipper’s original clones but two sodden lumps of disintegrated paper.

Tyrone-Two sets the bottle back on Grunkle Stan’s desk and helps Dipper down from the copier, undoing the knots of the rope until Dipper can wriggle his way free.

“Thanks,” Dipper breathes, rubbing his stinging lips once the tape is ripped away. “But, why?”

“I’m not a clone of them,” Tyrone-Two says, gesturing to the puddles. “I’m a clone of you.”

Dipper slowly nods his understanding. “And everything that comes with it. Just a year.”

“But what a year,” Tyrone-Two says with a smile. “Speaking of, isn’t Pacifica expecting you?”

“Oh, crud.” Dipper checks his watch, but he’s not sure when his clones accosted him. “I hope it hasn’t been that long.” He looks back to Tyrone-Two. “Wait, what about you?”

“I figured I’d go to the kitchen and try some of that expired stuff Grunkle Stan keeps in the top cabinet that he thinks we don’t know about,” Tyrone-Two says. “Melt in style, you know?”
Dipper’s heart sinks. “Oh. Geez, man, I don’t… I didn’t want to make any more clones because you —… I don’t want you to have to die…”

Tyrone-Two gives him an odd look, then punches him gently in the shoulder. “I’m not dying, Dipper. I’m you.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that.

Tyrone-Two waves a hand towards the door. “Better hurry, man, she’s waiting. You know how well she waits.”

Dipper is well aware that patience is not one of Pacifica’s stronger virtues. He can imagine her hovering around the edges of the dance floor, waiting for him to show up. “She’s gonna kill me.”

“Just go down right away and ask her to dance,” Tyrone-Two advises.

“You’re right.” Dipper straightens his clothing and takes a deep breath. “Wish me luck.”

“Remember what Melody taught us!” Tyrone-Two calls after Dipper as he hurries out the door. “Sway and step! Sway and step!”

“Sway and step,” Dipper repeats, muttering to himself as he hurries through the hall. “Sway, then step.”

The party is in full swing when he arrives in the hallway just outside the short staircase above the dancefloor. He can’t see the whole place from where he’s standing, but it looks like at least twice as many people are in attendance as last time. Grunkle Stan must be ecstatic. Mabel certainly is: Dipper can see her gyrating wildly to the beat with Candy and Grenda, a small crowd cheering them on.

He steps inside and the thumping bass washes over him; he’s momentarily dazzled by the spinning lights, bright and dark alternating in wild, fevered patterns. He blinks a couple times until his eyes adjust.

“Give it up party peeeeeeeeeepss!” Soos exhorts into his microphone, and the crowd roars in reply. He’s clearly in high-energy heaven. He spots Dipper and pumps one joyous fist into the air. “Dipper! Get in there, dude! I’m settin’ this thing off!”

Dipper waves distractedly in reply, more concerned with finding Pacifica than joining the bouncing mob. Finally, he spots her on the far edge of the room, near the door. She seems to be making good on her agreement with Stan, greeting latecomers with a perfect, brilliant smile and just the right amount of elegant energy. She promises a first-rate experience by her presence alone; the Party Queen of Gravity Falls welcoming her subjects. It’s only when the entering group moves on that her shoulders slump and she starts scanning the room, clearly hoping to see someone else.

Dipper girds himself, takes a deep breath, and makes his way over to her.

Her eyes light up when he emerges from the crowd. “There you are!”

“Sorry,” he apologizes, smoothing his shirt with his hands. “I got caught up with… party stuff.”

She takes a step back and looks him over, blue eyes as sharp and discerning as any fashion photographer. She straightens out his shirt, brushing off some loose rope fibers (he’s glad it’s too dark for her to see what they are and ask any questions). She pulls his hat off his head and tosses it over the crowd towards Soos, who deftly plucks it out of the air and hangs it on his mic stand.

Dipper remains still while she arranges his hair to her liking, every strand and curl carefully attended...
“There,” she says with satisfaction.

The current dance song comes to a pulsing close and a slow, sappy song takes its place. It’s so on cue that Dipper wonders if Pacifica planned it.

“Here’s a little somethin’ to groove on,” Soos says into the mic. “Guys, gals: you know what to do.”

Pacifica takes Dipper’s hand and leads him out onto the floor where the crowd of dancers is milling around, making their way to the snack table or looking for a partner. Soon it’s just Dipper, Pacifica and a handful of other couples. Mabel brushes by, face flushed and hair escaping her headband; she gives them an exaggerated wink.

Dipper just concentrates on his feet. Sway, then step with the beat. Rinse and repeat. After a moment or two he gets comfortable enough to look Pacifica in the eye. She seems to be enjoying herself. He is, too, if only because he gets to be so close to her.

“Where’d you go earlier?” she asks as they move together.

“Uh, it’s a long story,” he replies. Eager to change the subject, he says, “Looks like you’re still the Party Queen of Gravity Falls.”

“They know a good thing when they see it,” she says loftily.

“Modest as ever,” he jibes with a smile.

“Mabel helped a lot,” Pacifica confesses. “Once people saw we’re friends, I didn’t get so many weird looks. We sang a duet and totally killed it.”

“Yeah, sorry I missed it,” he tells her, not at all sorry he missed it because karaoke is not his thing.

“We’ll sing another one later, all of us,” she says decisively, and Dipper starts thinking of ways to disappear before then.

The urge to slip out vanishes, though, when she hugs him closer and puts her head on his shoulder as they dance, releasing his hand to drape her arms around his shoulders. His hands find their way to her hips and it’s the first time he understands why people like to dance together. She is small and delicate in his arms, and even though he’s smack in the middle of a party with who knows how many eyes on him, he feels like they are alone, together, in this moment.

Sway, then step.

***---~**~---***

*Strange Party* by **The Bitter Life Typcast** (Not On Label, 2012)
As the first party of the summer begins to wind to its eventual close (and he knows it’s only the first party, there’s no way Grunkle Stan won’t continue to monetize the Shack’s local celebrity), Dipper slips away from the heat and the noise. He’s just finished an incredibly embarrassing round of karaoke with Mabel and Pacifica and needs a break after demonstrating to all in attendance that he absolutely cannot sing. Mabel can’t either, but she makes up for it with sheer enthusiasm, and Pacifica not only *can* sing, she does so with complete confidence.

For his part, Dipper’s had enough of the crowd. He’ll be game for the inevitable afterparty, but for now he just wants to go somewhere without bass pumping through his bones and sweaty people knocking into him.

Plus, the thought that he might still have a paper clone somewhere around the house has been gnawing at him.

He ducks into the kitchen and, sure enough, there’s a puddle of sodden paper on the floor that comprises the remains of his last clone. He looks down at what little is left of Tyrone-Two with a mixture of horror and relief. Can a paper clone die if it’s not really alive? Tyrone-Two didn’t seem to think so, and he probably knew better than Dipper ever will.

Dipper isn’t sure if he’s grappling with the nature of existence or just the nature of magic paper, but either way it’s tying his brain into knots. He’s not going through this junk again, that’s for sure. He makes a mental note to tell Great-Uncle Ford about the copier so they can put it out of commission.

He goes into the gift shop and slips behind the curtain that conceals the ladder to the roof. He needs some fresh air to breathe and some room to think.

Outside, the air is cool and the sky is clear. The steady thump of the party music is muted and low. He clambers down the roof towards the lawn chairs, only to find that one of them is already occupied.

“Wendy?” he says in surprise.

He must have startled her, because she jumps a little in her seat. “Oh, hey,” she says.

Dipper was going to sit down, but something about the way she’s acting makes him hesitate. She must have been deep in thought to not hear him come up the ladder. “Cool if I join you?” he asks.

“‘Course,” she says with a quick smile.

He settles into the seat. The clouds at the horizon catch the moonlight, gilding their apices with silver. Soos says something into his microphone, his magnified voice booming through the Shack distorted and unintelligible. Dipper studies Wendy out of the corner of his eye; she’s staring at the forest pensively. When was the last time he saw her like this? Has he ever?

He spends a few seconds mentally waffling between wanting to say something and feeling like a companionable silence might be what Wendy prefers. “Um… is everything okay?”
She smirks at him. “Come on, dude. When has everything ever been okay?”

He grins sheepishly, hands reaching up to straighten his cap only to realize he left it on Soos’ mic stand. “Well, you got me there.”

Her smile fades and she looks back towards the forest that stretches out before them, deep and dark and evergreen. “I did this a lot while you guys were gone,” she tells him. “Not always at the Shack, but, you know. Just thinkin’.”

This is a side of Wendy that Dipper doesn’t know. “About anything in particular?” he asks.

“I dunno,” she sighs. “It’s hard to, like, cram it all into words. I always liked that about you. You’re awesome at saying the right thing when it really matters. Like, clutch time. You just know what to say.”

Not right now, he doesn’t. He shrugs. “Maybe sometimes.”

“No, it’s true,” she says, green eyes full of fondness. “It’s like your superpower. Well, and your big nerd brain.”

“Yeah, well, where would my nerdy brain be without your survival skills?” he laughs.

He’s just joking, but she doesn’t take it that way. Her face falls back into a thoughtful stare. “I don’t know, man. I try not to think about it.”

“I wasn’t being serious…” he says tentatively.

“I know, dude. But that’s the thing, because it’s like… I never used to think about this stuff at all.” She pauses, mouth pursing as she grapples internally with whatever she needs to express. “You know why I took my job at the Shack? Because I didn’t want to go work at my cousin’s logging camp and not see my friends all summer. It was supposed to be this thing where I could make a few bucks and goof off. It wasn’t supposed to change my life. But if I hadn’t been working for Stan, I wouldn’t have met you guys. I wouldn’t even have been in town for Weirdmageddon. Can you imagine that?” She shakes her head. “I can’t. It’s like… what kind of Wendy would I even be?”

Dipper thinks of how easily his parents could have decided that he and Mabel were better off at summer camp than in Gravity Falls. It isn’t like the two of them ever spent a summer with Grunkle Stan before. Dipper isn’t sure what prompted the decision, but he gets what Wendy is talking about. He literally can’t conceive of the person he’d be if he had spent last summer at camp. He’s too far away from it.

Wendy is still looking out at the pine trees with a worried crease in her forehead. “I never cared about my grades or getting into college or not getting into college. I just wanted to hang with my friends and have fun, nothing else really mattered. Now I’m all, like… I don’t even know. All that junk I used to care so much about…”

Dipper remembers the moment of stepping into his house in Piedmont draped in the tatters of a summer that altered his axis; that first bleeding edge of panic, of being disembodied. Like he’d been a shadow of his former self, cast by nothing, etched on the drywall.

“I’m supposed to be thinking about college for real now,” Wendy continues. “We all had to talk to the counselor at school. She’s like, ‘Where do you want to be in five years?’ and I’m sitting there thinking, ‘Still alive?’ She laughs and there’s an edge to it. ‘Man, that seemed like a lot to ask for at the end of last summer. But we made it. And now I just want to go to school somewhere where I can still be here when you guys come back. How can I miss this? I’d go crazy.’
“Just crazy?”

“Fine, crazier.” She acknowledges his smart-alecky comment with a smirk, then says, “So, you know that all the kids from the county go to my school, right?”

Dipper nods. Roadkill County is a big place and when it comes to anything approaching real civilization, Gravity Falls is it. Hence the public pool, mall and theater.

“School was super weird this year. The pecking order just fell apart and a lot of the cliques don’t even work anymore because half the school wasn’t here for Weirdmageddon. Everything’s different and all these kids have no idea why.” Wendy looks at him, her face as serious as he’s ever seen it. “Do you ever wish it hadn’t happened?”

“No,” Dipper says honestly.

“Yeah,” she says, turning away again, “me neither.”

Downstairs, Soos shouts something into the microphone, his voice buzzing through the warm, scratchy shingles beneath Dipper’s feet. A group of teenagers leave the party and cross the gravel lot, their voices ringing with the too-loud exuberance of the partially deaf. Cars start up, horns honk playfully. Dipper watches taillights weave, red and fading, down Gopher Road.

“This is so important to me,” Wendy sighs into the silence. “Just, everything. You guys and the Shack and… I feel like such a dork even saying it. I know I’m supposed to be a cynical teen or whatever, but… if I miss a summer with you guys, I’ll seriously throw myself in the bottomless pit. As cool as rescuing Pacifica was, it was also kinda an excuse. I needed to see you, man. I don’t know.” She grimaces. “Is this too much?”

A year ago, this was everything Dipper had wanted to hear. He would have been ecstatic, nervous and sweating, convinced that this was the moment, the big one, the moment where Wendy (probably) liked him the way he liked her and kind-of-sort-of-but-not-really admitted it. He would have set himself up for twice the heartbreak. Now he knows that this is better — is so much more — than anything else he could have wished for.

“Oh course not,” he says, humbled by her admission. All he can do is reciprocate. “You mean a lot to me, Wendy.” It’s her words, given back, but there’s so much truth in that simplicity.

“You, too,” she says. Then she smiles again. “Though not as much as Pacifica, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mumbles through a grin, accepting her gentle teasing.

“Man, of all the crazy crap that’s happened, that has to be one of the craziest. Dude: you’re dating the most popular girl in Gravity Falls! Like, whaaaaaat…?” Wendy’s eyes suddenly light up. “No, wait a minute… Ha! It’s totally the other way around! She’s dating the most popular boy in Gravity Falls!” Wendy pops her fists open next to her head. “Boosh. Mind blown.”

“No, come on. Me?” Dipper protests, even though he’s beginning to realize she might have a point.

“You. Your family doing the whole saving the world thing. Welcome to Coolsville, population Dipper Pines. How does it feel?”

Dipper can’t even wrap his head around it. “Please don’t tell Pacifica I’m more popular than her.”

“She would flip,” Wendy hoots, and soon they are both laughing into the night, their mingled voices
echoing softly from the clearing. The temperature has dropped; the air is cool and flavored with the astringent hint of pine sap and sawdust.

Wendy straightens up in her seat and calms. “Seriously, though… thanks for listening.”

“Of course, Wendy,” he tells her.

“But, yeah, that’s enough deep thoughts for one sitting. I don’t know how you do this all the time. Don’t give me that look; I know you’re always doing this stuff in your head.”

“Not all the time,” Dipper protests feebly.

“It’s okay, man. It’s cool. That’s just what makes you, you.” Wendy stands up and offers him a hand. “Come on, I bet the afterparty is about ready to kick into gear. Let’s go downstairs and get stupid.”

That sounds pretty good to Dipper. “Lead the way.”

They go downstairs and head towards the thump of the subwoofers together. It’s not the kind of ‘together’ that Dipper had once so longingly imagined, but that’s okay. It’s better than that. It’s deeper than any unreciprocated summer crush or temporary summer fling ever could have been.

Out on the dancefloor it looks like the afterparty is kicking into gear. Mabel is tearing it up with Candy and Grenda; they’re already going nuts, dancing like no one is watching (not that they danced any differently when people were watching). Soos is working the turntables harder than ever and Stan and Ford are discussing something near the snacks. Pacifica is taking a break in one of the chairs, but she gets to her feet when she sees Dipper come in. She grabs him by the hand and the next thing he knows he’s back up on the stage, Mabel on one side of him and Pacifica on the other and a karaoke mic pointed at him like the barrel of a gun.

But, you know what? He’s okay with this. The night is young. And everyone he wants to spend time with is right here, right now.

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This Means Everything To Me by Carlisle (IFB, 2006)
It’s a beautiful day out. The sun is high and bright in a sky scarcely populated by a handful of fluffy white clouds. It’s the kind of day where people take their work outside, populating benches and porches, filling up restaurant tables under big red umbrellas. The breeze is steady and gentle and just right to take the edge off the heat.

Pacifica is standing next to a warm stone wall directly in the sun and she still feels cold.

“You can totally do this,” Mabel is telling her.

Pacifica says nothing. She doesn’t want to admit that Mabel’s sturdy presence is the only thing keeping her from turning around and running away.

Mabel must be interpreting the look on Pacifica’s face, because her own expression falters. “…You don’t have to do this,” she amends hesitantly. “We could go back and help Grunkle Stan with the tour…”

But if Pacifica doesn’t do this now, then when? Later, without Mabel? There’s no way.

“No,” she tells Mabel. “It’s okay. There’s probably nothing here, anyway. I packed all my stuff when we left.”

Mabel makes a sympathetic face. “I know being here has to be all…” Either she can’t find a fitting Mabel-ism or she decides the one she has isn’t appropriate.

They’re standing outside the gate to Northwest Manor. McGucket Manor, now, Pacifica supposes. Dipper and Ford are already inside, visiting with Old Man McGucket and no doubt swapping reams of inscrutable nerd talk. Pacifica and Mabel had been in town doing some preliminary shopping for Summerween when Dipper texted them McGucket’s invitation; the eccentric inventor offered Pacifica a chance to recover anything important to her that had been left behind in the Manor.

Pacifica knows nothing of any significant value remains in the Manor, and all her personal belongings are in Malibu or Piedmont. The real reason she’s taking McGucket up on his offer is because ever since her arrival back in the Falls, her former home has loomed over her consciousness like a dark cloud on the edge of town. The Manor is a mental tooth ache, a stubborn seed lodged in the molars of her mind that she just can’t work free. Every time she sees the place perched up on its hill it brings with it a flood of emotions, and none of them are good.

She’s tired of it. She doesn’t want to think of this place as anywhere she can take shelter. It’s been ruined for that, many times over. Besides, one half of her real shelter is right here with her, wearing a ridiculous sweater and offering the kind of support she never got in the Manor. She’s free now. She’s free and this place doesn’t matter.

So she has to confront it, to prove that to herself.

(Easier said than done.)

“Okay, but if you want to leave we’ll just go,” Mabel says with an easy shrug. “Dipper is going to
nerd out all day anyway.”

Pacifica takes a deep breath through her nose. She’s fine. This is fine. She’s not going to magically turn back into Old Pacifica just by stepping over the threshold. She’s got Mabel right here and Dipper’s already somewhere inside and they will anchor her. She’s fine.

The gate to the Manor is wide open, which immediately strikes Pacifica as symbolic enough to be a bit on the nose. The front garden is overgrown and there are several goats grazing on the lawn. The atmosphere of the place is utterly changed, despite the aristocratic architecture. It feels like the border between the rustic and the extravagant, a strange mingling of rural charm and high-society aesthetic. It doesn’t feel like home anymore, but Pacifica is pretty sure it wouldn’t even if nothing changed. ‘Home’ is an entirely new word, one with connotations and memories divorced from the Manor and even Malibu. Home is in Piedmont, off Gopher Road, in the girl walking beside her and the boy she likes so much. ‘Home’ is still changing, still fluid and partially undiscovered.

The front doors are as wide open as the gates and curtains flutter in the gentle breeze through all the opened windows. The inside of the Manor is bereft of its usual scents of wood polish and sterile air. Instead, it smells as warm and wild as the outside. Pollen dances in the light shafts and the floor of the foyer is crisscrossed with dusty footprints. A bee buzzes lazily past, intent on a pot of large flowers which has been set out in the sun.

Pacifica feels a smile tugging at her lips. Her parents would explode.

“There’s less raccoons than I imagined,” Mabel says as she takes in the room.

Pacifica relaxes a little, comforted by how different the Manor is. The rooms are the same shape and the wooden planes of the walls are as old and elegant as ever, but nothing feels the same. It’s as if the place has a new soul, wedged into the vacancy of the old one and altering the very character of its shell.

She goes up the big twin staircase and at the end of the long hall with the purple carpet she finds the door to her old room. She places her hand on the handle and just stands there for a moment, overcome by the memory of opening this door a thousand other times on a thousand other days. She turns the handle and when she pushes the door inwards she can see in her mind’s eye her canopy bed and the old oak dresser with her grandmother’s jewelry box; she can smell the pine forest on the hills and a hint of lavender.

The reality is an empty room with dust on the floor and shelves. It’s dim and smells like a rarely-used closet. In the light from the doorway she can see the impressions on the hardwood where the feet of her bed left their mark. It’s all blank and faded from what it once was, so far removed from the space where she slept and read and preened and sometimes cried. Empty, with only the shade of her former self to keep the wallpaper company.

Maybe everything is haunted, because everything has been touched by someone. And everyone leaves pieces of themselves behind, even though they don’t mean to. The past never goes away. It’s a sea of ghosts, beneath the map.

Everything is haunted.

But in this case, Pacifica is fine with that. These ghosts, these past modes and minds, were left behind on purpose. They are old, empty skin, dry husks that rattle when she passes near. She’s still growing, still molting. She doesn’t miss their weight.

Mabel is silent behind her, standing a few steps back like she doesn’t want to intrude.
Pacifica’s expression firms. There’s nothing for Mabel to intrude on. This room is empty, and so was the Pacifica that lived here.

She goes in just to make sure there’s nothing left, even though she’s almost positive there isn’t. She finds a hangar on the floor of the closet and the rubber earpiece from a pair of headphones, and that’s all. She steps back out into the hall and closes the door behind her.

“I’m done,” she says with finality.

“You’re sure?” Mabel says.

“Totally.” Pacifica lets out a long breath, feeling some of the tension leave with it. “Let’s tell Dipper and go back out. I want to look at nail polish; I wore this color yesterday and I am not wearing it again.”

“Are you trying to set summer trends?” Mabel asks with a conspiratorial smile.

“Come on, Mabel. I don’t have to try.”

They go back down the hall intent on returning to the lower portions of the Manor. However, Pacifica stops at the top of the stairs, struck by a sudden thought. She turns the other way, towards the sitting room.

“Wait,” she tells Mabel, “I want to check something.”

She walks through the halls until she reaches the sitting room. Her parents’ favorite carpet pattern is still there, as plush and haughty as ever. The furniture is gone, though, leaving the former sitting room an empty, carpeted box. She isn’t surprised about the furniture; it had all been antique and valuable enough to save. She is surprised about the carpet. She doesn’t know why her parents left it here, but she’s glad it didn’t find its way to Malibu.

To her left, the torn portrait of the skeletal king is gone. There’s nothing in its place, leaving a dark hole in the wainscot. She tentatively steps inside, raising her phone as a light.

“Whoa, spook-city,” Mabel comments. She sneezes loudly. “Heh, more like dust-city. Is this where the ghost came from?”

“No, we tried to hide in here.” Pacifica moves her light around the cobwebbed space. All the paintings are gone, along with everything else that had been stored.

She stops her inspection on a spot in the middle. It’s as bare as the rest of the room, but she remembers that section of floor as clearly as if she’s still sitting on it, clicking her light on and off in a blackness as deep and dark as her own despair. The cold wood beneath the curtain of her dress. The tears prickling behind her eyes. His warm hand on her shoulder.

It’s not too late.

It hadn’t been. And she’s living without all the poison that was stored here, hidden but never really gone.

Her family name is still broken.

But she isn’t.

“McGucket should really put in a door,” Pacifica notes. She spins around and strides back out before
Mabel can say anything.

She wants to leave. She’s had her confrontation and made her peace or at least found whatever peace was available, and she’s ready to go and be done with it. Dipper doesn’t need her to check in on him. No doubt he’s neck deep in nerdery, anyway, so it’s not like he’s going to have a lot of attention to spare. She quickly texts him to let him know that she’s leaving, though she imagines he probably won’t see it any time soon.

She’s halfway down the staircase in the foyer when her train of thought is broken by a shout from above. She turns around on the steps just in time to see Mabel go shooting past on the bannister, whooping with glee. Her prolonged cheer comes to a sudden halt when she launches off the railing before she hits the decoration at the end and crashes into the hardwood floor with wince-worthy force.

Pacifica stares down at Mabel’s crumpled form. “Oh my god. Are you dead?”

“Worth it,” Mabel slurs, lifting one unsteady arm in triumph.

Pacifica descends the rest of the way to haul her dazed friend off the floor. “You’d better not have broken a nail.”

“Hey, I know what’s important!” Mabel wiggles her intact nails in Pacifica’s face. “I just broke my butt, maybe. Ow.”

A cool breeze drifts through the open door. The shadows are a little darker and the air smells different, fresher and lighter. Pacifica looks out and up through the nearest window and notes the grey clouds bearing down on the horizon. The forecast promises clear and sunny for the entire day, but an unexpected rain isn’t exactly the weirdest thing that could happen. Not in this town.

Pacifica has to care about the weather now, seeing as she’s without a chauffeur. “I guess we’ll have to do our nails at home. You’re lucky I’m an expert. Come on, let’s get back before we get wet.”

“We could catch a ride with Grunkle Ford,” Mabel says, pointing towards the back gardens.

Pacifica raises a skeptical eyebrow. “Mabel, we’ll be here forever.”

Mabel drops her hand and shrugs. “Okay. Race you to the driveway!”

“What? Hey!”

Pacifica rushes to catch up but Mabel has already given herself a significant head start. The two of them end up half-heartedly shoving each other off the walk in a fit of breathless giggles, making their way back into town.

It’s still beautiful out. The edge of the clouds hovers over the valley like a patch of night ready to roll back the day. The two of them make it all the way to one of the signs pointing to the Shack before the first drops begin to fall onto the thirsty ground. They jog through the gentle shower, Pacifica making the appropriate noises of disgust, but she doesn’t mean it. It’s wonderful. The warmth of the water, the moist air and the way the sun still dapples through the trees. The smell of the rain just before the real storm. She runs up the dirt road as the fresh mud curls up to touch her toes, the skin of her arms and neck slick and shiny, hair bouncing in time to her footsteps. She is laughing and breathing and wet and warm and it’s summer and she is as free as the birds and the butterflies and the last lingering note that swells in her lungs.

They reach the porch and Mabel is opening the door to go up when she sees that Pacifica isn’t
following. “Super Funtimes Nail Salon, right?” she says, gesturing at the stairs.

“I want to sit for a minute,” Pacifica tells her.

Mabel lets the door shut. “Sounds like a plan, Pacifica,” she says with a thumbs up.

They plop down on the musty old couch. The rain plinks off the corrugated aluminum awning with a growing clatter. Puddles swell and distant thunder rumbles from somewhere far past the cliffs. Pacifica leans forward and sticks her arm out in one of the streams, watching as the rainwater gathers, parts and twists its way down her wrist. It draws itself across her skin like veins. It’s in her, like it’s in the mud and the trees and the town. She is a part of this.

Pacifica leans back on the couch and breathes in the first electric hints of the summer storm.

“Feel better?” Mabel asks.

On the lawn before them the rain washes off the dust of the day, leaving each blade of grass as green and new as the first shoots of Spring.

“I feel great,” Pacifica answers.

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A Collection of What You’ve Lost by Arrowhead (Not On Label, 2015)
ii: fall

the victory of flight

Wow, that is one big rat, Dipper thinks.

He starts to wonder whether this rat wandered too close to one of the height-altering crystals or if there have just always been gigantic rats tunneling below ground. But he puts the brakes on that thought because the rat is barreling towards him. Fast. Like, really, really fast. In fact, it’s about to trample him. This would be a good moment for his survival instincts to kick in.

He doesn’t have the time for finesse. He throws himself to the side, rolling across clacking stones as the enormous rat roars past like a scrabbling, squealing freight train. It disappears deeper into the tunnels.

Dipper stays down for a moment, trying to catch his breath.

“Well,” he finally says, pushing himself into a sitting position, “I think we figured out what collapsed that road.”

“Please tell me you’re not dead,” Pacifica says from somewhere in the settling dust.

“I’m not dead. Just… dusty.”

“That rat really smells like pee,” Mabel coughs.

This is the upside of being a local celebrity: easy access to supernatural sightings. He hadn’t even been looking for something like this today, content to visit the Summerween Superstore with Pacifica and Mabel (under the assumption that saving the world had rescinded the Pines family ban). Next thing he knew, he was pulled aside by Mayor Cutebiker and asked to investigate, in the Mayor’s own words, ‘some strange transpirings’.

It’s only now, after he’s narrowly avoided being pancaked by a giant rat, that it occurs to him that he probably should have told Great-Uncle Ford. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and notes that, yep, he just cracked the screen and has no signal. Not surprising, being underground and all. The smart move would be to turn around and come back better equipped to deal with a rodent of such unusual size. It’s become academic, however, as the rat has collapsed the tunnel behind them. The only way out is through.

He stands up and dusts himself off. Mabel and Pacifica are ahead, peering down the sloping tunnel. He’s encouraged by the light that’s emanating from somewhere in that direction, too bright and steady to be the reflected glow of the girls’ flashlights.

“It went that way,” Pacifica says when Dipper catches up. She points towards the path that curves to the right. It’s where the light is coming from.

“That rat is fast,” Dipper remarks, making sure to note that in his journal. “It’ll be hard to catch.”

“Yeah, or, rats are gross and we shouldn’t go anywhere near it.”

“Come on, where’s your sense of adventure?” Dipper cajoles.
The look she gives him is dire. “I don’t know. Maybe I left it with all my clean clothes that don’t smell like rat pee.”

Dipper is sweaty and covered in dirt and it’s true that either he or the tunnel stinks heavily of rat urine (he’s guessing both). Also, in the process of looking down at himself he sees that his right foot is planted in what he hopes is mud but, really, he knows is rat feces.

“So this adventure is a little grosser than usual,” he concedes. “But we accepted a mission from the Mayor, and that is a sacred charge.”

“We are so heroic right now!” Mabel exclaims.

Pacifica pulls her hair back into a ponytail (using, Dipper notes, a blue scrunchy that is no doubt calibrated to match her eyes), her expression one of grim resignation.

They advance slowly, hampered by the uneven tunnel floor. It zigs and zags but always keeps going in a general direction that Dipper’s compass tells him is northeast. The light becomes gradually brighter. Fresher air wafts through, licking at their faces. Soon, the tunnel ends, and they are standing at the edge of a cave shaped like an upside-down bowl, an amphitheater whose stalactite-laden ceiling is porous with cracks and wide gaps where hanging curtains of moss descend in shafts of pearlescent light.

“It’s beautiful,” Mabel breathes.

“It… okay. It’s all right or whatever,” Pacifica says, her wide eyes belying her verbal dismissal.

“We might be the first people to ever see this place,” Dipper tells them. He starts sketching in his journal, trying to capture the natural majesty.

Mabel grins. “Dipper, we get to name it!” She straightens up and raises her arms in grand benediction. “I name you… Spike-Ceiling… Cave Place!”

Dipper keeps drawing. “Or, anything but that.”

“Gross Rat Cavern,” Pacifica offers.

“Okay, maybe not anything.”

Something splashes up ahead. Dipper tucks his journal away and peers into the gloom. There’s a sizable pool of water in the middle of the cavern. The giant rat is drinking from it, its disturbingly big pink tongue darting out with rapid speed to lap at the collected rainwater. It begins to preen itself, combing its whiskers and biting at the matted parts of its fur.

Dipper looks upward. There’s a network of vines around the ceiling, mingled with the moss and tracing the walls of the cavern. The tangle is thick enough that a plan begins to form in his mind.

“Look, up there,” he says, pointing towards the twisted plant mass. “If we can cut enough of that loose, I bet the weight could work like a trap! It would be trapped like a… a… I don’t know, some kind of animal that gets trapped.”

Mabel is instantly on board. “Mystery Trio!”

Pacifica is less enthused — about the name, anyway. “Don’t call us that.”

“Mystery… Bunch!” Mabel says with an awkward swing of her arm.
“That’s even worse.”

“Mystery Triplets!”

“NO!” Pacifica and Dipper bark simultaneously.

“Oh, yeah, no,” Mabel realizes. “That would be weird.”

Dipper sees that despite the noise everyone is making the giant rat is unperturbed. It must feel safe here. All they need to do is trap it long enough for him to go and get a height-altering crystal (he thinks it’s safe to assume the rat is the result of a crystal encounter, given that rats aren’t solitary creatures and it didn’t retreat to a giant rat nest). And maybe talk to Great-Uncle Ford about setting up some kind of perimeter around the crystals, because this is the third time they’ve caused trouble and it’s starting to become a trend.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” he says, crouching to draw on the dirt floor of the tunnel. “I’ll go left and circle around to the other side. Pacifica, you follow me but then you go up that wall; you should be able to climb right up the vines. Mabel, you do the same on the right side. Once we cut enough of the vines loose the whole thing should fall. Then we just have to go get a crystal and shrink the rat.”

It sounds simple enough. He’s put enough plans into action to know it won’t be.

They split up, ghosting along the walls of the cavern, keeping the maximum amount of distance between themselves and the rat. There’s no way it doesn’t see them, but it doesn’t seem to care. Dipper finds a tightly-webbed portion of the crawling vines and begins to climb. He’s about halfway up the wall when it occurs to him that the vines might be something like poison ivy. His skin isn’t burning, so he takes that as a good sign.

There are roots intertwined with the vines, vast tendrils of the dense forest above. Some of them are as thick as tree trunks and just as sturdy. Dipper pushes himself along one of them, cutting the vines at intervals. With the girls doing the same on their sides the whole net begins to sag in the middle as more and more weight falls on the load-bearing vines at the center of the cave. They rustle and snap loudly when they separate. The giant rat is still drinking and preening down below. It’s so tranquil that Dipper starts to wonder if it knows something he doesn’t.

Through the shadows of the stalactites he can see Pacifica sawing away at a thick rope of vegetation with her pocketknife. It’s a gift from Dipper, bundled with a flashlight and a bunch of other adventuring necessities. He’d had the thought, on the way up to Oregon, that she would be spending most of her time at the Shack, unwilling to partake in anything too dangerous or disgusting. He’d been wrong. He’s still not sure if it’s a stubborn unwillingness to be left out or a burgeoning taste for adventure (knowing her, probably both).

Last summer, Dipper had spent most of his explorations alone or with only Mabel for company. Some of the bigger events — like finding Grunkle Ford’s doomsday bunker or the dinosaur caves — had been with various friends and family, but Dipper had spent countless hours of his summer just wandering the forests of Gravity Falls with Journal 3 in hand. He doesn’t remember it being lonely. Funny how it seems that way looking back at it now.

He’s done a little of that again, but this summer Mabel has stuck to his side like glue. She’s been dedicated to his search for adventure with unerring commitment, wholly invested, always ready to go with a smile and a backpack full of snack cakes. Maybe all that’s happened gives her an increased appreciation for monster hunting; or, maybe just a new appreciation for family. Dipper, though, has this nagging thought that there’s more going on. There’s a conversation on the horizon, like a storm cloud dogging his heels. Something about birthdays and apprenticeships and make-believe
kingdoms, sock operas and a button that went un-pressed. A lot of unspoken stuff that needs to be
dug up before they can bury it.

He doesn’t need her guilt. He has to find a way to tell her that.

The vine under his knife gives way; the snap brings his thoughts back to the here and now. The
tangle on his portion of the cavern roof is loose, dangling around the edges of the room like a low
tent canopy. It looks like the girls have had similar success. But there’s still a portion in the middle
that’s hanging by a few tenacious strands.

It looks like there’s a way over to it but the roots in that area won’t hold his weight. If he supports
himself with the vines, he’ll just fall with them. However, there’s a thick root that runs out towards
the middle before twisting away, and not too far from it a gnarled extension from Mabel’s perch. If
he can get close enough, he can cut the thickest vine left as he jumps and catches hold of the next
root over. It’ll be close. Mabel is there, though, and she can catch him if she needs to.

He looks over at her and sees that she’s looking right back at him, eyes bright and wide. He hadn’t
been lying when he’d told Wendy that he and Mabel don’t have telepathy, but sometimes they have
the same thought so clearly that nothing needs to be said. This is one of those moments; they are
perfectly in sync, and in her expression he perceives identical determination and knows she’ll be
right there to catch him when he needs it.

This is what makes them the Mystery Twins.

He stands and runs, root shaking beneath his footfalls and raining sheets of dust. He reaches the end
and launches himself towards the next root, Mabel already waiting with her arm outstretched. His
knife cuts cleanly through the heaviest strand and the net of vines begins to strip off the walls,
collapsing under its own weight.

It’s perfect. Mabel grabs her root and leans out on a collision course. Dipper sails through the air and
has the fleeting wish that someone would photograph this. He’s doing it Indiana Jones style. If only
Great-Uncle Ford could see him now.

He reaches out and Mabel’s hand comes in towards his for the ultimate high-five—
—and his hand passes through the air, centimeters from the tips of her fingers.

He misses.

He has time for two thoughts as the floor rushes up to meet him:

1. His new height brings new weight, which means the root had bent beneath him significantly
   more than he had accounted for.
2. …This is really going to hurt.

He hears Mabel and Pacifica screaming his name, or about half of it. Then there’s a burst of hard
pain.

Then nothing.

***---~**~---***

The Victory of Flight by Twelve Hour Turn (No Idea, 1999)
It takes Pacifica about twenty minutes to conclude that she *hates* Gravity Falls Hospital.

It’s surprisingly big for a hospital in such a small town. But it makes sense, considering it serves the entire county. Its halls are wide and everything is white, heavy with the smell of disinfectant and something else, something sterile and plastic. As if it all comes from the same sealed jar of astringent fluid. It’s like the equipment used to keep people alive, to make them well, has no humanity of its own. No wood, no plaster, no fabric that isn’t spill proof. Once she spends enough time in the artificial air she starts to feel like her sinuses are getting bleached.

But that’s not what she hates about the place.

What she hates — what she can’t *stand* — is the way Mabel sits, slumped and quiet in her chair, as they wait for Dipper to come out of the ER.

The twins are two very different friends to Pacifica. But despite their dissimilarities they are each one half of the Mystery Twins. And if Dipper is the brains of the operation, then Mabel has always been its beating, star-bright heart.

With Dipper, Pacifica had to prove herself to earn his friendship, his trust, and then eventually something more; she did it through levers and late-night confessions and trying so hard to be different. Her friendship with Mabel is… it’s like Mabel willed it into existence, like she believed so completely that Pacifica was her friend that it came true. Mabel really is the shooting star; Pacifica got caught up in her rainbow wake.

Now Mabel sits in a lumpy waiting room chair and the light in her eyes is dimmed from an inner blaze to the faintest spark, rainbow wake gone monochrome. She is a candle in a bell jar, flickering fitfully as the oxygen leaves the room.

Pacifica gets it. It hurts, but she gets it.

The second Dipper hit that cavern floor her heart stopped in time to the impact. He fell so *far*. It’s the Boss-Lobster’s claw all over again, that moment of pure, undiluted terror — except this time, she and Mabel couldn’t save him. He had been unconscious for what felt like forever before jolting back into wakefulness, if not coherency. Nothing he’d said after that point made much sense and the girls had done their best to keep him standing while they found a way out. The precious minutes wasted while they staggered through the tunnels with Dipper barely able to walk were so unbearable that Pacifica can feel hot, frustrated tears pressing at the bottoms of her eyes with just the memory.

Not that this waiting is any better.

The doors to the waiting room swing open and Ford hurries in. He seems to hurry everywhere, rushing from one idea to the next. “The rat is taken care of,” he says, sitting down next to them. “Any news?”

“Nothin’ yet,” Stan grunts. He looks as worried as Pacifica feels.

“Well, perhaps no news is good news.”
Pacifica is suddenly furious at Ford. Where was he when they needed him? It’s his stupid mad scientist footsteps that Dipper is trying so hard to follow, that created this mess. Ford should be telling Dipper to be careful, to stop being reckless. Instead, all Dipper gets is encouragement to grow and learn at the cost of his health and sanity. This is crazy. They’re both crazy!

She shunts aside nagging thoughts of her own incipient enthusiasm for the anomaly-hunting life, along with the inconvenient fact that she had pursued the rat just as thoughtlessly as Dipper had. Her anger has no time for details.

Her burgeoning tirade is just as quickly forgotten when a doctor comes into the waiting room. The doctor looks down at her papers, then around the sparsely populated space.

“Are you Mason’s family?” she asks them.

“That’s us,” Stan tells her, standing up. “What’s the damage?”

“Mason has a concussion along with a sprained wrist and elbow where he landed. His bruising is extensive, but there doesn’t seem to be any internal damage. The concussion is his most severe injury. We’re going to keep him overnight and make sure the swelling goes down. Hopefully he’ll be able to sleep through the night.”

“Can we see him?” Stan asks, echoing everyone’s thoughts.

“Of course. Just don’t try and wake him, okay?”

They follow the doctor down the blank white hall into a room that’s a little cozier than the others Pacifica’s seen so far. There’s a bit of wood trim around the window and a small couch near the door. The room is dominated by the bed against the wall, jutting out like a promontory.

Dipper is there, prone and pale, a baby blue blanket draped over the lower half of his legs. A tube runs down from an IV pole, disappearing into the mass of tape on the back of his hand. His left arm is in a sling and there are bandages peppering his face, along with a much heavier bandage over what she remembers is a jagged cut just below his hairline. His closed eyes are sunken with dark purple bags beneath. He looks smaller, for some reason. Maybe it’s the size of the bed, or maybe it’s just the way he’s so still, so silent.

Logically, she knows he’s probably going to be fine. But it’s hard to believe it, seeing him like this. Stan sighs heavily. “Dang it, kid. You’d better wake up soon, ‘cause I don’t want to call your parents.”

“He’ll be fine, Stanley,” Ford says. “He’s just as tough as we were, and probably more. You should have seen him bring that Security Droid down.”

Stan just shakes his head. “Last summer I thought I’d be here a lot, but somehow it never happened,” he tells Ford. “Guess the kid’s luck finally ran out.”

Ford pats Stan bracingly on the back. “This is a minor setback. He’s young and he’ll heal, you’ll see.”

Mabel just goes back out into the hall. When she returns she’s dragging one of the plastic chairs, which she stations next to the bed before sinking into it. Pacifica wants to be close to him, too, but she feels out of place amidst all this family concern. She sits on the couch while Stan and Ford converse. Pacifica has nothing to say; she needs Dipper to wake up so she can shake him and berate him and hug him, and not necessarily in that order. Mabel’s silence is almost as unbearable as his.
Eventually, Stan and Ford return to the Shack to close up and see to still-running experiments. Pacifica is tempted by the opportunity to go with them, but she feels like that would be abandoning the twins. Mabel relocates to the couch as the sun begins to set, a blaze of golden orange seeping through the window blinds. Pacifica tries to pass the time by reading on her phone, but she’s exhausted. Next to her, Mabel is already asleep.

She doesn’t remember deciding to sleep, so she must have drifted off at some point. She wakes up when someone brushes by the couch on the way to the bed. Her neck is stiff from its awkward position against the couch arm; she sits up rubbing at it and blinking the room back into focus.

It’s one of the nurses who has entered the room, just checking on Dipper. Pacifica looks over at Mabel, but the other girl is still out cold, face buried beneath her brown tresses. Pacifica’s stomach rumbles. She hasn’t eaten since before they started chasing the rat.

The nurse hears it and he smiles kindly at her. “Do you need something to eat? The kitchen is closed, but there’s still snacks downstairs.”

Pacifica thanks him and then contemplates waking Mabel. This turns out to be moot when Mabel sits up and brushes the hair from her face, awoken by the short conversation.

“Want to find something to eat?” Pacifica asks her.

Mabel must be starving, but she looks at Dipper hesitantly. “I don’t want him to be alone,” she says. Pacifica doubts he’d know the difference. But she and Mabel would, and maybe that’s what matters. “Okay. I’ll bring you back some gummy koalas or whatever.”

“Thanks, Pacifica.” Mabel’s eyelids are already starting to droop again.

Pacifica looks across the short space to Dipper’s still form. “He’s going to be all right. They said he’ll wake up tomorrow, I think.” She’s trying to make Mabel feel better; or maybe she’s trying to make herself feel better. Either way, it’s not working.

Mabel’s voice is a husky shadow of its exuberant self. “I was supposed to catch him.”

Pacifica can’t stand hearing Mabel sound that defeated. It’s just plain wrong. “Yeah, well, he was supposed to not jump like he thinks he can fly! It was his dumb idea. If he doesn’t wake up when he’s supposed to, I will sue him so much.”

To her surprise, the ghost of a smile flits across Mabel’s face. “More like kiss him so much,” she says in a lowkey approximation of her usual jokes. “All the better to wake your sleeping prince…”

“Shut up, Mabel,” Pacifica says, and she’s never meant it less.

A short elevator ride later and she’s traversing the lower halls of the hospital, following the signs to the cafeteria. Like the nurse said, the kitchen is closed; metal shutters cover the openings beyond the long countertop where she assumes the line forms. But there’s a wide selection of vending machines in an alcove beyond all the tables and benches. Only some of the lights are on and it gives the place a dreamlike quality, where the lit rectangles of the fluorescent fixtures form a bright path through the gloom at the edges and corners; she feels as if she’s wandering the lunchroom at school after dark.

She has enough money to get a fair amount of food. Mabel was already half asleep again by the time Pacifica left Dipper’s room, so there’s no point in rushing back upstairs. By the time Mabel’s ready to eat the kitchen will probably be open.
Pacifica gathers up her snacks and turns to pick a table when she’s startled by the presence of a familiar face. Wendy is sitting by herself, drinking a bottle of water with a few empty wrappers scattered around the table. Pacifica isn’t really looking for company, but it would also be weird and standoffish to go sit somewhere else. Mixed as her feelings towards Wendy are, the fact of the matter is that she is a good friend to the twins and she’s not going away. Part of being a better person, Pacifica figures, is at least tolerating someone she doesn’t really know and isn’t sure she wants to.

It’s not all about Dipper. It’s not. Wendy is just… too much of all the things Pacifica wants to be but can’t seem to find in herself. Real confidence. Real cool, not purchased cool. And there’s several summers’ worth of memories of Wendy and her friends sitting on the sidelines of Pacifica’s pageant of a Gravity Falls life, snickering and mocking. Maybe Wendy is someone Pacifica decided not to like a long time ago and she just hasn’t changed her mind yet.

“Hey,” Wendy says when Pacifica sits down across from her. “You just missed Soos. We stopped by the room earlier when you and Mabel were sacked out.”

“Oh,” Pacifica replies, not looking up from her food.

Wendy pauses slightly before saying, “Gideon’s giant robot and all of Weirmdageddon, and Dipper gets hospitalized by a freaking rat. Go figure, huh?”

“He’ll be fine,” Pacifica says automatically. She needs to say that.

“Definitely. Then I can kick his butt for not calling me.”

Inviting Wendy along wouldn’t have been Pacifica’s first impulse, but she does have to wonder if things might have turned out differently if they had. Wendy is nothing if not physically capable, something Pacifica envies. It’s becoming increasingly apparent that adolescence will not be granting her much in the way of height. Both her parents are tall, too. It seems they just can’t give her anything that’s good, even unintentionally.

She munches her way through a few pretzels; the sooner she finishes eating, the sooner she can walk away from this uncomfortable encounter.

Wendy’s enigmatic gaze remains fixed on Pacifica, as if the older girl is studying her. It’s not making things less awkward. “It’s really cool that you’re in the monster hunting biz now,” she says.

“It’s alright,” Pacifica allows.

Wendy smiles knowingly. “Dipper’s like that, right, even more than Mabel. You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he’s always got something going on. That kid’s crazy in the best way. He’s, I don’t know, exciting. I get it, though, now that I’ve met Ford. That dude is a trip.”

Pacifica isn’t enthused about having a weird heart-to-heart with the girl who is maybe-sort-of-but-not-really her rival. Wendy is being nothing but friendly and yet the fondness in her voice when she speaks of Dipper is like fingernails on a chalkboard somewhere in Pacifica’s head. Pacifica has never had a boyfriend before, but she’s been possessive about everything else in her life up to this point, so this shouldn’t be a surprise. She’s never thought of herself as the jealous type, but that’s mostly because she’s never thought of herself as any ‘type’ at all. This is uncharted territory. Which is familiar, in its way, after an entire year of uncharted territory. She hasn’t known exactly who she is and what she’s doing for a long time. This strikes her as another of those moments where she has to choose who she wants to be.

She looks good in green, but this is a shade that doesn’t suit her.
She opens her mouth to tell Wendy that she agrees. Instead what comes out is, “Why did you turn him down?”

Oh god.

Wendy laughs, darn her. “Heavy! Wow, I didn’t know if you’d work up the guts to ask me. You’re alright, Northwest.”

“I have to go,” Pacifica mutters desperately, gathering up her snacks.

“I didn’t feel the same way,” Wendy interjects. Pacifica stops and listens, despite herself. “Seriously. I knew about his crush. He’s not… I mean, he’s a good guy, but subtlety isn’t really his gig. One of my brothers has a crush on an older girl. I think that’s just a thing for some people, like, part of growing up or whatever.”

Pacifica doesn’t understand how to not like him like that. The way she saw him in the first half of last summer is so far away from where she is now that it’s like someone else’s memory.

“He was so desperate to hang with me and I was in this tight spot, ‘cause I thought he and Mabel were cool kids and I wanted to hang with them, but at the same time I didn’t want to lead him on. I kinda hoped he’d just get over it.” Wendy sighs, resting her chin on one hand. “I think I just messed him up even more. I should have told him straight up, in the first couple weeks. But I got to do all this awesome stuff with him and I was totally bummed thinking that we might not be friends anymore, even if I let him down as easy as I could. That was my bad. I guess I got scared.”

Pacifica has a hard time imagining Wendy being scared of anything. “Okay, but… why didn’t you feel the same way?”

Wendy shrugs. “I don’t know… He was so short and not even a teenager yet, he was a kid. Like, I’m a kid too, I guess, but there’s a big friggin’ difference between twelve and fifteen. Man, I barely remember being twelve. Besides, high school kids don’t date middle-schoolers, come on. That’s gross.”

Fair enough. “Yeah. It’s just, in a few years—”

Wendy rolls her eyes. “What, wait for him to age into it? He’s not a banana. I don’t put people on a shelf, like, ‘I’ll come back to him later’. That’s a really weird way to see things.”

Pacifica feels reassured and hates that she needs it. “No, that makes sense. I was just curious.”

Wendy gives her an easy — if not very believing — smile. “It’s cool. Hey, do me a favor — don’t get on to Dipper about me, okay? He went through a lot last summer. And for what it’s worth, that dude is way into you.”

Not knowing how to answer, Pacifica just nods and fiddles with her drink. Anything she could say about that is something she’s not ready to say in front of Wendy.

“Enough boy talk,” Wendy declares. “I wanna know about this giant flippin’ rat you guys were chasing.”

Having not had time to change, Pacifica can still smell the unwelcome aroma of rat urine on her clothing. “Ugh, it was so gross. We trapped it with a bunch of vines.”

Wendy grins. “Dope!”
About half an hour later Wendy drives Mabel and Pacifica back home so they can shower and change, Mabel finally convinced to leave Dipper’s side by Wendy’s promise to return to the hospital. Pacifica collapses on the cool sheets of her bed and falls asleep almost instantly. She’s awoken by Soos the next morning; sun streams in through the window as he knocks on her door.

“Hey, Pacifica?” he says through the wood. “You awake?”

“Yes,” she says groggily.

“Me and Mabel are going back to the hospital, you want a ride?”

She throws on the first clothes at hand from her suitcase and stumbles out into the sunlight trying to rub the sleep from her eyes. It seems almost unbearably bright out after spending most of the previous night in the dim interior of the hospital. The transition is jarring.

When they get to the hospital room the first sight that greets her is Dipper, sitting up in bed and eating oatmeal one-handed from a tray. He drops his spoon when he sees them. “Hey, there you are! When can I get out of here?”

Mabel practically teleports to his side. “Never,” she says as she tightly hugs his good arm. “You scared me and now you’re in brother-jail.”

“Seriously, Mabel, I want to get out of here. What happened to the rat? Did we get it?”

Pacifica crosses the room and gets right in his face; he shrinks back into his pillows. “You got hurt and you are not going anywhere until the doctor says you can,” she informs him with flashing eyes.

“I— okay, but, I mean I feel pretty alright, my head hurts but other than that—”

“Gee, I can’t imagine why your head would hurt when all you did was try to fly.”

“Man, I really thought that would work…” he mutters. “At least tell me we got the rat.”

Pacifica throws her hands into the air. “Yes, we got the rat! Oh my god, you are such an idiot. Nobody cares about the rat.”

“…I mean, I care about the rat,” he says weakly.

“Better quit while you’re behind, bro-bro,” Mabel advises.

Pacifica, tired of not touching him, commandeers the edge of Mabel’s chair and takes his hand. “Don’t ever scare me like that again,” she orders.

He smiles sleepily. “Yeah, not planning on it.”

Pacifica threads her fingers through his and feels like she can finally breathe again.

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Portions of this chapter were inspired by Let Me Clarify by carpenoctem22.
Concrete Smiles at the Midnight Hospital Diner by One Toy Soldier (Bravestar, 2005)
Dipper is quickly learning that it’s not impossible to accomplish most daily tasks onehanded, but it is substantially slower.

He’s mentally mapping out the steps required to prepare a bowl of cereal and realizing just how many of those actions he usually performs using both arms simultaneously. He ends up standing there with a blank look on his face for what would have been an uncomfortable amount of time had there been anyone watching.


It’s only been two days and he’s already tired of having to find someplace to set everything down before he can interact with it.

It’s just him and Grunkle Stan in the Shack for the time being. Everyone else is in town for Pioneer Day. Great-Uncle Ford escorted the girls after it became clear that Grunkle Stan was going nowhere near the celebration.

Pacifica had initially been reluctant to participate. It’s not hard to understand why, considering her family used to lead the festivities. Mabel’s enthusiasm eventually prevailed, and so Pacifica is off to experience the holiday as one of the crowd, sans her pioneer costume (which is a little disappointing because Dipper vaguely remembers that she looked really cute in it, and he wouldn’t mind seeing her in the ensemble now that his view of her isn’t clouded by enmity). He wonders who will be up on the stage this year. Probably Mayor Tyler.

He’ll have to hear about it after the fact. His head still aches and he’s slightly dizzy and occasionally nauseous from his medication; definitely not fit for a crowd. He knows he should be grateful that he isn’t more seriously injured, but he just can’t believe it happened at all. He’d survived Weirdmageddon with less damage. Figures he’d end up in the hospital over a stupid rat.

There’s something else bothering him, though. This morning he had been passing through the living room when he’d stopped for a minute to watch the fish in the tank. This had reminded him of Mabel’s lobster, which had then in turn reminded him of her disastrous series of dates with Gideon.

Dipper has yet to run into his former (he hopes) enemy. He’s not sure if the Gleeful family is even still in town, considering all that’s happened. The Tent of Telepathy isn’t exactly welcome anymore; if Gideon wants to keep making money that way, he’ll need a different populace to fleece. He might have stated a desire to be a ‘regular’ kid, but Dipper expects that’s about as far out of Gideon’s reach as it is Dipper’s.

But it’s those dates Gideon took Mabel on that are clinging to Dipper’s thoughts. Because they weren’t good dates, obviously, but they were still dates; fancy restaurants and fireworks, holding hands, other date stuff. He’s not an expert.
He and Pacifica have never been on an actual date. It seems crazy to think because they’ve spent so much time together over recent months, but it’s true. Their relationship is kind of weird, at least compared to most of the other ones at school. It’s forged by fire, bonded by secrets, built out of the weirdness that permeates their new life together.

Maybe the dance at the party sort of counts as a date. Still, Dipper isn’t confident enough to depend on that, or all the various monster and anomaly hunts. Those are adventures, not dates, even if they are pretty much his ideal way to spend time together as a couple. But even though Pacifica has really come around on weirdness and clearly takes satisfaction in a successful excursion, he doubts she considers them a classic couples’ activity.

Dipper wants to be a good boyfriend. He’s still fitting himself into the role, still figuring out what it all means, but he wants to be good at it. And he knows he isn’t, sometimes. But as hard as it is to go out on a fancy date with no car (no license, for that matter) and no money, he still feels like he has to try. Like he’s not holding up his end of the deal.

So here goes nothing. He makes his stiff and slow way over to the living room where he finds Grunkle Stan on the easy chair with the newspaper, face hidden behind the pages.

Dipper leans against the doorjamb, trying to look nonchalant. “Hey, Grunkle Stan?”

“Yeah?” Stan says, not lowering the paper.

Grunkle Stan is really the worst person to ask for this, but Grunkle Ford already helped out with money before and Dipper wouldn’t feel right asking Soos or Wendy, especially not knowing if he can pay them back.

He eases his way into the conversation. “So, I know that I work around the Shack for room and board and stuff…”

That gets Stan’s attention. He lowers the paper just enough to glare at Dipper over the top of it. “Hey, you got hurt off my property. I’m not liable for anything! You been talkin’ to OSHA?”

“What? No.” Dipper doggedly moves past whatever Stan’s getting defensive about. “I need some money to take Pacifica on a date, and I figured—”

“Wrong.” The paper goes back up. “You want an allowance then stop eatin’ so much.”

Dipper had anticipated this. “You know, after that lecture Great-Uncle Ford gave us last night, it would be bad if he found out you were the one who ate all his pudding cups.”

Stan drops the newspaper. “You tryin’a blackmail me, kid?”

“Come on, Grunkle Stan, ‘blackmail’ is such an ugly word. We’re just two guys making a deal.”

Stan grunts, but the sound is one of amusement instead of discontent. He reaches somewhere into the chair and then Dipper barely catches the tightly rolled bundle of bills that gets flicked at him.

“There’s your back pay from the party. Now quit makin’ me proud of you and get outta here.”

Dipper rushes up to the attic room and counts his newly acquired bounty. It’s not extravagant (obviously; it’s from Grunkle Stan) but it should be enough to cover dinner for two at an upscale restaurant. There’s only two in Gravity Falls that he knows of: The Club, which he’s pretty sure is invite only, and that seafood place he can never remember the name of.

Seafood it is.
It’s late afternoon and he’s lying in his bed, propped up on a few pillows for his mandatory, sister- and-girlfriend-enforced resting time. The sun shines through the window between his bed and Mabel’s, bisecting the room with a dusty beam. There’s a grilled cheese sandwich in his stomach and his pills are making him sleepy. The Pioneer Day festivities ended about an hour ago and everyone came back to the Shack tired and slightly sunburnt, glad to get out of the heat.

Pacifica is sitting in the space between his legs, her back against the painting of the sailing ship. There are cotton balls jammed between her toes as she paints them. He likes what she’s wearing, a light green halter top with matching shorts that show off a pretty excellent amount of her legs. He doesn’t know if she’s seen him looking, but if she has then she doesn’t seem to mind.

“People kept watching me like they thought I was going to get up on stage with Mayor Tyler,” she’s saying. “I wasn’t even dressed for it.”

Dipper fights against the heaviness of his eyelids, forcing them open. “Nobody gave you a hard time?”

“No…” Pacifica pauses with the tiny nail brush in her hand, its bristles tinged a vibrant shade of lime green. “I mean, Mabel was basically dragging me all over and it’s not like anyone would bother her.”

“You didn’t see Gideon, did you?”

Pacifica scrunches her nose in disgust. “That little disease? He wasn’t there. Someone said Bud Gleeful is out of town, so maybe they all are.” She resumes painting her left big toe with perfect, even strokes. She has the faintest smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheekbones from her day in the sun. He knows she’ll cover them up as soon as she notices, and he wishes she wouldn’t.

As pleasant as Pacifica is to look at, the somnolescent combination of lunch plus pills is still dragging Dipper under. He shuts his eyes, letting the warm ambience of the summer afternoon wash over him.

“I told you it would be okay,” he mumbles in an attempt to stave off actual sleep.

Pacifica doesn’t respond right away. The bed shifts a bit as she repositions, springs creaking. “They all thought I was going to get up there and talk about how great the Northwests are,” she says tightly.

“Hey, you don’t know that.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” She sounds more resigned than upset. “Maybe now they think I should talk about how the Northwests are horrible.”

Dipper forces his eyes open. “You aren’t.”

She’s got eyes like the ocean. He’s always known that, even before he would ever admit it. She turns to give him a look that’s sincere and meaningful and he’s somewhere on the coast, looking down into dark blue depths. He wants to jump in.

She leans over until her head is resting on his chest, carefully keeping her feet and their still drying nails dangling off the edge of the bed. “I sort of wondered what my parents would think, for a
minute. When Mayor Tyler was up on stage, I mean,” she says, her voice buzzing against his skin. “Then I, like, just… didn’t care anymore. And it was so amazing.”

Dipper is aware that their new position would get them into trouble back in Piedmont. But Grunkle Stan has a whole different attitude than Mom does, so he lets his eyes close and doesn’t worry about it, savoring her closeness and the scent of her sun-warmed hair.

“Oh, and Mabel tripped and fell into this horseshoe display and it was, like, the loudest thing ever,” she continues. “I totally pretended we weren’t there together.”

Dipper grins. “Please tell me you took a picture of it.”

Her arm shifts upwards and he opens his eyes again to bear witness to her phone, on which is a perfectly timed picture of Mabel sprawled amidst what looks like a couple shelves worth of horseshoes.

“She was okay, right?” he has to ask.

“She’s fine. I’m, like, fifty-percent sure she did it on purpose so she could flirt with the blacksmith’s assistant.” Pacifica tucks her phone away and relaxes against him, going limp with a sigh. “Hurry up and get better. I’m already tired of you being stuck here.”

“You had fun anyway,” he points out.

“Maybe,” she says stubbornly.

He’s too sleepy to keep trying to make her admit it. But just as he’s about to slip over the edge into unconsciousness, he remembers what he’s supposed to be doing.

“Um, hey…” he begins, clearing his throat awkwardly. “You know, I’ve been meaning to ask you… We’ve been spending a lot of time together already, but I was wondering if, maybe, you wanted to go out with me?”

She sits up sharply. Cool hands come up to hold his head as she looks searchingly into his eyes. “Oh my god, did you really hit your head that hard? Is your vision blurry? How hot am I, like one to eleven?”

“Eleven,” Dipper says, confused.

“Well, your eyes are okay.” She leans back slightly. “Dipper, you remember you’re already my boyfriend, right? We kissed a whole bunch of times, there’s no way you can forget. I mean, look at me.”

“I know!” he exclaims, exasperated. “I meant go out on a date with me, a real, official date! At a fancy restaurant and everything.”

“Oh.” She drops her hands. “So you’re not having some kind of senior moment.”

“I just thought we should go out, you know, as a couple.” Having made it this far, he starts to second-guess himself. “If you want to! If you don’t, that’s cool, I could… do stuff, other stuff, there’s stuff to do, definitely—”

“Yes!”

“Yes?” he repeats, the first tinge of relief beginning to blossom.
“Of course we should go out!” She’s smiling, blue eyes shining. “I’ll wear a dress and we’ll get you a nice suit and I’ll be sexy and you’ll be dreamy and we’ll eat out on the veranda and that’ll show everybody who thinks I shouldn’t be back, hah!”

“Yeah, okay,” he says smiling back uncertainly. “Kind of took a dark turn at the end there, but, sure, yep — sounds good.”

She pushes away from him and turns to pluck the cotton balls from between her toes. “Something green, obviously. Lakefoam green…”

He has no idea what she’s talking about, but she seems happy with the idea and that’s good enough for him.

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They wait a couple days until Dipper is a little more fit for a public appearance. His arm is still in a sling, but he can use a fork onehanded. After Pacifica tells him which fork to use, anyway. It all works out because it gives him time to make a reservation, just in case. Pacifica’s plan to eat outside ends up being a bust, though; when Grunkle Stan drops them off in the early evening, it’s pouring rain.

Dipper is intensely uncomfortable from the moment they sit down. People are watching them. Not overtly, but through a steady series of glances and murmured conversations too low to understand. He doesn’t get it. Yeah, the Northwests are disgraced or whatever, but they’re also gone. The mansion is McGucket’s and Pacifica is staying at the Shack. She’s on vacation, which, technically, she was last summer, too. So what’s the big deal? Can’t they see that things are different, that she’s not the same?

He’s not even sure that’s why they’re looking. Maybe his fly is down. He surreptitiously checks beneath the tablecloth.

Pacifica, predictably, is thriving in the environment. She guides him through the courses with instructions whispered through a perfect, pageant-ready smile. She nods in acknowledgment to a few of the other patrons and he knows her well enough to see the subtle enjoyment she takes from their evident bemusement. Dipper recognizes a couple of them from the Northwest party.

Finally, someone decides to just ask. A woman in a glittery purple dress approaches the table with a fixed smile. “Pacifica, dear, how wonderful to see you,” she says. “Are… your parents in the private hall?”

“My parents aren’t summering this year. I’m afraid we’re not currently on speaking terms,” Pacifica says with a purposefully blasé air.

“I see,” the woman says, her expression making it clear she understands why. Dipper figures she must have been around for Weirdmageddon. “Well, I’m sorry to have brought it up.”

“That’s quite all right. I’m enjoying the evening with my boyfriend, Mason. I’m sure you’re familiar.”

The woman immediately grants Dipper an ingratiating smile. “One of the Pines, of course. That’s wonderful. Well, have a nice evening, dear.”
“You as well,” Pacifica says a bit dismissively.

As soon as the woman is gone, Dipper raises an eyebrow at Pacifica. “Mason?”

“What? It’s your name.” Pacifica stabs at some glazed asparagus unrepentantly. “Am I, like, not allowed or something?”

“…I guess? It’s just kind of weird,” Dipper says, not even sure exactly what his problem with it is. It’s weird.

He turns his attention back to his food. He’s not entirely certain what it is, but it cost a lot and isn’t that bad. It’s edible, anyway. There are odd combinations of flavors that he’s sure are high-class, but unfamiliar and strange to him. Maybe he’s just too used to everything tasting like MSG, salt, sugar and grease.

“You hate this.”

Startled, he looks back up. “What?”

Pacifica is giving him a very knowing look across the table. “This,” she says, indicating the entire tableau with a tilt of her head.

“I… don’t,” he protests weakly. He’s eating, isn’t he? And tolerating the strangling presence of his tie. He’s doing alright. “I like spending time with you,” he adds, hoping to score some quick points.

“Obviously. I’m amazing,” she retorts, punctuating the proclamation with a delicate sip of her seltzer. “But you keep fidgeting — which you need to stop, you look like you have to pee — and you keep staring at people. They’re supposed to stare at us.”

He sighs. “Is this really that important to you? All this stuff with appearances, or whatever this is?”

“Yes,” she says sharply. Then she casts her eyes downwards for a moment, revealing a flash of vulnerability. “…I thought you were okay with that.”

He doesn’t completely understand. He doubts he ever will. But does he need to? He set this up. He took her out for dinner at this fancy place, knowing her history. And if he wants to be with her (and he really, really does), then this is a part of that. Just like getting covered in mud and possibly rat feces is a part of it for her.

“Okay, Pacifica,” he says with a wry smile. He raises his glass of bubbling water towards her. “I’ll try not to embarrass you.”

Her eyes glow at his acceptance. He wants to touch her and knows he can’t yet. “You’re not embarrassing me, we’re owning this place. Miss Gravity Falls and one of the Mystery Twins? Two words: Power. Couple.”

He grins back at her, still not really getting it but content, regardless.

When they finish eating, they step outside to find it still raining. Water streaks down from the darkness, catching in the streetlights and the glow from scattered windows. The neon sign of the restaurant reflects off the street like it’s written there, blazing from every puddle. Chilled summer air mists across their faces as they huddle against the wall, separated from the street by a curtain of water descending from the short, slanted awning of the roof.

“I texted Mabel,” Dipper tells Pacifica. “Grunkle Stan should be here soon.”
“No rush,” she says, looking up at him. Her arms go around his waist. “I had a good time tonight.”

“Me too,” he says, and is surprised to find he means it.

He finds out, a second later, that he’s about to have an even better time.

She kisses him. Not unusual… but, there’s something about the darkness outside the restaurant, the rain, the date, the way they’re standing up against the wall together; this first belated step they’ve taken as a couple, or, maybe, just that age fourteen is a little bit closer. This kiss is different. She presses against him and someone opens their mouth a little — maybe him, maybe her — and this kiss turns hot and hungry in a way that’s unfamiliar, in a way that’s almost scary, like it’s dangerous; like it’s a precipice. They separate with a smack and they’re breathing hard, eyes inches from each other, caught in something new.

The sudden honk of a horn startles them and they jump apart. Dipper looks and instead of Grunkle Stan’s old car, it’s Soos’ new truck parked on the street. In the light from the restaurant’s door Dipper can see a piece of paper taped up against the rear passenger window; it reads ‘CHAUFFEUR’ and he can’t help but laugh. Soos rolls the window down and waves at them.

“Sup, dudes?” he says with an amiable grin. “It’s not a limo but it’s better than walking, am I right?”

“You are not wrong,” Dipper says, opening the door for Pacifica and then climbing in after her.

The headlights cut through the storm, pointing the way home. On the seat between them, Dipper’s hand finds Pacifica’s. His blood is still thrumming through him, heart racing from whatever just happened out there in the rain. He feels like he just ran a lap.

Not bad for a first date.

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Small Victories by Frameworks (13th Floor, 2013)
The sound that echoes through the lab is like the world’s largest car failing to start, the stuttering wheezes of a mechanical giant starved of energy. Great-Uncle Ford lets go of the lever and looks at it with evident disappointment.

“Blast. Still short on the wattage,” he mutters.

Dipper’s been helping his great-uncle solder wires and run cables for hours. The generator with the Quantum Destabilizer core at its heart is a brushed steel orb with thick cables jutting out in every direction, draped on its frame and along the floor like an undone ball of string. There’s a six-inch-thick plexiglass porthole on one side revealing the flickering blue sphere which gives the machine life. It looks a lot like the original atom bomb, which makes him glad it’s hidden in the secret basement. It’s a generator, of course, not a bomb, but knowing Ford it probably could be a bomb with a few alterations.

“The pins?” Dipper says. He’s holding yet another cable, but it sounds like a lack of cables isn’t the problem.

“Yes, the issue here isn’t with the feed. It must be closer to the source.”

Dipper looks at the porthole, where the bright, shifting gleam of the core glints against the plastic. “It looks like it’s working…”

“I think the core itself is functioning perfectly, but the power isn’t reaching the cables. We’re just splitting what little we’ve been able to draw.” Ford approaches the device, hands clasped at his back as he peers inside. “I think our problem lies with the cradle. It’s not strong enough to withstand the core. Look closely; you can see it’s warping.”

The Quantum Destabilizer’s core sits atop a pylon made from alien metal, held in place by a web of conductive filament. When Dipper stands next to Ford and looks, he can see at least some of the cradle has bent and is no longer touching the core.

“Harmonic resonance. I should have known this would be trouble,” Ford grumbles. “The core is a strange and extreme energy. What I pulled from the walls of Crash Site Omega isn’t cutting the mustard.”

“Can we use the hyperdrive shell from the portal?”

“Cracked. Broken when the portal fell apart; too much stress. Stanley was not the most careful of operators.” Ford pauses, considering that. “…Not that I’m ungrateful. But we’ll need to look elsewhere.”

Dipper wracks his brain. “Well… there’s a lot of weird stuff around. There must be something that will work.”

“Agreed. I’ve got something in mind, assuming we can find it.” Ford flips open his journal, revealing a sketch of a vicious-looking creature. “A werebear is said to have claws that can cut through anything. I don’t know if that’s true, but if it is then this might be the anomalous material which will
do the trick.” He tucks his journal away. “Usually, I’d reach out to my magical contacts in the area. But I’ve been away for… a while.”

Dipper smiles reassuringly at his great-uncle. “I think I know a guy.”

“How about that view, huh?” Dipper remarks.

The Multi-Bear’s cave is perched near the top of a craggy mountain, overlooking the rippling sea of trees. The entrance itself is high up, the forest spread out down below, but some of the sides of the mountain are gradual enough to have forestation. Where Dipper stands the trees are nearly level with his feet, providing the sensation of flight, or riding a wave. He knows it wouldn’t actually work, but a part of him feels like if he picked up enough speed he could hit the treetops and keep running, one step ahead of gravity.

Mabel stands on top of a flat rock in a crane pose, arms bent over her head like wings. “CA-CAW!” she crows. “Move over eagles, there’s a new boss bird in town!”

Pacifica is standing nearby, moving her phone in a slow lateral sweep in a clear attempt to stitch together a panorama. “Mabel, be beautiful,” she says, pointing her phone in the other girl’s direction.

Mabel drops her arms and strikes an exaggerated stance, hands at her hips. “Fierce!”

They’ve been taking a lot of pictures together on this expedition and Dipper suspects that Pacifica has been converted by Mabel’s scrapbooking zeal. As usual with Pacifica, it’s hard to tell if she’s genuinely enthused or just cooperating enough to satisfy Mabel. Either way, Dipper’s been on the business end of her camera a few times already. Not particularly eager to be the subject of yet another poor photograph of himself, he edges away from the girls and puts his toes at the ledge. He could hang glide from here, maybe. He wonders if Great-Uncle Ford has enough aluminum to machine a frame. Of course, given the entire vista before him is an ocean of evergreens, landing might be an issue…

His thoughts are suddenly interrupted when a hand grabs the back of his vest and yanks him away from the cliff edge. “Hey!” he squawks, flailing blindly until he knocks the hand loose.

It’s Mabel. “Getting kind of close to the edge, there.”

“I was fine,” he protests.

She gives him an apologetic pat on the shoulder, though she doesn’t look sorry. “Just looking out for ya, Dip,” she says.

Dipper isn’t sure what that’s all about. While Mabel goes back over to Pacifica, he wanders up the incline to the cave entrance to see how things are going. He can hear Ford conversing with the Multi-Bear. The two had met briefly during Weirdmageddon but there hadn’t been time for full introductions. Dipper is pleased to see they’re hitting it off.

“And it’s just the one?” Ford is saying.

“He is a solitary creature,” the Multi-Bear rumbles.
“If he trims his claws, I can barter for the clippings. What is he after? Money? Shrunken heads?”

The Multi-Bear sighs. “The Werebear lives beyond the trade of man. A word of warning, seeker—he’s a massive tool.”

That doesn’t sound promising.

Shortly after, the four of them descend back into the trees. The forest is lovely in the afternoon air, coniferous copses waving in the gentle breeze, sunlight streaming down through the gaps in the canopy in shifting pools of shadow and light. They follow a stream as it winds through the woods, rippling over smooth rocks and under the occasional fallen log. Their small group is chattering and lively; Pacifica and Mabel pause frequently to take pictures while Dipper and Great-Uncle Ford discuss the environs. They spot a plaidypus and Dipper gives a neutral wave to a couple of gnomes, past sins forgiven but not forgotten.

It’s when they get closer to what the Multi-Bear said is werebear territory that things start getting stranger. If the Werebear had been a regular person, then Dipper would have said they live on some bizarre magical equivalent of frat row. He’d been to Mom and Dad’s college once for an alumni event and they had driven through a section of town in which every available trash receptacle seemed to be filled entirely with beer cans. There’s more than a few of those scattered around the roots of nearby trees, along with graffiti sporting such stimulating statements as ‘WEREBEARS ROOL’ and ‘SCREW UNICORNS’ (Mabel nods approvingly at that one). And it looks like someone has TPed a few branches.

“Oh, gross,” Pacifica says, stepping around some sodden lumps of toilet paper that haven’t survived the morning dew. “What is this, the jock side of the forest?”

“Reminds me of Backupsmore,” Ford says, looking like he’s having a minor flashback. “That’s… not good.”

The trail of empties ends at the mouth of a cave. Black trash bags hang down over the opening as a makeshift curtain and the blacklights haphazardly wired around the edges give it the ambience of a low-rent nightclub. Phosphorescent paint declares it to be ‘THE REAL MANCAVE’, which Dipper thinks the Manotaurs might have something to say about. The air coming from inside smells like stale beer and gym socks.

Ford eyes the entrance dubiously. “I’m hoping this will go smoothly, but I’m beginning to have doubts. Wait here and stay quiet; I’m going to have a look before we commit to anything.”

Dipper, Mabel and Pacifica crouch in the divot between two tangled masses of tree roots. Ford sneaks forward to peer through the gap at the edge of the plastic curtain, then disappears around the side of the cave.

“You always take me to the nicest places,” Pacifica deadpans, nudging a crushed beer can away from her knee.

“Hey, that restaurant was nice,” Dipper reminds her.

“So does this mean you owe me another date?”

Dipper figures he might be able to get some more date money off Stan, but it’s going to be awhile. “How about grilled cheese and the finest cinema Gravity Falls Public Access has to offer?”

She leans in closer and the scent of the forest in her sun-warmed hair makes him want to bury his face in it, to pull her into his arms. “Do we get to make out during commercials?”
“It’s Gravity Falls Public Access,” Dipper says wryly, “we can make out whenever.”

Their eyes are locked in shared amusement and attraction. And he could not have put it into words, but his heart swells with the fact that they have this; this moment, this back and forth; this bright push and pull.

Then he remembers they aren’t alone. He looks away to find Mabel watching them with a wide grin. “You guys are awesome,” she gushes, hands clasped beneath her chin. “So close and couple-y. You should totally kiss.”

Dipper doesn’t miss the phone she’s holding. “Are you recording this?” he says, outraged.

“Come on, one scrapbook kiss,” Mabel says, neatly sidestepping his question. “You kiss all the time! What’s one more for the scrapbook? Pacifica, babe — you love the scrapbook. I know you do.”

Dipper’s eyes widen when he sees Pacifica actually considering it. She taps a finger against her chin. “…No,” she eventually decides. “I don’t have any breath mints and he’s been eating that nasty trail mix your uncle made.”

Ford’s ‘trail mix’ is really just chunks of marbleized nutrients in a plastic bag. It tastes like bitter chalk, but Dipper has been dutifully eating it to maintain his energy. “It’s not that bad,” he says in a decidedly half-hearted defense of the stuff.

“No, it is,” Pacifica says.

“It tastes like disappointment,” Mabel adds.

Dipper isn’t sure this is an argument he can (or should) win. He’s saved from having to when Ford returns.

“He’s in there,” Ford confirms. “He’s doing squats — I’ll spare you the details. We’ll need a distraction as our contingency plan. Any volunteers?”

Dipper opens his mouth immediately. “I—”

“I’m on it!” Mabel interjects, overwriting his first syllable.

Ford nods. “Good. There’s a small entrance around the back you should be able to squeeze through. Make sure his attention is on us before you go all the way in and be ready to make some noise if we need it. Pacifica, do you see that trail going up to the left? There’s a second level to the cave, a sort of ledge that seems to be used for storage. You can get to it if you climb up that way. From there you can be our eyes and direct Mabel.”

“What about me?” Dipper asks.

“You and I are going in together,” Ford says, clapping him on the shoulder. “We’ll present a united front. If we’re lucky, the girls’ subterfuge won’t be necessary.”

They split up, Mabel and Pacifica disappearing into the woods while Dipper and his great-uncle march right up to the front. They wait about five minutes to give the girls time to get in place and then push through the plastic curtain into the cave.

Dipper is immediately taken aback by the humid stench of a locker room. Exercise equipment is scattered everywhere, along with crushed cans, animal bones and a layer of moldy straw that seems to serve as carpet. The walls are covered with graffiti along with a dartboard or two and a basketball
hoop. Up above the left half of the room is a ledge decorated with an enormous pyramid of light beer cans.

The Werebear is in the middle of the room with a barbell across his oddly human shoulders, doing squats. He’s a strange combination of human and bear, standing on two legs but covered in thick brown fur. He has large, human-like eyes which are currently squinted in concentration; the lower half of his face is a squashed muzzle with a big flat nose and a toothy maw. His only concession to human standards of dress is a dirty green basketball jersey, number sixty-nine.

He’s grunting, talking to himself. “Six…Ssssseven…” he pants.

Ford clears his throat. “Greetings!”

The Werebear’s eyes fly open. “…One hundred!” He sets the barbell down. “Who the funk are you?”

“Yes, I’m Stanford Pines, a local physicist—among other things—and this is my young protégé,” Ford says, gesturing to Dipper and himself. “We were hoping to do business; you see, I’m in the market for an anomalous material for a project I’m working on and—”

The Werebear’s eyes glaze over somewhere in the middle of Ford’s second sentence. “Slow your roll on the nerd talk, bro, you’re wrinkling my brain.” He turns his attention to Dipper. “Sweet hat, bro, but you should flip it. Chicks did the backwards lid, you know what I’m saying?”

Dipper hesitantly reaches up and turns his hat around. When in Rome, he supposes. “Uh, yeah… Cool.”

“Ch’yeah, brah. Haul it, ball it, never call it.”

Ford is tinkering with one of his gadgets, his expression perplexed. “My Dimensional Translator must be failing to trigger the parse backend. Didn’t understand a word of that.”

“Ditto,” the Werebear says. “So are you dudes here to thrash, or what?”

Ford still looks lost, so Dipper figures it’s up to him to take the lead. “Um, so we heard that—”

“Hold up.” The Werebear takes a deep sniff of the air, his brow furrowing. “What’s that wussy smell? Smells like… oh, no, no way. Did the Multi-Bear send you over? That dude is a total dweeb.”

Dipper isn’t sure how to handle this development. “I mean, we talked to him but he didn’t send us…”

“Bogus. You’re bogus, bruh!” The Werebear sniffs deeply again, his eyes filled with mounting rage. “You think I don’t know you aren’t alone, but I do know! I know things! Smells like you brought some females into my mancave and that’s a violation right there, brother, that’s a red frickin’ flag!”

Dipper doesn’t intend to antagonize the Werebear, but he’s caught so off-guard by the creature’s attitude that the words just tumble out before he thinks them through. “What, you think you’re going to catch cooties?” he says with an incredulous laugh.

The Werebear swells with rage. “Oh, you did it now, son, you came in and stepped all over my steez. You think you can come in here and laugh at me? Do you even lift, bro?! DO YOU EVEN LIFT?!!”

“Uh… he’s not being chill about this. Okay, what now?” Dipper asks Ford as they back away from
the snorting, slavering Werebear.

“I believe we run,” Ford says.

“HEY! OVER HERE!” Mabel’s voice suddenly rings out from the back of the cave. “I’M SHOUTING AT YOU! RIGHT NOW, WITH MY VOICE!”

The Werebear spins around. “What the hey?”

“PRETTY DISTRACTING, HUH? HUH HUH? HOW ABOUT IT?”

The Werebear takes a threatening step towards her. “Do you not see me hulking out?! I am on the edge, little girl! I’M GONNA BREAK YOU!”

“HARD NOPE.”

There’s a motion from above; Dipper looks up just in time to see Pacifica throw herself into the pyramid of beer cans. As she pushes against it, he realizes that they aren’t empty: they’re full.

The mountain of cans comes crashing down onto the Werebear, slamming him to the floor and burying him until only his head peeks out from the hissing, foaming wreckage.

“Dude… not… cool,” the Werebear gasps, and then passes out. He begins snoring loudly a second later.

Ford removes his hand from his jacket with an expression of relief; Dipper assumes he had been about to draw his gun. “That’s one way to do it,” he laughs. “Well done, Pacifica!”

Pacifica climbs down a nearby ladder and surveys her handiwork. “He deserved it,” she confidently concludes.

Mabel comes skipping around the pile, her face filled with delight. “Ha ha… that’ll teach him to listen to me.”

As Ford goes to work collecting his samples, Pacifica pulls her shirt out with two fingers and sniffs at it. “I smell like a werebear,” she says with a moue of distaste.

The stench of cheap light beer really is overwhelming. Dipper hopes Great-Uncle Ford finishes up soon. The scientist is crouched over the slumbering werebear, hard at work with a laser cutter.

“I can’t believe he just fell asleep like that,” Dipper says, making a note of it in his journal. “I wonder if werebears hibernate?”

“They do if Pacifica’s around,” Mabel says gleefully.

It doesn’t take long for Ford to finish up. A few minutes later and they make a quick retreat back into the forest. The air seems especially fresh outside after being in the Werebear’s less than sanitary abode. The sun is still high overhead and birdsong twitters through the trees.

Dipper falls in beside Mabel as they walk. “You were pretty eager back there,” he says, studying her closely.

She doesn’t look directly at him, a sure sign that something is up with her. “You know it. Action-Mabel, hi-yah hi-yah!” She karate chops the air.

He watches as she runs ahead to take another picture with Pacifica. He’s obviously going to have to
corner her at some point, because it looks like they need to talk.

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_Low Standards for High Fives_ by **Hunter Gatherer** (Scene Police, 2000)
It’s getting close to ten at night and Dipper is standing in the corner of the room, trying his darndest to look cool.

This is difficult because — well, because it’s him, for starters, but also because he’s dressed like a Ghost Harasser. Surprisingly, it’s not the dorkiest costume in the room. That dubious honor likely goes to Thompson, who’s garbed in a Jedi costume which is obviously a bathrobe.

Mabel is bouncing around in her own Ghost Harasser costume, as it had been Dipper’s turn to pick. Pacifica, however, demurred when offered the opportunity to match the twins. She flits elegantly through the throng in an expensive-looking dress she pulled from somewhere in her stack of suitcases. Dipper still thinks it doesn’t really count as a costume when it’s something she already had, but there’s no point in arguing. She’s dressed as a ‘princess’ and that’s that.

It’s not Summerween. It’s about a week or so early for that, maybe a week and a half if Dipper is remembering right. He hadn’t caught the full explanation in the initial rush of excitement (Mabel had been the one told, so he’d heard it all secondhand). Apparently, someone or the other is going to be out of town on the actual Summerween, so this party is being thrown early. He supposes it’s this or no party at all, if this is the usual place.

He’s not sure whose house this is. There are cheap green streamers draped around the doorways and a few jack-o’-melons in key locations; most of the lamps have sheets draped over them to dim the mood appropriately. There’s no flyer this year; their invitation came straight from Wendy, along with their transportation. He thinks it might be Tambry’s place, but it could be someone else’s.

For his part, Dipper is excited to be at his first cool teen party (or at least as cool as anything in Gravity Falls can be). He’s got a red plastic cup of punch and good section of the wall to lean on as he views the action from the sidelines, taking sporadic sips. That’s a cool thing to do, right? He feels cool. He puts one foot flat on the wall behind him with classic loitering poise.

“Uh, O-M-G, feet off my wall,” Tambry snaps at him as she brushes past with her eyes glued to her phone.

So it is Tambry’s place. Dipper immediately drops his foot and hopes no one notices in the low light, taking quick drink to hide his chagrin.

Tambry goes over to the corner of the couch where Robbie is fiddling with his guitar for the benefit of the handful of people who still buy into his schtick. And maybe that’s unkind, but… it’s still how Dipper feels.

He’s in a weird place with Robbie. Dipper’s been changed by last summer and everything in between, but if he’s being honest then has to admit that Robbie has, too. The moody older teenager is still sort of an overdramatic, jerky poseur, but the old aggression just isn’t there, the sense of enmity. Maybe they are both aware of how real the stakes can be and how pointless their feud was. Maybe they can’t take that kind of shallow rivalry seriously anymore.

The entire foundation of their animosity has been pulled out from under them. Neither of them are
into Wendy; not like they used to be. All that’s left now is the fact that Robbie is... well, still Robbie. Kind of a tool. And even that’s not as true as it had once been.

Dipper isn’t rushing over to make friends with the guy, but he’s also not using his vantage point to glare poisonously at his one-time rival. So that’s progress.

“BOOM! Gotcha, ghost!”

Dipper staggered to the side as Mabel comes out of nowhere and nearly knocks him to the floor with hug that’s more of a tackle. He’s lucky his cup of punch is nearly empty.

He laughs slightly and tries to shrug out of her grip. “I’m not a ghost, Mabel. We’re on the same team, remember?”

“Yeah, okay. I still think you should have been a ghost, though. Now that’s a twin costume.” She pulls back and pushes a comradely fist against his shoulder, her eyes glittering in the near-dark. “Trying to be a cool wall-guy, huh? I see what you’re up to,” she says slyly.

“I’m just hanging out at a party,” Dipper says with as much nonchalance as he can muster.

“Where’s Pacifica? Why isn’t she making you dance?” Mabel wonders, raising up on her tiptoes to look around for the other girl.

That’s a pertinent question, albeit one Dipper isn’t in a hurry to answer. Learning to slow dance is one thing; trying to dance to something with more energy is probably beyond him. Besides, he’s glad to have caught Mabel alone for a minute.

“So, Mabel, I’ve been meaning to talk to you—” he begins.

“There she is!” Mabel exclaims, and darts off in the middle of his sentence.

Dipper doesn’t see Pacifica anywhere. His suspicions are confirmed: Mabel is avoiding him. At least she is when he wants to talk, anyway. Something’s going on with her.

He stands there with his punch in hand, debating whether it’s worth going after Mabel when there’s so many other people around. Probably not, right? There are too many opportunities for her to evade and distract. She is, as always, the heart of the party and there’s literally no one here that she can’t pull into any given conversation. Better to wait until they’re back at the Shack.

“Yo, Dipper!” Wendy calls out, pulling him from his musings.

Dipper turns and sees Wendy slouched on one of the couches that have been set in a rough circle. She’s with most of the group: Nate, Lee and Thompson are clustered there as well.

Wendy pats the empty cushion next to her. “Grab a seat, man.”

“Dr. Funtimes!” Nate catcalls as Dipper hoists himself over a couch arm and slumps down next to Wendy.

Lee points a mock-serious finger in Dipper’s direction. “Dude, level with me — what’s it like hooking up with Pacifica Northwest? Is it like dating a marquis? ‘Cause I want to say it’s like dating a marquis.”

“Close enough,” Wendy chortles, giving him a gentle elbow to the side.

Thompson’s brow furrows in confusion. “Hah, yeah, but how is she a sign…?”

There’s a moment of uncomprehending silence. Then Nate’s face fills with utter glee as he figures it out. “Oh my god,” he says, leaning back into the couch as he laughs, “he thinks you said marquee, like at the theater!”

Thompson immediately backpedals. “No, I know what a marquis is, I totally know—”

Lee is beside himself. “Dude, why are you digging yourself even deeper?!”

“Thompson, bail out!” Nate howls.

“Come on, guys…” Thompson whines.

Wendy is laughing next to Dipper, shaking the couch with her mirth; this is everything he had wanted last summer, to belong like this, to be a part of her group. Honestly, it’s pretty nice this summer, too.

“Status update: Laughing at Thompson, per usual,” Tambry says in her monotone staccato as she approaches the couch, thumbs clicking away at her phone.

“What’d Thompson do now?” Robbie says as he vaults over the back of one of the couches and settles in with Tambry at his side.

The source of all the laughter isn’t even half as funny when it’s retold (you had to be there), and soon the conversation moves away from poor Thompson. Dipper sits at the edge of it, just happy to be able to exist in this spot with these people.

About an hour later, the party has started to clear out. It’s getting late and Tambry’s parents are tolerant as far as parents go, but there’s an expiration date on the get together. Wendy, being in Tambry’s closest social circle, is one of the last to leave, which means Dipper, Mabel and Pacifica are stuck there until she does.

They could walk home, but when Dipper steps outside the sky is black overhead and the chilly air speaks of rain. It’s been an unusually wet June so far, raining off and on for the last week. There’s a real summer storm on the horizon, past the cliffs; Dipper can see the flicker of lightning pulsing like giant fireflies caught in the clouds, too far away to be heard. The mild temperature of the day is turning colder. The wind cuts through his costume but it feels good after the close heat of the party. He stands on the patio and breathes in the bracing, rain-fresh air rolling in before the storm.

He’s slightly startled when he realizes that he’s not alone. Pacifica is at the other end of the patio; there are visible goosebumps on her arms as the wind is cuts through her thin dress. She’s staring out at the far-off storm, her eyes as distant as those sparking clouds.

“Pacifica?” he ventures, approaching her.

Her lower lip pushes upwards as she slightly squints, her face taking on a thoughtful cast. “Do you ever look at clouds like that and wonder who’s under them?” she asks.

He blinks. “Well… yeah. All the time,” he admits. He starts to smile. “I guess I didn’t know anyone else did.”

“I didn’t use to,” she murmurs.
He’s not sure if she wants to be alone, but he puts a tentative arm around her and relaxes when she leans into him. The skin of her bare arm is cold beneath his palm. They should both get inside soon.

“How are we here?” she says, her voice low beneath the wind.

He looks at her, concerned. “What do you mean?”

She shivers as another gust sweeps across the yard. “I don’t know. I’m in Gravity Falls, I’m at a party… everything is the same, but, everything is different.”

This is such a vague assessment; and yet, Dipper is keenly empathetic to her meaning. He knows this kind of existential speedbump. Those first weeks after last summer had seemed an endless series of them. He was in his old life, and he wasn’t. He was himself, but not. Everything was different then. Everything is different now.

He’s proud of her. She is learning to see herself and the world around her. She is growing in so many, many ways.

“I might have worn this some other place,” she says, running her hands down her sleek sides. “I don’t remember. Somebody here might, and I’m just… Like a rerun, but the words are wrong. Old dress, different me.”

He turns her towards him, makes sure she’s meeting his eyes. “Real you,” he says.

As they stand there on the concrete slabs of the patio — his hands at her arms, hers pressed lightly to his chest, their eyes locked in concert — there comes a moment where they seem so close, so fully twined in understanding, that to kiss would somehow be a step removed.

A faint roll of thunder echoes from the cliffs; the storm is getting closer. Pacifica shudders again in the wind and wraps her arms around herself. “Tch,” she scoffs, her expression reigniting with haughty verve. “You infected me with your nerd brain. I hope you’re happy.”

“Actually, I am,” he says with a grin, taking her hand to go inside.

The warmth of the living room is almost oppressive after being outside. Wendy is still talking to Tambry but they’re standing by the front door, so it looks like it’s about time to go. Mabel is nowhere to be seen.

Tambry turns away from Wendy and walks towards the kitchen; she stops near Dipper and Pacifica and makes unusual eye contact with them. “Hey, thanks for coming,” she says with a surprising lack of sarcasm. “It was cool.”

“Uh, yeah, totally,” Dipper stammers, unprepared to have even a brief moment of genuine communication with Tambry.

Pacifica is considerably more articulate. “We had a wonderful time. Thank you for inviting us, Tambry,” she says with a touch of formality.


But it turns out that isn’t the biggest surprise. Robbie, following Tambry to the kitchen, turns as he walks past and jerks his chin upward towards Dipper in acknowledgement. “See you around,” he says.
Dipper, caught off-guard, manages an awkward sort of half-wave as Robbie disappears into the next room.

Pacifica looks entirely too pleased. “Networking? Not bad for a first try. Next time, talk to me first.”

Dipper just sighs. “You know I’m not…”

“Not with *that* attitude.”

They meet Wendy at the door and step back out into the cool air of the night. Mabel is leaning against Wendy’s car, looking sleepy and obviously ready to go home. The ride back is only a few minutes long and Wendy stays in the driver seat as they clamber out, the darkened Shack welcoming them home. Dipper can see the shifting light of the television downstairs and knows that Grunkle Stan is still up.

Just as Dipper is about leave, Wendy reaches out and tugs at the sleeve of his costume. He turns back to look at her.

“You have fun?” she asks.

“Yeah, man,” he says, smiling. “Thanks for taking us along.”

“No prob. Tambry actually asked if you could come anyway.”

“She’s the one going out of town?”

“Yeah, and we always party at her place. Better early than never, am I right?”

“Definitely.”

Behind him, Dipper can hear the door to the Shack open but doesn’t hear it close; he knows Pacifica is probably waiting.

Wendy’s expression has turned serious. “You know Mabel was avoiding you, yeah?”

Dipper grimaces and nods. “Yeah… I know.”

“I tried to talk to her about it, but she wasn’t having it.” Wendy shrugs. “Just making sure you know what’s up.”

“I’m pretty sure I do. I think.”

Wendy tilts her head, assessing him. “Want my advice?”

“Always.”

“Don’t let it go. Corner her if you gotta. ‘Cause you guys are as tight A-F, and if she doesn’t wanna talk to you then something’s wrong, man.”

This is more or less Dipper’s assessment, too. “I know. I think it’s because… I think it’s when I fell. And maybe some other stuff from last summer.”

“You’ll work it out,” Wendy says confidently. “You guys always do.”

“Yeah. Yeah, we always do,” he replies with a hint of genuine optimism. Because Wendy’s right, after all. As usual.
“Alright — later, gator,” Wendy says with a lazy two-fingers salute.

Dipper slides off the seat and shuts the door, watching as Wendy turns a tight circle in the parking lot, rumbling down the gravel until her taillights disappear behind the pines lining Gopher Road.

“What was that about?” Pacifica asks when he approaches.

“Mabel,” he tells her.

“Yeah, she’s being weird.”

“Tell me about it,” he sighs.

It isn’t until he ascends the steps to the attic room and struggles out of his costume that he realizes how tired he is. He climbs into bed, resolving to shower and brush his teeth in the morning.

Across the room, Mabel is already asleep. He considers waking her up to talk, but the thought vanishes as soon as his head hits his pillow.

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Dividing Blue from Blue by Woke Up Falling (M-Theory, 2001)
“Ahhh… you smell that, kids?” Grunkle Stan says, leaning on his cane.

Dipper tentatively sniffs the air of the early afternoon. “…Corndogs and B.O.?”

Mabel gets a snout-full of her own and adds, “Corndogs with B.O.”

“That’s the smell of a first-rate carnival!” Grunkle Stan says proudly.

The Mystery Fair is nearly assembled. It’s almost twice as big as it was last year, the Ferris wheel turning lazily beneath a partially overcast sky. The Sky Tram wends its way overhead, twisting through the trees and looking slightly sturdier than before. Tents and booths are springing up all over, festooned with question marks and brightly-colored balloons, flashing bulbs and loudspeakers; all the blinking hustle is enticing against the deep, almost brilliant green of a forest gleaming with this morning’s rain. The recent downpours have accumulated and granted the vegetation of Gravity Falls an almost unreal natural splendor, so rich in shade it gleams like film in technicolor.

Despite Grunkle Stan’s words, it’s still very much a second-rate carnival. Regardless, he clearly is of the opinion that the Shack’s new popularity will translate into high attendance for the fair. Dipper thinks he’s probably right. The Shack really has become landmark in a way it wasn’t before Weirdmageddon. No promotion of Stan’s has failed thus far; he’s been making money hand over fist. The town will get tired of the Shack eventually, but it looks like it won’t be any time soon.

For his part, Dipper is looking forward to the fair, albeit for different reasons this time around. He won’t be getting tangled up over Wendy or using time travel to manipulate her (not his finest hour). He has a steady girlfriend to take to The Tunnel of Love and Corndogs. Of course, getting Pacifica onto something called ‘The Tunnel of Love and Corndogs’ will be a challenge. Maybe they should stick to the ring toss.

Then he sees Grunkle Stan over at the ring toss, testing out rings to make sure they won’t fit. So not that, either.

The crowds haven’t arrived yet. The fair doesn’t start for another couple hours and Dipper expects most people won’t show up until the evening when it cools off. The humidity after the storm is stifling; Gravity Falls feels like a greenhouse. The expected forecast is that by the time the sun dips behind the cliffs, yet another front of cool air will come sweeping through the valley. More rain is expected tomorrow. Dipper loves rainy days as much as the next introvert, but they’re starting to interfere with his desire to explore. Maybe he should invest in a waterproof backpack…

“Bring back any memories, Waddles?” Mabel says, holding the pig up. “This is where our lives became complete.”

Dipper glances over to where the pig pen was last year, but there’s a new goldfish-based tent instead. Looks like Waddles will remain Mabel’s only soulmate.

He’s still intent on catching his sister and making her have a real conversation with him; he’s just biding his time. If she’s expecting him to try and corner her, she’ll never stop moving. The moment will arrive, he’s sure of it. He can afford to be patient.
Mabel runs over to where Grunkle Stan is clearly sabotaging the spring on one of the games. “Grunkle Stan, that’s cheating!”

“Hey! Watch your mouth, Mabel: nobody says ‘cheat’, alright, you’re breaking the carny code.” He spreads his hands winningly. “Besides, I’m just making these games more difficult. People love a challenge!”

“Your lying is making Waddles sad,” Mabel says, using her fingers to turn the pig’s lips downward.

“I can live with that,” Stan says with a fatalistic shrug.

Dipper walks away from the argument, aware that neither side is ever going to budge. He doubts that many of the people soon to be attending will hold much hope for prizes, not if they’ve ever been to a fair before (and definitely not if they attended this one last year). They’ll want to eat terrible fried food slathered in nacho cheese and then put their stomachs (and possibly their lives) on the line while enjoying rides of dubious safety. That’s more or less his plan for the evening. That and whatever Pacifica wants to do.

He looks around, but she’s nowhere to be seen. He turns and heads back into the Shack, opening the old wooden door and taking a second to savor the cooler air in the entryway. Pacifica is just ahead in the living room, sitting cross-legged in front of the television while eating a late breakfast of granola and honey. Dipper detours into the kitchen to grab a cold can of Pitt and then joins her.

“Aren’t you coming out?” he asks, flopping into Grunkle Stan’s easy chair. He’s not sure what she’s watching; the channel looks like Gravity Falls Public Access. There’s an abysmally cheap commercial playing for Upside-Down Town.

“In that humidity?” she says incredulously. “Don’t be ridiculous. My hair will frizz.”

“Pacifica, if you go to the fair with frizzy hair, anyone else who’s fashionable will have frizzy hair by tomorrow,” Dipper predicts.

“You wouldn’t,” she retorts.

Dipper — slouched in the chair to the point his clothes have bunched up, the can of Pitt resting on his partially revealed stomach — says, “I have my own distinct style.”

Soos comes lumbering into the room with his toolbelt jangling at his waist. He’s sweating profusely in the intense humidity and it immediately makes Dipper think of their pterodactyl hunt beneath the sweltering sun. It’s not nearly that hot today in actual temperature, but the sheer moisture makes it nearly as unbearable. The next cold front can’t get here soon enough.

“Either of you dudes seen Melody?” Soos asks, taking off his cap to wipe at his forehead.

“She said something about a package?” Pacifica answers vaguely.

“She must’ve run back to the house. I’d probably know that if I hadn’t lost my phone, heh heh!”

That makes this the third time Soos has lost his phone in as many days, which strikes Dipper as strange. Soos is often clumsy and sometimes pretty unfocused, but he’s not really known for misplacing things; at least, not more than anyone else. Dipper’s mystery instincts are tingling. Something more might be going on, though he hasn’t speculated as to exactly what…

“Oh, great,” Pacifica says.
Dipper snaps out of his thoughts. “Huh?”

“You’ve got that face going on. You know the one.”

“…No?” he says, half-confused, half-defensive.

“It’s your mystery face. Like on the cover of those dumb Sibling Brothers books,” she drawls.

“What? I don’t do that, come on…” he scoffs, even though he fears she’s probably right.

She dramatically narrows her eyes and stares intently at nothing, scrunching up her mouth contemplatively and rapidly clicking an invisible pen in her fist. “I don’t know what’s going on, so let me point my brain at it really, really hard…”

“That’s… not totally accurate,” Dipper says, the end of the sentence subsiding into a mumble as he gives up.


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That evening, with the sun finally sunk behind the cliffs, the valley cools off rapidly. The Mystery Fair fills up with everyone who hadn’t been willing to brave the heat, people shedding their hats and sunglasses and shivering in delight. The breeze wicks away the warmth of the day, tugging at t-shirts and skirts, turning the sweat which slicks necks and arms suddenly, deliciously cold. It sends bunches of balloons thumping hollowly against each other and rumbles across tent canvas, makes ribbons snap and pinwheels whir. It is the harbinger of the clouds that hang in the distance, blotting out the first faint stars of evening as they gather to swoop over Gravity Falls tomorrow, bringing yet another summer storm.

The cheapness of the whole enterprise aside, there is fun to be had at the fair. Dipper walks down the matted grass of the aisles with a low-level sugar buzz humming in his veins; cotton candy, funnel cake, Pacifica’s hand in his. The lights are bright, the speakers are loud and it’s an assault on all senses in the best way. They wander through the swirl of fairgoers, sometimes stopping to watch someone try their luck, sometimes trying it themselves. They get sick on the Tilt-A-Whirl, elated on the big slide, mildly romantic in the Tunnel of Love and Corndogs (but it’s so lame that it’s mostly just funny). Pacifica hurls a ball at some bottles and Dipper instinctively protects his face; but, somehow, she nails it and gets her very own stuffed duck-and-or-panda thing, this one in brilliant lime green.

“I don’t know what this is, but I like it,” she declares, tucking it underneath her arm.

Dipper knows better than to take his own shot at the game.

As the sky turns black overhead, they rest their worn-out feet at a picnic table, splitting a plate of chili cheese fries with Wendy. Dipper is glad to see Pacifica getting along with — or at least easily tolerating — the older girl, though it happened so suddenly he feels like he must have missed
Soos passes by and snags a fry or two. He’s been promoted this year to Fair Inspector. It’s a title Stan no doubt invented on the spot, but it’s not an empty one. Soos is practically running the fair, moving from stall to stall, making sure everything is working well enough to avoid lawsuits, sorting out inventory issues and stopping grease fires. Freed from such concerns, Grunkle Stan has been making the usual spectacle of himself; goading people into trying rigged games, drawing attention to neglected corners of the fair, constantly greasing the wheels of commerce with his huckster flair. It’s impressive how smoothly the fair is operating. Soos obviously learned a lot in his time as the Shack’s only manager. Turn out for the fair has been good enough it seems like a shame it’s only for one day (though the incoming storm would pose a problem). Stan doubled the size of the fair this year; maybe next year he’ll set it up for a whole weekend.

Wendy is reaching for another fry when her phone buzzes on the picnic table. She picks it up and rolls her eyes. “Hey, I gotta jet. Robbie puked on the Scrambler and Tambry needs to borrow a shirt.”

Pacifica immediately loses interest in the fry she’s holding. “That’s disgusting.”

“Right? I’ll take some pics. Catch you guys later!” Wendy hops up and vanishes into the crowd.

Pacifica points a turquoise-blue nail in Dipper’s direction. “If you ever throw up on me, this is over.”

“What if you throw up on me?” he counters.

“Northwests don’t throw up,” she says primly. She pushes the chili fries away, having clearly lost her appetite entirely. “Anyway, I don’t get what Tambry sees in Robbie.”

Dipper had spent a considerable portion of his previous summer contemplating what girls could possibly see in Robbie. “He’s tall and has tight pants and plays guitar,” he says dismissively.

Pacifica tilts her head contemplatively. “Huh. I guess he is a musician…”

Dipper has never regretted quitting band until this exact moment. “Yeah, but, he’s still kind of a jerk,” he stammers.

“A tall jerk.” Pacifica straightens up decisively. “Okay, you convinced me. I’ll date Robbie.”

“You— I—” Dipper’s mouth flaps open and shut several times before his brain catches up. “…Why do I let you do this to me?”

“Because you like me so much,” Pacifica says smugly.

Well, there is that.

They rest a little while longer and then head for the Shack. Pacifica is tired of carrying her stuffed prize around and she doesn’t have to, seeing as the fair is literally in their own backyard. It’s kind of unreal to see the Shack, quiet and dark, sitting just across a short stretch of grass outside the light and motion. The Mystery Fair seems like its own world.

They are just about to exit the pool of the lights and enter the shadow of the unused lawn when Dipper spots Grenda and Candy at one of the ticket booths. Grenda has Waddles cradled in her arms, but Mabel isn’t with them. Dipper’s eyes curiously trace the path back towards the heart of the fair and that’s when he sees her: Mabel is hopping onto the Ferris wheel alone, saving the seat for her friends.
It suddenly occurs to Dipper that this is his chance.

He takes off, sprinting back into the fair with Pacifica’s exasperated call of “Dipper?” following him. He’ll have to explain later. He crosses the path, dodging clumps of fairgoers, and makes it to the side of the wheel.

“They’ll be right here, I promise,” Mabel is saying to the man operating the controls, who looks too bored to be annoyed with her.

Dipper hops up onto the wooden platform and snakes under the safety rail of the seat like he’s doing reverse limbo.

Mabel gapes at him. “Dipper, I’m saving—”

“All set, you can go!” Dipper shouts to the operator.

Mabel realizes, too late, what is happening. “No, you can’t!”

The operator isn’t even listening. Given permission — however dubious — to continue, he slaps his hand on the button and the Ferris wheel grinds into motion. Before Mabel can do anything, she’s suspended fifteen feet in the air while the next couple people climb aboard.

“Geez, Mabel… is riding with me really that bad?” he asks her as they sway above the ground.

“No! I was just—” she abandons her denial and switches to righteous indignation in mid-sentence. “Dipper! I was saving that seat for Candy and Grenda!”

Dipper glances down at the seat. Candy could easily fit with him and Mabel. Grenda would be a stretch. “How?”

Mabel just crosses her arms and looks away. Dipper knows her too well, though: her pouting is too silent to be real.

“Come on, this is cool,” Dipper cajoles. He spreads his arms, indicating the fair below. “What could be better than a Ferris wheel ride with your favorite brother?”

Mabel doesn’t answer, gaze intent on the tree line.

The two of them climb ever higher as the wheel rotates one bench at a time, and soon they are suspended at the very top, above the trees. At the bottom of the wheel, the last bench is being filled.

“You have talk to me eventually, Mabel,” Dipper warns. “We’re stuck together.”

Mabel blows a raspberry, eyes rolling. “It’s only one ride.”

There’s a sudden, fair-wide noise that’s unmistakable — a dozen motors all winding down at once. The lights along the tents and pathways go out in the same instant and the entire fair is suddenly plunged into total darkness. A murmur of consternation rises above the crowd. Dipper twists in his seat to look, but the only lights he can see anywhere are from the occasional car or cellphone. Even the town is invisible down Gopher Road.

It’s a complete power outage.

Mabel wilts in her seat. “Oh, boy.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

above the earth, below the sky — ii
The twins are now hung high in the dark, suspended between the black palette of the sky and the scattered lights far below. Dipper has a strange feeling of vertigo; it’s as if he is at the top mast of a ship sailing on a bobbing sea of lights which are impossibly reflected from some cloudless other sky. The wind roars in his ears and makes him tug his hat down tighter.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. He slides it out and glances at it.

**Pacifica:** Where’d u go

He texts back, **On the ferris wheel with Mabel**

**Pacifica:** Lol ur stuck now

**Dipper:** Now she has to talk to me

**Pacifica:** So should I tell Wendy to not climb up

**Dipper:** Better hold off so we can get some twin time

**Pacifica:** Dorks

Dipper tucks his phone away. The continued murmur of the crowd can be faintly heard, but whatever conversations are happening below aren’t audible at this height. He and Mabel are swaying just above all but the tallest of the trees. He knows the power could come back at any time. He returns his attention to an unnaturally silent Mabel.

“How weird is it that I’m the one trying to get you to talk?” he says.

A reluctant smile flits across her face. “Heh… yeah.”

Her hair flutters in the stiff breeze, snaking around her shoulders, making it hard to see her expression in what little moonlight beams thinly through the thick clouds. They rock back and forth above the darkened earth, suspended in more ways than one.

“Geez, Mabel,” he finally says, “is it really that bad?”

She doesn’t meet his eyes. She leans back in her seat and looks up into the wide black sky. “I was supposed to catch you.”

Dipper is taken aback. “What?”

“You fell. You fell and I…” She wraps her arms around herself. “I thought you were dead.”

“That’s what this is about?” he says. He’s torn between relief and incredulity. “Mabel, I’m fine.”

“I know,” she sighs.

“It wasn’t your fault. I thought that branch would hold me and then there’s the whole being taller thing… not that I’m complaining,” he adds.

Mabel nods half-heartedly.

Dipper puts his arms across the safety bar and takes a deep breath of the night air. He had honestly thought this would be easier, that she would just cave when confronted. “I don’t understand,” he admits. “I mean, I get that you don’t want me to get hurt again, but I don’t get why you won’t talk to
me. You could have just told me that.”

She remains silent for so long that he begins to wonder if she will ever answer. “Remember when I wouldn’t press the button?” she says abruptly.

Dipper is caught off-guard yet again. “Uh, yeah. Of course.”

“You told me to press it.”

“I did. And who knows how long Great-Uncle Ford could have been trapped…? I don’t know if we could have gotten the portal working again.” This thought has haunted him before, and still does from time to time. They are all so lucky that Mabel had possessed the courage to do the right thing.

Mabel huffs out a frustrated breath. “No, Dipper, don’t you get it? I didn’t listen.”

“I know it looked bad, but you saw Stan was telling the truth and I just couldn’t believe it, even after everything. Do you think I should apologize to him? He doesn’t usually like apologies.”

Mabel lets out an irritated groan. She pulls off her headband and drops it on the seat, allowing her hair to blow wild in the wind. It whips across her face in long, rippling streamers. “I didn’t know what to do, Dipper! I did nothing and that turned out to be the right thing, but then later I thought you were staying and I did the wrong thing, and maybe I was doing the wrong thing the whole time, trying to have a dumb summer romance when you were having a real summer adventure, and…”

She stops. Her flailing hair conceals her eyes and all Dipper can see is her mouth, slightly parted and downturned. “I just… I just keep thinking that this time I shouldn’t get all stupid again. Then you fell anyway.”

That is a lot to unpack. “You’re sorry you didn’t listen about the button?” Dipper says, confused.

“No. I don’t know. Sort of. …No.” Mabel sniffs wetly. “I just didn’t want to think that about our grunkle.”

“Maybe it was too easy for me.” Dipper feels the old shame welling up, the weight of his doubt.

“It’s just…” Mabel sighs again and her arms drop limply to her sides. “I know it was all my fault and then you came to get me… I was all messed up because I thought I was losing you and then I almost just lost you for real. I thought I’d be better this summer, you know? With everything. Guess not.”

Dipper refuses to accept that. “Weirdmageddon wasn’t your fault, Mabel. You were just the last person to get tricked.”

“I shouldn’t have been so dumb,” she says.

“Yeah, well… we all shouldn’t have.” Dipper shakes his head. It had been a long line of unbroken errors, and if any single human bears the most responsibility for Weirdmageddon, it’s Great-Uncle Ford. But Dipper doesn’t accept that, either, because it’s quite clear where the blame lies. “Besides, it’s definitely Bill’s fault.”

“Cruddy ol’ triangle,” Mabel says thickly.

The lights have become more scattered. There’s a steady stream of cellphone flashlights walking back to town or the parking lot. Dipper isn’t worried yet, but it is getting chilly. Mabel has a sweater tied around her waist; he’ll have to just bear it.

“I bet you wish you had stayed now,” Mabel says.
“What?”

“With Grunkle Ford. Since you’ve been learning from him and stuff,” Mabel explains. “I bet you wish you stayed.”

“I was only excited because I didn’t think it through,” Dipper admits. “Mom and Dad wouldn’t have gone for it, there’s no way. They only just found out about Ford, they didn’t know him at all then. And it’s not like I wouldn’t have missed them, or you.”

Mabel doesn’t say anything, though she seems to absorb that.

Dipper tentatively pokes her shoulder, trying to get her to lighten up. He’s so unused to seeing her like this. “Look, I’m sorry I scared you when I fell. I’ll try to be more careful, okay? But everything is fine — we are fine. And don’t worry about last summer. I mean, isn’t that what we’ve been telling Pacifica?”

It’s this, more than anything else he’s said, that seems to get through to Mabel. She straightens in her seat and pushes her hair out of her face, wiping at her eyes. “Silly,” she mutters at herself.

It isn’t, though. Dipper had been the one coming apart in the aftermath of last summer, and Mabel had pushed all this down and picked him up. He doesn’t need her guilt (and he’s had this thought before, he remembers). It makes him wonder how he would have handled it, if it had been Mabel who had fallen. Would he have blamed himself?

Probably.

…Definitely.

And then Mabel would have made him see otherwise.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he says firmly, and he doesn’t particularly care which ‘it’ she assigns the truth to.

The smile she gives him is a little watery, but he’s just glad to see it. “Okay, Dipper.”

“I can’t promise nothing will ever go wrong again, but that’s okay, right? We’re okay. We’ll deal with it, together. Just like always.” He holds out a clenched fist. “Mystery Twins?”

She presses her hand to his. “Mystery Twins.”

He’s barely started to retract his arm when she leans over and catches him in a fierce hug. He returns it as they hover above the dark earth, beneath the black sky, perched in their own moment. The pine trees murmur in the wind, the only witnesses to the reaffirmation of something intrinsic and precious.

When Mabel finally pulls away, she brushes her hair back and puts her headband on, wiping her face on the sweater sleeves dangling from her waist. She is already starting to look like her usual self again.

“I guess the power really pooped out,” she says.

Dipper is actually getting a little concerned by this point. “I kind of thought they would have turned this thing manually by now.” He leans out over the edge, but he can’t see much with all the struts in the way. He can just make out the heads of the people on the next seat down towards the front and that’s about it. The clouds have thickened and even the sparse light of the moon has all but vanished.
Mabel shrugs philosophically. “At least we’ve each got someone to talk to!”

“It could be worse,” Dipper acknowledges with a small smile.

And then, as if the clouds above are listening to him, it begins to rain.

Fat, wet drops plunk onto the Ferris wheel and rattle through the trees, picking up in pace and number until they streak to the earth in a growing swell of noise. It’s not a hard downpour but the droplets are large and heavy, a real soaking summer night’s rain, the kind that thumps off a roof and stings a little when it hits you. The water ricochets off the metal safety bar and the wooden seat, smacking against Dipper’s exposed arms and legs and thudding on the brim of his hat.

Dipper starts to laugh. There’s really nothing else to do. Mabel joins him, raising her face up with her tongue out, giggling as they get gradually saturated.

“Ha ha ha! Geez, what a night!” Mabel exclaims. She closes her eyes and lets the rain wash over her.

Dipper slumps a little in his seat, wet and cold and emotionally tired. “I guess this is our life now.”

“Yep. We’re Ferris wheel people. Forever!” Mabel points to the other indistinct seats on the lower tiers. “We’ll have to climb around and figure out who’s our mayor, who has snacks, who we should eat first if nobody has snacks—”

They are both suddenly blinded by a flare of light. Dipper blinks as his eyes readjust and he realizes that the Ferris wheel has regained power, its bulbs and giant glowing question mark reignited. Leaning over the side of his seat, he can see dim figures below near the controls for the wheel. Craning his neck around, he looks back towards the Shack and sees it lit, windows glittering through the rain.

“Great-Uncle Ford must have tapped the generator!” he says to Mabel. “Two weeks ahead of schedule, too. Nice!”

The Ferris wheel jolts into creaky motion. It takes a few more minutes for it to complete its rotation as its shivering prisoners disembark. Dipper and Mabel’s seat at last slides down to the platform and they gratefully stand on solid ground; Soos, shrouded in a vast yellow raincoat, steps forward to give them a helping hand. Ford is nearby at the control panel, shielded with a large umbrella. A fat black cable twists away through the grass towards the Shack.

“Safe and sound, dudes!” Soos says, giving them both a pat on the shoulder.

“Sorry for the delay,” Ford says as they stagger back to earth. “We tried working this thing manually but there were some issues. The rides Stanley rented are not exactly up to code.”

“Sweet, sweet dirt!” Mabel says, bending to kiss it. She just as quickly straightens back up. “Whoops, that’s gum.”

“Thanks for the save, Grunkle Ford,” Dipper says through his chattering teeth. “You too, Soos.”

“Everyone else had to make a run for it when it started raining, but I came prepared. Never put your faith in the forecast entirely.” Ford pushes the button to continue rotating the wheel, bringing the next set of people down to freedom.

Soos gestures towards the Shack. “You dudes should get inside and warm up.”

“Hot chocolate?” Mabel asks, perking up.
“Try hot towels, hambone,” Soos says with a knowing nod. “I threw a couple on the radiator.”

“Soos you’ll always be my heroooooo—” Mabel calls back to him as she darts away.

The twins run towards the beckoning light of the Shack, clothes sticking to their sodden skin. The sweater tied around Mabel’s waist slaps wetly against the backs of her legs as she runs. Ducking through the curtain of water running off the roof of the awning, they push through the old wooden door and tramp into the living room, wet footprints in their wake. They find everyone else basking in the shifting radiance of the television. Grunkle Stan is slouched in his chair while Pacifica and Wendy sit at the small table. Pacifica has her hair wrapped in a towel, looking a bit like she just wandered away from a day spa.

“Hey, you made it,” Wendy says with a grin. “How’s the weather up there?”

“Can’t talk. Toweling.” Mabel snatches one of the towels off the radiator and burrows into it with a shiver.

Pacifica just holds up her phone and fixes Dipper with a look. “Seriously?”

He winces at her expression as he wraps his own hot towel around his clammy body (the heat is delicious). He can only guess how many missed messages he has. “Sorry, Pacifica. We were… kinda preoccupied.”

“Stranded! Abandoned, by our own grunkle!” Mabel says dramatically.

“You look fine to me,” Stan grunts. “As a reminder, you’re both family so you can’t sue.”

“Do we know why the power went out?” Dipper asks as he starts to feel warm again.

“Nope. It’s the whole town so one of the big lines must be down,” Wendy says.

Gravity Falls, like most of Roadkill County (maybe all, Dipper isn’t sure), gets its power from the hydroelectric dam up north. The dam itself is probably far enough away to be safe from paranormal interference, so if any of the valley’s creatures or anomalies knocked a line down it would likely be closer to town. Or that’s just Dipper jumping to conclusions. There’s been a lot of rain recently and maybe it’s a downed tree. Though in his experience, that’s rarely the case around here.

Well, he’s not going to find anything else out tonight.

About half an hour later he walks out of the steamy shower feeling drowsy. It’s been a long day and he’s ready to crawl between his sheets. When he steps carefully through his darkened room and drops into bed, it looks like Mabel is already asleep. He rubs at his eyes and relaxes into his pillow.

“Dipper?” Mabel says quietly across the room.

“Yeah?” he says.

“…Thanks for saying all that.”

“Of course, Mabel,” he says with a long exhale, sinking into his mattress. “It’s the truth.”

“More mysteries tomorrow?”

He smiles sleepily towards the ceiling. “Definitely.”

It doesn’t take him long to fall asleep.
Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note

I’ve been getting some more frequent comments lately concerning these epilogues and how they might as well exist as a separate sequel. I take issue with this, as I don’t feel the epilogues stand on their own. These are very episodic entries, and while they all follow in the same continuity there is no longer a central plot to move things along. They are, as it says on the tin, new summer scenes. I hesitate to call them ‘aimless’ as they usually have some sort of point or tie into the themes of the work, but they certainly are aimless in comparison to the fifty-six chapters which comprise the story proper.

I know there is interest in such a sequel and to be honest I have at times considered ending these epilogues and finishing the summer as the prologue incorporated into a full sequel, or eventually continuing after touching on all the major summer milestones and moving into post-summer 2013. This would require a fully-formed idea for a sequel, and while I do have ideas, I don’t think I have anything complete enough to build a story around. Not yet, anyway.

But at the same time, I think that the demand for such a sequel is fading as the Gravity Falls fandom sinks ever deeper into its eternal hiatus. There will always be someone discovering the show for the first time and people reading and rereading fanfiction, but the reviews for this story have been fallen off for the last couple chapters and this may be a sign that the audience just isn’t there anymore. There are fluctuations in these things, of course, but I wouldn’t be surprised if readership steadily erodes from this point forward. It’s been years since the finale.

My writing is not dependent on getting X number of reviews. It never has been and never will be. But as interest fades, I may find it best to bring this all gracefully to a close.

I will admit, at the moment such an act seems inconceivable. My love for Gravity Falls is undimmed and I want to keep spending time with these characters. And I have been in that headspace far longer than I ever thought possible, and it is what drove me to begin writing epilogues, and it is what keeps me writing them even if not as many people are reading them. I can’t seem to shake this town, and I don’t really want to.

Still, I have to recognize that, someday, I may no longer feel this way. And even though I do write for myself, I don’t only write for myself. I write for all of you, as well, and I can admit that the day in which no one reviews a new chapter will be the day I find it so much harder to continue.
But this is not that day. So, for those of you that read, thank you for reading. And those of you that review, thank you for reviewing. I hope we can spend a little more time in the Falls together, whatever form that takes.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

stories to weather and storms to tell

Pacifica is dreaming.

At first, she’s unusually aware of this fact. She’s draped in the cobwebs between sleep and waking, in the fuzzy, peculiar place where reality has only partially receded. She can hear the rain against the Shack and feel the pillow against the side of her face, but she slips into dream, nonetheless.

She’s at the party—not the recent one, or first one. The big one, the best one, if marred by the presence of a ghost. And it’s just before… no, it’s just after. It comes into being around her, part memory, part imagination:

It’s the tail end of the party and Pacifica is riding the crest of the wave, too high up to feel anything but the afterglow of victory but not so blind she doesn’t see the rocks below. Mother and Father are watching her from the sidelines, their expressions speaking volumes. If she can keep her head up and keep moving, maybe she won’t fall. She’s a cartoon character running past the edge of the cliff, refusing to look down.

She’d rather look at Dipper, awkwardly bobbing his head to the music in his borrowed suit. Perhaps it’s the near-death experience talking, but maybe he’s not so bad after all.

This didn’t happen. The dream shifts slightly, becomes less concrete. The feeling of being in her room fades.

He lights up when she approaches. “Hey!” he says. “This is great, huh?”

Pacifica hears something big and expensive crashing to the floor in the side parlor and smiles contentedly. “Of course. I told you, it’s the world’s greatest party.” She puts a hand on her hip, acknowledging him with a flippant gesture. “Besides, we won. What’s not to celebrate?”

Dipper raises his fists in nerdy exultation. “I know! I told you the journal would come through. Never doubt the journal.”

She rolls her eyes but must concede the point. “Fine. Maybe your book isn’t so dumb after all.”

The song changes. Pacifica recognizes the tempo and, still floating on the bright madness that is a death averted, holds out a hand. “Quit standing around by the stairs like a weirdo. Let’s dance!”

“Uh…” He shuffles his feet with indecision. “I don’t know how?”

She huffs in amusement. “Just follow my lead, dummy.”

She grabs his hand and whisks him into the crowd. The lights whirl as she spins and for this single, drawn out moment she is in motion, she is happy, and she is safe.

No, this didn’t happen. Not then. She knows this, in some dim way, and brushes it aside. She’s too content.
Somehow, it’s still the party, but before the dance. Or is it after? Time is strange and she moves from place to place without travelling.

She’s watching Dipper by the stairs. He looks self-conscious; he lets his arms fall to his sides, then crosses them, then ends up trapped in an awkward compromise with his hands loosely clasped at his waist like he’s one of the waitstaff.

The party ebbs and flows around them, the smell of cider and hors d'oeuvres, the sound of classical strings humming beneath loud conversation. Mabel brushes by with Candy and Grenda, the three of them in a giggling miniature herd. Manly Dan is drinking an entire keg of cider in one go. Father is still running around frantically trying to exert some modicum of control on the proceedings, which is just as entertaining as anything else that’s happening. Mother is slumped on a couch, about halfway through what looks like her second bottle of champagne.

Pacifica is… by the stairs? Near the banquet? No, she’s at the top of the staircase. She approaches Dipper, the sound of her expensive heels on the waxed wooden steps behind him drawing his attention. She meets his eyes—and maybe it’s just the shared high of a near-death experience but there’s something electric in their gaze.

This is familiar. Happy with the dream, she is almost convinced that this is how it was (it wasn’t. Not then).

Dipper points to where Manly Dan just finished off the barrel of cider; the lumberjack lets out a belch that rattles the chandeliers. “Now it’s the world’s greatest party,” Dipper says with a smile.

Pacifica wrinkles her nose. “Oh, gross.” But her eyes dart over to where her parents are looking on the proceedings with identical expressions of utter horror, which makes her smile. “Well, as long as they hate it.” Descending the rest of the steps, she gestures to Dipper with an elegantly gloved hand. “Come with me.”

Dipper follows her down a hallway to the kitchen. She ducks into the pantry and emerges with two glasses, each filled with sparkling grape juice.

“A little something to celebrate,” she says, handing him a glass.

He looks dubiously at the reddish liquid. “Uh… should we be drinking this?”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s sparkling grape juice, dummy. This isn’t a trailer park.”

Dipper is just about to raise his glass when there’s a commotion at the other side of the kitchen. Voices filter in from the hallway, outraged and familiar. Pacifica knows them immediately.

She hisses and grabs his arm, pulling him away. “My parents!”

They dodge the elder Northwests and end up by circuitous route back in the entry hall. They stand near the wall as the party swells around them, a raucous event that’s never far from being completely out of control. It’s strange, and sometimes gross, and way too loud, but at the same time it’s like a congratulations, in a weird way. She made this possible.

“Any regrets?” he asks curiously.

She fixes him with a side glance, her mouth tilted in a smug pink smile. “Maybe tomorrow,” she says.

He smiles back and her heart does something odd in her chest, something new she can’t describe.
But it isn’t new. Or it is, in this not-memory… She is fully surrendered to the dream, now, she’s in the deepest pocket of sleep.

“Well, here’s to you, Pacifica,” he says, tilting his drink in her direction.

The rim of her glass meets his with a clink. Pacifica watches the chaos unfolding as she takes a long, pensive sip. “This isn’t so bad,” she says, deciding that it’s true.

And neither is he. Not bad at all. Kind of cute in that tuxedo, actually… if she went for boys like that. Which she doesn’t.

Except she is.

Something’s different. Maybe wrong. The dream is twisting again. It is wilder, stranger. She rolls over in her sleep, the first hints of unease penetrating her serenity.

It’s later. Or the same time, or— it doesn’t matter. It is night and day. She pulls Dipper away from the party and into her room. He sits at the edge of her four-poster bed and his eyes go huge when she drapes her arms over his shoulders, when she leans in closer. They kiss and he tastes like grape juice and something else so familiar—except, no, it can’t be. This is the first time. This is new.

They are in the garden, but it’s sunny. Dipper has something to give to Ford. Pacifica picks it up: it’s a journal with a blue cover. She turns to give it to him, but he’s gone.

She walks the empty streets of the town while lightning dances along the tops of the cliffs. She’s late. She’s forgotten something. She sees Dipper’s hat through the window of the diner and runs towards it; when she opens the door there’s no one inside. It’s dark and the air is stale. No one’s been in here for years.

She turns around and the edge of the woods is close, having swallowed up the road. There’s a deep pit in the dirt and she can hear Mabel calling somewhere below. She gets on her hands and knees and crawls for what must be hours, maybe even days.

She emerges in her old room in Malibu. It is dark, just like the diner, and rain runs down the big windows. Mabel is saying something; it sounds like she is in the kitchen. Pacifica follows the sound, but when she gets to the kitchen, Mabel is gone. The door to the basement is ajar.

Pacifica descends the steps. The basement is lit only by a few standing lamps clustered around the hole in floor by the far wall, and the concrete is covered in water. She walks across the flooded room; when she looks down, she sees huge, pale fish skim beneath her toes, and she realizes the water is as deep as an ocean. At the rim of the pit, the water pours endlessly over the ledge beneath her feet. The sea has entered the house and the hole is a hundred feet deep, sinking down far below to where the waves crash against its cylindrical sides.

Pacifica contemplates this impossible well, trying to make out the figures in its center. She hears something clacking behind her, a sharp and threatening sound. But when she turns around, she sees nothing but a curtain of water; she is at the bottom of the pit.

In front of her, the Boss-Lobster lies dead with its pincers and legs curled over its abdomen, its one black marble eyeball staring blankly upwards. Mabel is crouched by its side, weeping over the corpse; her tears run down her chin and into the swells. She cries as if her heart is irreparably broken.

Pacifica, confused, reaches out to put her hand on the other girl’s shoulder, but Mabel leans forward and wraps her arms around the body as she sobs. When Pacifica looks down again, it’s not the Boss-Lobster whom Mabel holds—it is Dipper.
Overcome with horror, Pacifica grabs one of his hands. His skin is wet and cold, and there is no life in it. She looks at his face, slack and grey. There’s a colorful line around his neck; when she looks closer, she sees that it is pink thread, stitched into his skin.

Mabel looks up, tears still flowing freely from her tortured eyes. “I put it back on,” she says.

No no no no NO—something explodes in her, loud and real and the world falls away from her in a jumble of splinters—

Pacifica wakes up.

A mighty crash of thunder sends her spinning from sleep, thrust into the waking world with her heart pounding and her mouth dry. Her breathing gradually slows as her mind reconnects with reality. She’s in her room in the Mystery Shack. The events of the day come pouring back over her when she sees the stuffed panda-duck thing at the foot of her bed.

The same rain she had been briefly caught in has turned violent in the hours since nightfall. Through the window at the top of the wall she can see lightning flickering on the horizon with enough frequency for the light to be almost constant; the rain lashing against the glass sends weird, blury shapes sliding down the interior of her room, a shifting, watery shadow world. The rain rattles against the Shack, muted through the wood or plunking loudly against the windowpane, rising and falling with the sharp gusts of wind that intermittently turn the clatter into a burst and roar. The thunder rolls in the distance, echoing through the valley in a low seismic growl which is frequently punctuated by the sudden stuttering crackle of a closer strike. The whole house shudders and creaks under the storm’s assault.

Pacifica takes a few deep breaths, waiting for the aftershocks of her nightmare to fade. And, really, having a vivid bad dream on a night like this? Such a cliché. She wants to roll her eyes at herself, to scoff and pull her sheets back up and ignore the storm.

But every time she thinks she’s calming, another bolt from the black sends a jagged spike of anxiety through her chest. The knot in her breast has yet to loosen. In the dark corners of the room she can still see faded imprints of Dipper, dead in Mabel’s arms. Pacifica squeezes her eyes shut, trying to wipe them away.

Lightning strikes so close that its deafening report is like a bomb blast, the window rattling as the sound slaps against her body, compressing her lungs.

Her composure shattered, she scrambles out of bed and pads away from the sluicing shadows, stumbling blindly into the hallway. It’s only once she’s there, frozen still in the dark with the rain thumping hollowly through the hall, that she considers what she’s trying to accomplish. It’s just a nightmare. It’s just a storm. She should go to the bathroom and go back to bed.

Her feet carry her another direction entirely. The tatters of the nightmare still cling to her, and she hurries through the darkened rooms with the snarl of thunder at her heels. The wooden steps fly beneath her bare feet and she soon finds herself standing in the doorway to the attic room, the creaking of the door unheard beneath the fury of the storm.

The twins are in their beds, somehow still asleep. Lightning strobos through the triangle window, casting a bright shape on the floor that is unsettlingly familiar. Dipper is where he should be; but Pacifica can’t see him clearly. She can’t touch his skin to check for warmth, she can’t see his chest rise and fall. She needs him to sit up, look at her, say something. She needs to see his unmarred neck.

Still, she hesitates. She’s not supposed to do this. She’s not supposed to be here. Stan and Ford are
exceptionally permissive compared to the twins’ parents, but even with them it is tacitly understood that Dipper and Pacifica shouldn’t be together after bedtime. Bending the rules is one thing—they do that all the time. This is outright breaking them.

With the nightmare’s inky tendrils still draped around her brain, she finds she doesn’t care.

She walks across the room as a fork of lightning bisects the seething horizon and rocks with house with its cannonade. She is a heroine in a horror movie, approaching a still form on a dark and stormy night. This is stupid, utterly ridiculous. She might still be dreaming. She’s going to wake up again and feel like an idiot.

Another lightning strike, this one close enough to make the glass in the window flex and ring. The hair on her arms stands up.

She thinks, *This is real.*

She reaches Dipper’s bed. He’s turned towards the wall and his face is hidden in shadow. This should be enough—she can see him, he’s here; he’s fine. But it’s not.

She does it quickly, like she’s afraid something will happen if she hesitates; she reaches out and puts her palm on his arm.

He immediately rolls over and blinks at her. “Pacifica?”

Her heart nearly stops. “Oh my gosh!” she hisses, smacking him on the shoulder. “You scared the crud out of me!”

“Hey!” Dipper holds up his hands defensively as he sits up. “I scared you? What are you doing sneaking up on me? What time is it?”

Pacifica exhales harshly, one hand pressed to her startled heart. “I don’t know,” she admits. “I… never mind.” She turns around and falls into the space between his legs, lying sideways against his chest and wrapping her arms around his middle. “Just shut up for a second.”

It’s pretty obvious something is wrong, and even Dipper can tell. “Okay… But, did something happen, or—”

“No.” Pacifica doesn’t want to put it words and reveal just how dumb it all is.

Dipper’s tone of voice is aptly skeptical. “Right, you just wanted your usual post-midnight hug.” As soon as he finishes his sentence, a tremendous crack of thunder splits the air and reverberates through the valley. “…Well,” he says more soberly, “I guess you weren’t sleeping anyway.”

“I shouldn’t be here,” she says, making no attempt to leave.

“Definitely not,” he says, making no motion to remove her.

It’s enough to just sit there and feel him breathe. Pacifica starts coming down from the plateaus of terror. She presses her cheek to the heat of his shoulder and listens to the storm which now seems more distant from inside the safety of his embrace.

“So0000, you guys aren’t kissing,” Mabel suddenly says, startling Pacifica yet again. “I don’t have to keep pretending to be asleep, right?”

Dipper hugs Pacifica tighter to himself and scoots backwards until they are propped up against the
wall. “Alright, Mabel,” he says like he’s been expecting this.

Mabel springs from her bed in a flurry of sheets and flops onto Dipper’s. “I don’t like storms either,” she tells Pacifica. “Dipper does, ‘cause he’s weird.”

“They’re cool,” Dipper says defensively.

Pacifica usually likes them—just not tonight. In the circle of Dipper’s arms, with the steady pulse of his heartbeat at her back and Mabel’s friendly presence nearby, the truth isn’t quite as embarrassing.

“I had a nightmare,” Pacifica admits. “It’s dumb, I know. It just seemed so real.”

“About the storm?” Dipper asks.

“About that stupid Boss-Lobster. I can’t believe we saw that gross thing again.”

“I had a nightmare about the Boss-Lobster one time,” Mabel says. “She was helping me knit a shell cozy and then she tried to eat me, like a jerk.”

“You think the Boss-Lobster is a she?” Dipper says curiously.

Mabel shrugs and makes an ‘don’t know’ sound.

Pacifica plucks a loose thread from Dipper’s sleeve, glad she doesn’t have to meet his eyes. “Anyway, it’s not a big deal,” she claims.

Mabel sighs loudly and rolls over, tilting her head back and looking at Pacifica upside down.

“What?” Pacifica snaps.

“Pacifica, if it wasn’t a big deal then you wouldn’t be here,” Dipper points out.

She feels the urge to tug out of his grasp and go back to her own room in a fit of petulance; it quickly passes. She’s still not good at this, but she is going to keep trying. “I was… scared,” she says, words stilted. “I just wanted to see you.” She falls silent, attempting to find the words to explain. “I don’t know why I freaked out. I like storms too, usually, but… it was different this time.”

“I’ve had a few like that,” Dipper says with quiet understanding. “They stick with you, even after you wake up.”

“Nightmares are a sucky bunch of poop,” Mabel opines with equal sympathy.

Pacifica is glad the darkness hides the grateful hint of tears in the corners of her eyes. There’s no real call for that kind of emotion but sometimes it just hits her, in the deepest way, how amazing it is to have this kind of support, and how desolate her life had been without it.

The three of them huddle together as the storm lashes the Shack. Sometimes they talk, but mostly they share a tired, companionable silence in their tripartite refuge. In time, the storm begins to ebb. The thunder dims into a distant percussion drumming somewhere out past the cliffs of the valley; the night is given back to the darkness and the driving patter of the rain.

Mabel returns to her own bed, and Pacifica should do the same. But Dipper has already fallen asleep, slowly tipping over until he is breathing softly against his pillow, Pacifica still tangled up in his coltish limbs (it’s crazy how much he’s grown in the time she’s known him). She’s going to extract herself and make the trip to bed, but he is so warm against her back and she is so worn-out. The rain against the attic roof is as potent as any soporific, and even as she commits to going downstairs, one
blink lingers; then a second, and then she drifts away.

***---~**~---***

*Stories to Weather and Storms to Tell* by Ornaments (Heads Up, 2015)

Chapter End Notes

If the deluge of replies I received after the last chapter is any indication, I should apparently write author’s notes more often.

I’d like to thank everyone who took the time to let me know that they are reading and enjoying this story. As I said previously, I have no intention of stopping work on this story any time soon. And as proof positive of my intentions, here’s another chapter! Why, it’s almost like the old days when I uploaded every week. I can’t actually promise that anymore, seeing as I have to write the chapters as they are posted (I wrote the first part of this story all in one chunk, and divided it into chapters later). I am trying to update more frequently than I did last year, however, depending on how much time I have for my own writing.

There may be some superficial changes coming to the story. Given the sheer length this ‘epilogue’ has stretched into, it has become less of an epilogue and more of a second part. I think I might be changing the presentation of the story to reflect that. Stay tuned.
Dipper is dreaming.

Nothing he will remember. It’s really warm and he’s in Soos’ truck, begging the man to turn the AC up or crack a window. They are driving through hot springs, like a national park or something; Dipper has the impression that the landscape is alien and weird, but he only cares about how hot it is.

“Soos,” he says, and by talking in his sleep, wakes himself up.

He blinks groggily, wondering why he’s still hot. Then he wonders if maybe he’s still dreaming, because Pacifica is sleeping in his bed.

The light filtering in through the window has the muted quality of a cloudy day, which is unsurprising given last night’s storm. Dipper judges it to be late morning. Pacifica is curled up next to him, her legs tangled with his. She’s wearing one of her expensive nightgowns and the only thing softer than its slippery cloth is her skin where it meets his own. She feels amazing, and she smells amazing, and her face is mostly covered by her hair but she still looks amazing, and this is utterly, absolutely forbidden and why the heck is it so stupid hot in here?

Besides her, he means.

The attic tends to be uncomfortable on warmer days, but this is outside the norm. He wonders if he’s slept so late it’s actually noon and absolutely scorching outside. He feels sticky and his pillow is damp with sweat. Something isn’t right.

As reluctant as he is to remove his much-too-beautiful girlfriend from such pleasant proximity, he doesn’t have much of a choice. His bladder demands it, on top of everything else.

He’s just about to gently shake her when the door to the attic opens. Dipper freezes, fearing the worst.

It must be his lucky day, because it’s just Mabel. “I told you!” she says with a huge victorious grin. “O-T-P! O-T-P!”

Dipper sighs. This time Pacifica actually is in his bed for the exact reasons Mabel had once teased him with. Well, sort of. Nothing happened. They just fell asleep… wrapped around each other.

How is this his life?

“Stan and Ford don’t know, right?” he says, dreading the response.

“I covered for you, spy style, but you better get up soon,” Mabel warns. “The air conditioner died and Grunkle Stan is talking about going to the pool.”

That explains the heat. Pacifica is still asleep despite the conversation, so Dipper reaches out and pushes at her shoulder. When she doesn’t respond, he keeps it up until he’s rocking her entire body
back and forth. She really must have been tired last night.

“What?” she eventually says in a tone as sleepy as it is irritated, obviously unhappy to be awoken. She raises up on one elbow and blinks at Dipper, her brow furrowing with pique. “What are you doing in my bed?”

“Nope, guess again,” Mabel laughs.

“Mabel?” Pacifica’s gaze snaps to the other girl. She blinks a few more times before she realizes where she is. “…Oh. Are we in trouble?”

“Not yet,” Dipper says. “Mabel covered for us—”

“Spy style,” Mabel interjects.

“—but you should go before we get caught.”

Pacifica reluctantly slides out of the bed and straightens her nightgown. Dipper, caught off-guard by the sight, openly gawks.

“Dipper!” she hisses, splotches of red appearing on her cheekbones.

“Sorry! Sorry.” He obediently turns away.

“Holy cow, when did it get so PG-13 in here?” Mabel gleefully comments.

“Shut up, Mabel,” Pacifica mutters. Dipper can hear her bare feet padding across the floorboards and figures it’s okay to turn around.

“Grunkle Stan is outside with Soos,” Mabel tells Pacifica. “I don’t know where Grunkle Ford is, though. I’ll create a distraction—spy style!”

“Stop saying that.”

After the girls vacate the attic, Dipper starts to dress. About thirty seconds later there’s a tremendous crash from somewhere downstairs. He appreciates Mabel’s sudden preoccupation with stealth, given it’s in the service of avoiding parental censure. He doubts whether Grunkle Stan would ever narc, but Grunkle Ford might feel duty-bound to call Mom and Dad, or at least come up with some kind of punishment (which might be fun to see, provided it weren’t aimed at Dipper and Pacifica).

Man, he swears it’s gotten ten degrees hotter in the short time since he woke up. When last summer’s heatwave had overwhelmed the Shack’s rusty old AC unit, it had led to Dipper making an idiot of himself over Wendy at the public pool. He can take comfort in knowing that won’t happen again, though he is facing the possibility of making an idiot of himself over Pacifica instead—he has very clear memories of that swimsuit she wore at Lake Gravity Falls.

He goes down the stairs and immediately experiences the slight relief of its cooler clime. Hopefully it isn’t too hot outside. Just looking through the windows, it doesn’t seem like another extreme heatwave. The sky is cloudy, and the ground still looks damp.

He finds Mabel and Grunkle Stan in the kitchen. Mabel is on the floor picking up what looks like a whole cabinet’s worth of cheap plastic bowls while Grunkle Stan eyes her from behind his newspaper.

“How did you dump an entire cabinet, ya knucklehead?” Grunkle Stan asks her.
“Guess I got a case of the dropsies!” Mabel whimsically replies. She pauses briefly to give Dipper a very obvious wink and he turns away before she blows their cover.

At least the refrigerator is still running. Dipper opens the door and pauses a second to let the frigid air wash over him.

“I’m not payin’ for you to refrigerate your drawers!” Grunkle Stan barks.

Dipper rolls his eyes and grabs the milk. He checks the cereal cabinet and picks the box which looks the most edible. “When are you going to buy some real cereal brands?” he asks Stan.

“They put marshmallows in everything! I don’t have *marshmallow* money,” Grunkle Stan retorts.

The doorbell rings and Mabel hastily crams the rest of the bowls into the cabinet and runs off to answer it. Dipper assumes she’s been waiting for Candy and Grenda.

“Is Soos fixing the AC?” Dipper is becoming increasingly curious on this point as he’s starting to sweat.

“I dunno. Ford is out there with him, so it’ll probably be a time machine by tomorrow.” Grunkle Stan does not looked perturbed by this, though Dipper thinks he *should*.

Dipper finishes his cereal and places his bowl in the sink. “Uh, I’m going to go wake Pacifica up,” he says, figuring it won’t hurt to cover their tracks.

“Oh, sure. That must’ve been some other blonde girl who was upstairs,” Grunkle Stan says sarcastically. Dipper freezes in mortification, but then Stan adds, “Unless Mabel put a wig on Waddles.”

A sudden spark of anger wipes away Dipper’s chagrin. “Hey!”

“What?”

“Come on, that’s not cool.”

Grunkle Stan sighs harshly but manages to look at least mildly apologetic. “Yeah, I’m still getting used to this whole ‘that Northwest kid is alright now’ thing we’ve got goin’. I… shouldn’t have said that.”

Dipper appreciates how hard that must’ve been to say. “Well, okay. Just lay off her, alright? She’s been through a lot.”

“Not last night, I hope,” Stan says pointedly.

“Geez…” Dipper fidgets uncomfortably. “Look, she just came up because of the storm and then we both fell asleep. That’s all, I promise.”

“If it was anyone else, I wouldn’t believe it,” Stan said. “And, well… between you and me, kid, I can’t exactly point any fingers. I was up to worse when I was thirteen.”

Dipper can only imagine. “So… it’s okay?”

“What’s okay?”

Dipper smiles gratefully. “Thanks, Grunkle Stan.”
Stan snorts and returns to perusing the paper. “I don’t even know what you’re thanking me for. You should do it more often, though. I saved the world! I should get a plaque or somethin’. Or maybe they only give those to dead people. You know what, never mind. Make it a lump sum.”

“You should write Mayor Tyler,” Dipper says, turning to go.

“I billed City Hall, but they never got back to me. Me!”

When Dipper steps outside he finds the temperature to be in the low 80s, which isn’t too bad by itself, but the humidity is stifling in the aftermath of the storm. His shirt begins to stick to his back in the short time it takes him to walk over to the AC unit. The grass soaks his shoes and socks and he sinks a bit into the sodden ground with each step. The forest is cloaked in misty fog despite the relative brightness of the day. The muted quiet is a bit eerie; all birdsong sounds distant and the fog curls out from behind the trees in strange shapes, every bush and fern made a ghostly apparition.

Great-Uncle Ford has partially disassembled the air conditioner when Dipper walks up. He’s bent over it with most of his upper torso inside. Soos is standing close by, handing him tools. With a loud clank, Ford emerges, wiping at his forehead.

“This thing is practically an antique,” he says, “and I should know. We could fix it, but it’ll just break again. I think I’ll come up with something better.”

“Are we going to capture some sort of interdimensional ice dragon?” Soos says.

“No. Ice dragons are much too lazy. I’ll use the internet to find some schematics and we’ll go from there. Between your knowledge of air conditioner repair and my everything else, we should be able to knock something together."

“Oh, hey Dipper,” Soos says, noticing Dipper’s approach.

“You guys need some help?” Dipper says eagerly, excited by the prospect of helping Ford invent something.

“Aren’t you going to the local pool?” Ford says. “Mabel seemed very enthused about it.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t have to go,” Dipper says.

Ford cheerfully waves him off. “It’s perfectly fine, Dipper. Soos and I will manage. Go enjoy yourself!”

Dipper is reluctant to abandon the possibility of science, but a dip in the water does sound amazing. “Yeah, I guess… I’ll be back later, though.”

As Dipper walks away, Ford and Soos return to their examination. “We’ll need to collect all the fluorocarbon we can get out this old thing,” Ford says. “Be careful, it’s not a safe substance.”

“Got it,” Soos says, his voice coming muffled from the inside of the unit. “But, uh, what would happen if maybe I got some in my mouth just now?”

When Dipper traipses back around to the door, he finds Pacifica seated on the couch beneath the awning. She’s wearing a sundress in her usual shade of eye-matching blue, along with what Dipper supposes is a very fashionable sunhat with a pair of hot pink sunglasses perched on the brim. There’s a towel slung over one of her shoulders and her skin has the telltale greasy sheen of sunscreen.

“Where’s your swimsuit?” Dipper says with what he hopes isn’t noticeable disappointment.
“Public pools are for hobos,” she declares.

“You’re not going to swim?”

“People pee in there. All the time.”

“Not all the time…”

The look she gives him is dire. “No thanks.”

“You’re not even going to work on a tan?” he says, having the vague thought that’s something stylish people do.

“Do you have any idea how terrible that is for your skin?” Pacifica tugs her sunhat more firmly into place. “If you want to look like a leather purse by the time you’re forty, be my guest.”

His hopes of seeing her in a swimsuit again have been thoroughly dashed. His enthusiasm for the pool is commensurately diminished. “Uh… Great-Uncle Ford and Soos are working on the air conditioner and I might—”

Mabel comes bursting out of the door like a starry rocket, a spangled t-shirt draped over her swimsuit and her purple flipflops clapping against the porch. “What’s up pool people?!?” she practically shouts. “Where my floaties at?”

“POOL PEOPLE!” Grenda cheers, coming out right behind her.

“We rule the pool!” Candy says, bringing up the rear.

Dipper is about to tell them he isn’t going, but Mabel catches him by the arm and shoves him towards the door. “Come on, Dip, get ready! Pacifica, you can’t swim in that!”

“I told you, Mabel, I’m not swimming. People pee in that pool. All. The. Time,” Pacifica repeats.

“Yes, that’s half the fun!”

“…You aren’t allowed to use the bathtub before me.”

Grunkle Stan joins everyone outside, carrying a towel and looking disgruntled. “I don’t know how I got roped into this. Who are we waiting on? Dipper?”

Dipper shakes his head. “I think I’m going to help Great-Uncle Ford—”

“Oh no,” Grunkle Stan immediately interrupts. “I ain’t taking your sister, her friends and your girlfriend to the pool while you stay here. I’m taking you with me, kid. Get your stuff.”

Dipper fully understands that ‘I’m taking you with me’ has meaning beyond the literal in this case. And he owes Grunkle Stan one anyway (when will he learn—never owe Stan anything). He sighs and jogs upstairs to retrieve his swimsuit.

There are too many people to fit in the car, or so Dipper thinks. Before long, however, he finds himself stuffed in the backseat with Candy and Mabel. Grenda rides shotgun, and Pacifica sits on Dipper’s lap. Which he’s fine with.

When they arrive at the pool it’s less crowded than the previous summer. Not that it was particularly crowded then, either, since Gravity Falls isn’t exactly a big town. But it’s dreadfully humid and the temperature, while on the warmer side, is nothing compared to last year’s heatwave. Besides,
everyone else’s air conditioners are working just fine.

Mabel and Candy take running leaps into the pool, followed closely by a cannonball from Grenda that soaks everyone in a ten-foot radius. Pacifica spreads her towel over one of the chairs and lies in repose with her sunglasses in place, despite being in the shade. Dipper can’t decide if he wants to join her or Mabel. It’s entirely too humid and the pool offers relief, but Grenda looks like she’s in a dunking mood.

Grunkle Stan rubs his hands together anticipatorily. “That little creep Gideon won’t be around to take my spot this time. And I got the perfect keister for that perfect chair…”

“What ever happened to him, anyway?” Dipper asks.

“Who cares? Probably found some other hick town where he can impress grandmas. He’s someone else’s problem now.” Stan strolls off, intent on claiming his vaunted chair.

Dipper decides not to note how similar ‘impressing grandmas’ sounds to Stan’s own job description. A quick survey of the pool shows that Grenda is indeed in the process of half-drowning Mabel and Candy, so Dipper heads over to keep Pacifica company for a bit.

“What, you aren’t ready to pee in the pool yet?” she snipes at him when he sits on an adjoining lawn chair.

He rolls his eyes. “You are really obsessed with that.”

“I’m not the one making it true.”

The fog is starting to thin. Dipper feels the hint of a breeze wick the heat from his face and it’s a wonderful relief. If there’s anything the valley needs right now, it’s some wind.

“You should take me somewhere with air conditioning,” Pacifica says, apropos of nothing. “The theater would be fine.”

“Like, on a date?” he asks.

“Maybe,” she says coyly.

“The theater seems a little low-rent for you,” he notes.

“This entire town is low-rent for me,” she says haughtily, though there’s just enough of a hint of self-awareness in her tone to take the edge off it.

“So, your majesty doesn’t want to see a movie?”

She glances at him with overstated indifference. “I don’t know. I might get a better offer.”

If he had somehow been able to choose beforehand how he would relate to a theoretical girlfriend, ‘combative flirting’ would not have been what he would have picked for himself. But he wouldn’t want what he has with her to be in any other form; not that it could be, each of them being who they are. He’s about to test her poise of disinterest with further verbal sparring when a gust of wind bursts across the open pool and shakes the trees just past the fence, so sudden and bracing that it whisks the words from his mouth.

“Geez!” he exclaims. “Was it supposed to be windy today?”

“Dipper, look,” she says, pointing towards the horizon.
Clouds are rushing in from the cliffs of the valley; thick, roiling clouds of an ominous storm-black character. They come in so quickly that it’s like watching a recording fast forward. The air—dead calm a minute before—is alive with a cold, scouring wind that rips the fog from the damp earth and sends the pool-goers shivering. They are suddenly at the seething edge of a stormfront. The sun disappears and the temperature plunges with frightening rapidity.

There’s another hard clap of wind that flattens the grass, and then Dipper sees something descending from the clouds. He doesn’t know what he’s looking at; there’s a huge round disk made of what he thinks are twigs and branches woven together like a wreath.

And standing in the middle of it is…someone? Something?

Chapter End Notes

After a great deal of consideration, I have changed the structure of this story. The original, completed portion of the story is now ‘part one: anyway, i’ve been there.’ The extended epilogues are now ‘part two: new summer season.’ These chapters grew so extended that calling them an ‘epilogue’ had begun to strain credulity. Those of you reading on A03 can enjoy the new picture for part two, if you are so inclined. I had originally intended to remove the album information from the end of each new summer season chapter and compile it at the eventual end, like I did for part one, but I think it’s nice to give credit in the present. So that might not change.

The title of the story won’t change. Think of it as a collection that takes its name from part one. I have been making changes to the summary in order to better reflect the current content. That said, I don’t have enough space on FFN to summarize each part separately. Therefore, I think it’s best that the summary still primarily applies to part one, since that’s where new readers will start. Presumably, by the time they reach part two they won’t care that they’ve moved beyond the purview of the summary. Besides, a summary should serve to capture the beginning premise of a story, not every plot point.

The one facet I’m still going back and forth on is whether or not to mark the story as complete. On one hand, part one is finished and tells a complete story with a satisfying ending. And I think there are probably a fair number of readers who started this story because it was marked complete and they knew they wouldn’t be left hanging, as is so common in fanfiction. On the other hand, part two is ongoing, and stating the story is definitively complete seems at least slightly dishonest. I haven’t made a final decision about this yet.
Floating down from the sudden stormfront, the mysterious figure above draws closer, somehow buoyed aloft by the wind. It’s roughly human-sized. Dipper at first thinks it’s a bear, maybe, or… an owl with antlers? A huge, antlered owl? No—it is a person. They are draped from head to toe in furry animal skins and feathers, complete with a bizarre helmet which is made of the same woven construction as the platform and is surmounted by a pair of buck antlers.

When the floating nest is hovering about five feet over the concrete outside the changing rooms, the roar of the wind lessens. The platform falls to the ground with a distinct crunch and the person loses their balance for a second, arms windmilling before they regain their footing.

Grunkle Stan has left his spot at the far end of the pool and is now standing next to Dipper. “Kid, you didn’t summon a hairy antlered owl man, did you?”

“I did not,” Dipper says, completely taken aback.

Their balance restored, the antlered person spreads their arms high, a staff of wicker and bone in one hand. Then, in a voice like thunder (it is somehow amplified and echoed by the wind) they roar, “BEHOLD! I HAVE BROUGHT THE ST— wait.” The owl-thing, now revealed by his words to be a man, shakes his staff like he’s trying to get it to work. He proceeds to slap it on the disk a few times the way one would a malfunctioning television remote.

“You wanna say something, or should I?” Stan asks Dipper.

“Uh…” Dipper clears his throat and then addresses the antlered man. “Excuse me, are you—”

“BEHOLD!” This time the man’s staff releases a shockwave of air that forces everyone back a step and sends a fine mist of pool water over Dipper, Pacifica and Stan. “I HAVE BROUGHT THE STORM TO YOUR VERY DOOR! DO YOU WRETCHES NOT TREMBLE BEFORE THE MIGHT OF THE WENDIGO?”

“Our door?” Stan says, looking around. “This is public property, pal.”

“You’re a Wendigo?” Dipper says, intrigued.

“JUST SO!” The man bellows. “BEHOLD ME IN MY TEMPESTUOUS GLORY— you’re saying it with an ‘I’, right? ‘Win’-digo?”

“That’s… what I said?”

“Right, but it’s with an ‘I’. Like wind? It’s my thing. I control the— well, I’ll get to that— BEHOLD ME IN MY TEMPESTOUS GLORY! OH, HOW YOU HAVE TREMBLED BENEATH MY STORMS!”

“Ha ha… Okay, that’s awesome,” Mabel says from the water. “What a show! Do you think you could make it warm again? See, we’re here to swim today—”

“Hey, you stole that line,” Dipper protests.

“Wait a minute,” Pacifica says, “you’re the reason we had that storm last night?”

“HA HA HA! HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE BOWED BENEATH MY LIMITLESS POWER? ARE YOU NOT READY TO KNEEL? WILL YOU NOT GROVEL, YOU WORMS WHO FLEE MY FLOOD?”

Dipper looks at his friends and family, all of whom appear equally unimpressed.

“I mean, the rain hasn’t been that bad,” Mabel says.

“ Heck, I like the rain,” Dipper adds.

Stan just shrugs. “That’s your power, huh. Making things moist.”

“Who are you calling a worm? Come down here and say that!” Grenda says aggressively.

“Worms cannot swim, and we are swimming,” Candy reasons. “You are wrong.”

“I CONTROL THE STORM!” The Windigo thunders, unchastised. “I BRING THE POUNDING RAINS!”

“If you were smart you woulda charged for that. Lots of people out there with petunias.” Stan’s eyes narrow contemplatively. “You thought about going into business? You already look like one of my attractions.”

“ENOUGH!” The Windigo slams the end of his staff against his platform and another burst of wind nearly knocks Pacifica’s hat off. “IF YOU WILL NOT KNEEL, THEN YOU WILL DROWN!”

“Oh, no, a summer shower!” Stan mocks. “How will I ever stand being damp? Bring it on, bear rug! I’ll— uh oh.”

Mabel, Candy and Grenda scramble frantically out of the pool as a wind funnel plunges into it and instantly becomes a whirling waterspout. Dipper readies himself to run, not sure which way to go. The waterspout surges forward and he grabs Pacifica’s arm and dives to the left. He loses sight of Grunkle Stan behind the funnel. Grenda picks up Mabel and Candy and barrels straight through the fence at the pool’s perimeter.

A hard, driving rain begins to fall, clattering against the concrete. Thunder rolls over the valley and the Windigo laughs as his platform begins to rise.

Dipper is on the ground next to Pacifica, one arm still over her from his attempt to pull her out of harm’s way. Her hat is gone, and her hair is plastered to her head. Her eyes widen with sudden fear.

“What do we do?” she shouts over the roar of the waterspout.

Dipper looks towards the Windigo. The strange man is now a few feet above the ground, his staff raised over his head.
“We’ve gotta get that staff!” Dipper yells, setting his jaw with determination.

He pushes himself to his feet and starts to run, veering around the edge of the half-empty pool, his feet slapping through puddles. He leaps and catches the lip of the wicker disk, rolling up onto it.

“FOOL!” The Windigo brings his staff down and points it at Dipper, who is instantly trapped in a torrent of wind that sucks the breath from his lungs. “YOU CANNOT OVERCOME THE WINDIGO! MY POWER IS ENDLESS! MY POWER IS ETERNAL! YOU ARE A MERE —”

Dipper doesn’t get to find out what he’s a ‘mere’ version of. Pacifica suddenly appears behind the Windigo and charges straight at him. She knocks him off balance, but he retains his grip on his staff; he spins around and points it at her. The wind which emerges is so strong that she falls over sideways and must hold onto the platform with both hands, pressed flat against it with her hair flapping violently down her back.

Gasping for breath, Dipper forces himself to stand and rushes the Windigo, grabbing the man’s arm. The Windigo is a bit bigger than Dipper, but Dipper is quite a bit bigger than he used to be; they are almost evenly matched. They struggle for the staff, staggering all over the disk and nearly falling off it.

“UNHAND ME!” The Windigo demands.

“Give it up, man!” Dipper yells.

He’s not sure what happens next, but somehow the staff turns so that it’s pointed at the ground. In the same instant, Pacifica recovers and runs to them; her hand is just about to grab the Windigo’s furry robes when there’s an enormous whoosh and the Windigo, with Dipper in tow, shoots upwards into the air.

“You can’t take that staff!” Pacifica screams, her voice quickly fading as they ascend with incredible speed.

Within seconds, they are at least fifty feet in the air. The wind forms a strange tunnel around them, and they slowly twist in the middle as the cone gathers forward momentum. Dipper doesn’t stop trying to take staff, now believing that it’s the only chance he has to keep the Windigo from dropping him. The two combatants zoom into the forest, pine needles showering down around them in a brittle rain as their pocket of wind shakes the trees. The Windigo’s attention is torn between trying to shove Dipper away and looking upward to steer.

“This so cool!” Dipper exclaims as he elbows the Wendigo’s free arm away and tries to grab the staff. “How does this work?! How are we flying?”

The Windigo seems uninterested in providing answers. “I SAID UNHAND ME, BOY! BOY! BOY.”

Dipper just holds on tighter as they whirl past the treetops. “My name… is Dipper!”

The Windigo looks down at him. “Seriously? I thought that girl was making fun of you— OH DANG—”

The Windigo looks up just in time to slam directly into a pine tree. Dipper is cushioned from the impact by the Windigo’s body; he manages to catch a branch and hold on until it bends him closer to the ground, though the resultant fall still leaves him dazed on the forest floor.
“Ow…” Dipper groans, sitting up slowly.

He’s landed in a small clearing. The ground is soft soil strewn with pine needles both brittle brown and springy green. Dipper shakes his shirt a few times—he’s covered in pine needles, too, along with a fair amount of sap. He smells like a new air freshener.

The Windigo is spread-eagled a few feet away, facedown. His robes have flapped up to reveal a pair of neon board shorts and his helmet is missing an antler.

“Hey, you’re not dead, are you?” Dipper says.

A piece of paper flutters down next to him. He picks it up; it looks like it’s from a notebook. There’s a name at the top, ‘Greg,’ followed by a crude drawing of the staff. At the bottom is written ‘SUPER TOP SECRET.’

“Uh, is this yours?” Dipper asks, holding up the piece of paper. Although there’s no reply, he prudently walks over and picks up the staff. “I’m going to hold on to this.”

The rain slows to a stop, though the trees continue to shed drops. Dipper assumes the waterspout is no longer menacing anyone.

The Windigo eventually staggers to his feet with a series of whimpers. “Ohhhhh… Man, where’s my other antler?” he whines, feeling for it. “Aw, geez… I look like an idiot.”

“It’s over, Windigo,” Dipper says, brandishing the staff. “Don’t do anything crazy, okay?”


Dipper starts to answer and then pauses, hearing something strange. It’s a noise that’s growing louder, getting closer. He briefly digs a finger into one ear, wondering if the impact left it ringing.

The Windigo hears it too. “That’s not me, is it?”

“raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” In the middle of a full-throated yell, Grunkle Stan comes plowing through the underbrush with one fist pulled back.

The Windigo points at him with a noticeably wobbly finger. “Oh, hey, it’s that guy from the p— OOOOUGH my sack lunch.”

Grunkle Stan socks him right in the midsection at full tilt. The Windigo folds up like a wallet and hits the dirt with a thump.

“Got ya!” Grunkle Stan grunts, stepping back. “Guess there’s at least one guy around here who hasn’t learned not to mess with the Pines. Who is this freakshow?”

“Greg?” Dipper says.

“ATTACK!” someone suddenly yells.

From the other direction there’s a concert of snapping twigs and rustling leaves and Mabel, Candy and Grenda jump out into the clearing. They’ve raided the pool supplies and are covered in various flotation devices as makeshift armor, each brandishing a weaponized pool noodle.

“Come and get it, windbag— oh.” Mabel looks down at the limp form of the Windigo. “Sorry,
Grenda. He’s already been punched.”

Grenda looks disappointed. “Should I punch him again? You know, to be sure?”

“Punch out all his evil!” Candy advises.

“Guys, I think he’s had enough,” Dipper says. “Pretty sure he’s concussed, actually.”

And then there is yet another crash through the forest growth. Pacifica emerges holding a solid branch like a long sword. “Give me Dipper back, you— oh.” She lowers the branch awkwardly. “You’re okay.”

“Mostly. Turns out he’s not so great at flying. Or at least not when I’m tagging along,” Dipper says.

“Alright, what’s your deal, pal?” Grunkle Stan asks the Windigo. “Give me one good reason to spare the rest of your stuffing.”

The Windigo reaches into his voluminous hides. “Spare staff,” he wheezes, pulling out a bone wrapped tightly with wicker.

“What? No, I said spare your stuffing. It’s a, I don’t know, metaphor or whatever. It sounds dumb if you make me explain it!” Grunkle Stan says resentfully.

With a sharp clap, a gust of wind swoops into the clearing and lifts the Windigo back into the air. He vanishes into the dark sky like a ragged raven, and seconds later the clouds begin to lighten.

“Which way did he go? Was it north? Did anyone else see?” Dipper says excitedly, pulling out his journal and a pen. “It was north, right?”

“It looked like he was flying towards the valley mouth,” Candy observes.

“Could he be hiding there…” Dipper mutters, tapping the pen against his teeth. “But why? And how is he doing all of this?”

“He’s a wizard!” Grenda says.

“Or a mad scientist,” Candy supposes.

“With a killer Summerween costume!”

“Maybe he’s not wearing a costume!” Mabel suggests.

“You mean he’s actually a bear-owl-deer?” Grenda gasps.

“A browldeer.”

Dipper shakes his head. “He’s not. I saw his shorts.”

“He’s a stupid wad and he talks like a dork and he ruined my hair!” Pacifica laments. Her blonde locks are a rain-matted, windblown mess.

“Dipper, make us fly with the staff!” Mabel says. She runs over and wraps her arms around him. “Fly, my pretty! Go! Take off! Up up and away! To infinity and——”

“I don’t know how to work this thing,” Dipper admits. He gives the staff an experimental shake to no result. “Maybe Great-Uncle Ford will know what it is.”
They gather up and head back to the pool. The whole area is more or less destroyed, with several trees knocked down and the water in the pool sitting low, filled with leaves and pine needles. Mr. Poolcheck looks like he’s in the midst of a quadruple aneurysm and they quietly file past without drawing his attention. When they get back to the car, they discover that they left some of the windows down.

Grunkle Stan pulls open the driver door and a small wave of brown water pours over his feet. “Aw, come on!”

It’s a very soggy ride home. The seats squish beneath them and the whole car smells like chlorine. The only upside from Dipper’s perspective is that Pacifica is riding on his lap again. She’s fighting with her tangled hair, trying to salvage it with her fingers. He has the feeling she’ll be disappearing into the bathroom for quite a while.

He’s been looking at the staff more closely. It’s made from wicker and bones, though he’s pretty sure they aren’t human bones. He hadn’t seen it before with all that had been going on, but at the top of the staff there’s a crystal enmeshed in wire, attached by fine holes drilled through the topmost bone. There doesn’t seem to be anything electronic or mechanical about it. Dipper is almost certain that it’s magical, which is exciting. He doesn’t remember anything like it being in the journals.

Well, whatever it is, there’s no one more likely know than Ford.
The gravel of Gopher Road has been darkened by the aborted tempest; wide, shallow puddles pockmark the uneven path, their mirror surfaces grey beneath the clouds. The fact that there are any puddles at all after so brief a storm is a testament to how heavy the rain had been. The air flowing through the car’s open windows is cool and misty, heavy with moisture and the heady smells of a pine forest doused with fresh water.

Grunkle Stan pulls the car up next to the Shack and everyone climbs out. The grass of the lawn is heavy and slick, and the house windows are beaded with rainwater. Dipper runs around to the other side and finds Soos and Ford still working on disassembling the old air conditioner; they are both rain-spotted. Soos is wearing a trash bag poncho, while Ford’s usual coat serves as his protection.

“Back already?” Ford says when he sees Dipper. “Can’t say I blame you. This sudden temperature differential is highly unusual; it might even be a record.”

Dipper holds out the staff. “Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

Ford takes it with obvious fascination. “Where on earth did you get this?”

As Ford turns the staff over in his hands, Dipper quickly summarizes the events at the pool. “And then he had a smaller version of this, it was just one bone. But it still made him fly,” he finishes.

“Incredible. I’ve read about these, but I’ve never seen one myself.” Ford flips the staff over and examines the crystal at its tip. “I believe this is a form of shamanistic witchcraft, though I’m hesitant to assign a specific school to it. You see this carving in the crystal? It’s a rune, Hagalaz. It means ‘hail.’”

“Not ‘storm’?”

“In this context we can certainly take it that way,” Ford muses, rubbing a finger along the crystal’s smooth edges. “I’d like to ask this ‘Windigo’ how he cut this crystal. It looks machined.”

“I don’t know if you can really talk to this guy,” Dipper cautions. “He seems pretty unhinged.”

“You’d have to be to get into this kind of witchcraft. You’d be just as likely to get struck by lightning as you are to fly. You might call for a windstorm and get a tidal wave instead!” Ford shakes his head. “Nature is a powerful structure, Dipper, and it rarely cooperates with the whims of human beings. Our helmeted friend is playing with dangerous forces.”

Dipper can’t say he’s surprised. “Well… he did fly straight into a tree today.”

“If he keeps this up, he’ll be lucky to survive the week. We need to find him.” Ford grips the staff decisively. “Come with me.”

Soos, who has been watching the conversation the way one would an engrossing television drama, holds up his hand. “Is this one of those quests that could use an amiable sidekick, or is it more of a family-based episodic adventure…?”
Ford turns, his expression making it clear he had forgotten Soos was there. “Yes, of course you’re welcome to assist. If the Windigo is as unstable as Dipper says, we’ll need all hands to deal with him. No time to waste, gentlemen—to the lab!”

The inside of the Shack has cooled off due to the Windigo’s interference in the valley’s weather. When Dipper follows Ford and Soos towards the hidden entrance to the lower levels, Mabel comes darting out of the living room and intercepts him.

“So what’s the deal, Dip?” she asks.

“Great-Uncle Ford’s got a plan to find the Windigo,” Dipper explains. “Or I think he does, anyway.”

“Just keep us in the know-know, bro-bro!” Mabel says with a thumbs up.

Grunkle Ford’s renovations of his semi-secret laboratory have been coming together nicely. Equipment is neatly stacked against the walls of the control room and everything broken has been repaired or replaced. There are obvious signs of an ongoing tech upgrade—a modern laptop and a few new monitors sit on top of an old console. The Quantum Generator emits a steady blue light and a deep hum that runs beneath all other sounds.

Ford takes the staff and carries it into the high-vaulted room that had once housed the portal. After a month’s worth of cleaning, it’s mostly bare concrete and a few workbenches, along with some mobile equipment now that’s draped with heavy canvas, outlining strange mechanical silhouettes.

“I’ve had my eye out for a chance to test the equipment in this capacity,” Ford says. He places the staff on a workbench and connects several leads to it. They run back to what Dipper recognizes as a Weirdness Emission Spectrometer. “I have yet to isolate and identify any particular particles related to Weirdness, but I’ve theorized that Weirdness Emissions exist at differing wavelengths. It’s only just recently that I’ve developed the capability to test that theory. If I can measure the wavelength of this artifact, we may be able to track down similar anomalies.”

“The spare staff!” Dipper says excitedly.

“Precisely. The data we collected in Piedmont was critical to this development. Here’s hoping it pays off.” Great-Uncle Ford presses a few buttons and the familiar green readout on the screen dissolves into scanlines; a minute or so later, they resolve into a long number with constantly shifting decimal places. “It’s working! I can’t attest for its accuracy, but that should be our nanometer range.”

“Wow!” Dipper stares at the green number with fascination, aware he is witnessing some of the first quantitative data ever gathered on Weirdness.

“I don’t know what we’re excited about, dudes, but I’m way on board!” Soos says somewhere behind them.

Ford quickly takes the leads off the staff and switches the spectrometer’s input to its built-in sensor. “Now to filter for the correct wavelength…”

At first, the readout is completely bright green (unsurprisingly, given it is in Gravity Falls). Gradually, layers of green begin to disappear several at a time, stripped away like coats of paint. The process is a bit slow.

“I intend to get everything up to speed eventually,” Ford explains somewhat sheepishly. “My old equipment has barely a fraction of the computing power of your phone.”

Dipper knows that’s something he can help with, but for now there are other matters at hand. The
spectrometer finally finishes its work and shows a distinct green tinge on the side of the screen representing north.

“North! We saw him go that way,” Dipper tells his Great-Uncle.

Ford nods in satisfaction. “If we’re still detecting him, then he can’t have gone too far. I’ll need a minute to program a filter into my handheld spectrometer. Of course, he may out of range for such a small receiver… Soos, we’ll need to load some of this into the back of your truck.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Pines,” Soos says eagerly.

Dipper turns to run back upstairs and inform the others, but Ford catches him by the shoulder before he can leave. “Hold on a minute, Dipper. There’s something I’d like to try.”

Ford takes the leads from the spectrometer and clips them to Dipper’s fingers. A moment later, he attaches them to his own. Dipper watches with confusion, not sure what’s going on.

After a couple minutes, Ford leans back from the readout with a triumphant gleam in his eye. “Have a look,” he says.

Dippers sees two long numbers on the screen. “What is it?”

“It’s us.” Ford points to each in turn. The numbers are not identical but are very similar. “Yours and mine. Our own personal Weirdness.”

It takes Dipper a second to digest all the implications. “Whoa…”

Ford places his hands on Dipper’s shoulders, beaming with pride. “You were right, my boy. You were right!”

Dipper is stunned by the sudden verification of at least part of his pet theory, but he doesn’t have much time to dwell on it. When he returns to the upper levels, he finds everyone gathered in front of the television, watching a Duck-tective rerun. To Dipper’s surprise, they’ve received reinforcements: Wendy is slouched on the floor between Mabel and Candy.

“Hey, Dipper,” she says when he walks in. “I heard we’ve got a wizard to punch.”

“Mabel texted you?” Dipper guesses.

“Someone had to,” Wendy says with joking censure.

“Yeah, sorry,” he apologizes. “I should have told you.”

“It’s cool,” she says easily. “So we ready to roll, or what?”

By this point there really are too many people to fit into Grunkle Stan’s car, regardless of who sits on whose lap. The Windigo-hunting party encompasses pretty much everyone who would be interested in something like this, give or take a McGucket. Dipper climbs into the back of Soos’ truck to help Great-Uncle Ford plug everything in and strap it all down well enough to survive the trip. The rest of the group split up between the truck cab and Stan’s car.

High fives are exchanged along with jokes and some convivial teasing. Dipper is surrounded by a close cadre of like-minded friends and family, on the cusp of adventure. He ties some cables together and grins as Wendy, riding shotgun with Soos, leans out her window and shouts something to Stan about his lack of driving skills, daring him to race. Mabel, Grenda and Candy are drawing who
knows what on Stan’s car in the film of dirt left by the waterspout. Soos walks around the side of the truck bed with another armful of car batteries for Ford’s spectrometer; he gives Dipper a double thumbs up after making his delivery, enthusiastic and ready to go.

The only person missing is Pacifica. When Dipper finishes connecting the last ribbon cable (Ford really needs to upgrade) he hops down from the truck and runs inside to retrieve her. As he suspected, she’s in her bathroom. The door is open and she’s in front of the mirror, brushing her hair back into its usual impeccable state.

“It’s just going to get messed up again,” he points out.

“Then I’ll brush it again.” She sets the brush down and looks at him. “Is everyone ready?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” He’s excited, buzzing with the energy of the hunt. “So what do you think, is this guy gonna run when he sees all of us or will he want to fight it out?”

“He’ll be a jerk about it,” Pacifica predicts. “Anyone who dresses like that has to be crazy.”

Everyone piles into their chosen vehicle and the two-car convoy takes off down Gopher Road. The weather is still windy, and the occasional low cloud goes scudding overhead. Still, with the heat banished and the humidity blown away, it’s pretty nice out. The sun flickers around obstructions, winking in and out among the clouds and the swaying treetops. The whole forest rustles loudly with every spate of wind, the sound rising in a hissing organic clatter and then falling as the gust passes by, the sonic waves of an evergreen sea.

Dipper sits on the hard bed of Soos’ truck, swaying with every bump and divot on the gravel road, waving to Mabel when she leans out of Stan’s car, grinning at Soos in the rearview mirror. He couldn’t have asked for a better mission, or a better crew.

He can see the back of Pacifica’s head through the rear window of the truck; when they pull over so Ford can consult his readings, she leaves the cab and comes around to the back. She climbs up and sits in the space between Dipper’s legs as the truck lurches into gear and drives back onto the road.

“I thought you didn’t want to mess your hair up,” he says.

She only shrugs. “Like I said, I’ll just brush it again.”

Her hair flutters over his face, tickling him when the wind catches it just right. He puts his arms around her and takes her hands in his own, letting the motion of the vehicle rock her more closely against him. She leans her head back on his shoulder and looks up at the treetops scrolling by.

As expected, Ford’s spectrometer takes them towards the fractured cliffs which form the entrance to the valley. For Pacifica’s benefit, Dipper points out the distinct UFO shape punched through the rock face, just as Ford had once shown him. He’s probably mentioned it before, but it still gets to him sometimes how incredible it is. A real alien spacecraft; Dipper’s favorite place on earth created by something utterly unearthly. The shadow of the old rail trestle flits across the truck, a sunless line that goes by in a blink.

But just as they are about to turn out onto the highway, Ford leans towards the open rear window of the truck cab and shouts, “Pull over here!”

Soos parks on the shoulder of the road. Grunkle Stan pulls up behind them, one arm dangling out his window. “What’s the hold up?” he calls impatiently.

“I believe we may have passed our objective,” Great-Uncle Ford yells back. “I’ll need a minute!”
Dipper goes over to look. If he’s reading it right, the spectrometer is showing a hit back in the direction they came from. “When did it switch?” he asks.

“The refresh rate is too low to be certain. We were headed in the right direction prior to passing beneath the cliffs, so we might be close enough to utilize the handheld spectrometer.” Ford unpacks the handheld Weirdness Emissions Spectrometer from its plastic case and turns it on. “Excellent! I’ve got a reading: south-east.”

Dipper looks back down the road. There are no obvious hiding places this close to the highway; the roadsides are mostly clear, and past the dense forest on either side of the road the cliffs loom like enormous stone gates. It’s always a bit dizzying to be this close to Gravity Falls’ most unique landmark. It’s such a natural (well, artificial, technically) wonder that it’s strange it doesn’t attract more tourists. Once again, Dipper is left to ponder the true nature of the valley and its zoning of reality.

He cranes his neck back and looks all the way up to where the railroad trestle spans the precipice. It makes him slightly queasy to realize just how far up he and Mabel had been while trying to overcome Gideon’s gigantic robot and equally gigantic sense of entitlement. However, thinking about the confrontation on the rail bridge also brings to mind what that rail is connected to.

“Could he be hiding in the old tunnels?” Dipper wonders.

“It’s possible,” Ford confirms. “That railroad was built to service the mines. Most of the mines in the valley were abandoned around the turn of the century, though a few are still worked by a handful of local prospectors.”

“What were they digging for?”

“Gold, usually, though they’d settle for silver.”

Dipper immediately thinks of Stan. “I’m surprised Grunkle Stan doesn’t have us out looking for gold.”

“Any placer gold in the valley is long gone. There may still be veins of it somewhere deep in the earth, but anything accessible was mined years ago. Gold fever didn’t last long in Gravity Falls, for obvious reasons. Which is ultimately for the best.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gravity Falls’ real mineral wealth isn’t in gold or silver,” Ford explains. “The Law of Weirdness Magnetism has made this place a hotspot for meteorites over millions of years, along with who knows how many forms of alien or extradimensional objects. As a result, the valley is rich in rare elements and minerals, most notably platinum. There’s a fortune of the stuff in the soil.”

Dipper immediately grasps what that would mean for Gravity Falls. “They’d tear the valley apart…”

“Indeed,” Ford says grimly. “I had a few ideas for preventing such a catastrophe. I considered running for mayor and passing protective legislation, or perhaps getting the valley a state or national park status. But anything I might do would bring unwanted attention and should probably be a last resort. The Weirdness here seems to protect itself perfectly well, after all.”

The valley of Gravity Falls has somehow transitioned intact into an age of cellphones and satellites, so Great-Uncle Ford has a point. Still, it’s hard to imagine the cliffs and forests overrun by industry. The town and its surrounds are special. They should stay what they are.
Ford adjusts his handheld spectrometer and then points it back towards the cliffs. “Definitely that way. We should move more slowly this time.”

Dipper pokes his head into the truck cab. “Hey, we need to go back the way we came, but go slow.”

“You got it, dude,” Soos says, shifting into drive.

“Are we close?” Wendy asks.

“We can’t be too far off if the handheld sensor is working,” Dipper tells her. “We think he might be up in the old tunnels.”

“No way, me and Tambry used to sneak in there,” Wendy says. “I know a killer shortcut.”

“What’s inside?”

“Honestly, not much. It was just a lot of rocks and old train stuff.” Wendy shrugs.

The truck grumbles back up the empty road, tires buzzing across the cracked asphalt. It’s strange to see Gravity Falls from this side, from the outside looking in. Its entrance towers over the surrounding forest like a fortress, its rocky gates opened wide. Only the distant mountains can match its grandeur, and even they aren’t nearly as interesting as the uniquely-fractured cliffs. Like it is in everything else, Gravity Falls is weird in its natural majesty.

Somewhere in that splendor lies their quarry. Dipper is certain of it.
The expedition parks between the twin crags of the valley, the colossal rock formations directly facing them on either side like the gaping maws of two stone titans. Dipper has always been awed by the valley, by its incredible beauty and grandeur. In some other world, where weirdness lived in the light, Gravity Falls would be talked about the way Mount Rushmore is, or Yellowstone.

Of course, he’s also quite taken with other, closer views. A strand of Pacifica’s hair flutters upwards and brushes his chin from where she sits against him. They, like everyone else, are waiting while Ford consults his spectrometer.

Dipper runs the loose strand through his fingers. “Your hair looks kind of different,” he says to her, unable to place exactly how or why.

“It gets lighter when I’ve been in the sun a lot,” she says, “but it’s darker than it used to be. Mom said that would happen when I got older.”

He looks more closely at her roots and, sure enough, what had once been a platinum blond hue is beginning to look more golden, a warm honey blonde.

“I like it,” he says, hoping she can tell he’s being honest.

She gives him a smug backwards glance. “I told you it was real.”

“Hey, I already apologized for that like a million years ago.”

“I still told you so.”

He’s too content with having her in his arms to start a fight. “Yeah, yeah.”

It doesn’t take long to confirm Ford’s preliminary findings. The Windigo has either retreated to the top of the cliffs or hides somewhere inside them. Everyone disembarks from the vehicles and gathers up to continue. Ford passes out flashlights; Dipper takes two and hands one to Pacifica. He watches with a knowing smile as she immediately tests it, flicking the switch on and off a few times.

“See, it actually works,” he tells her.

“But Dipper, how are we supposed to make out if we don’t have to share?” she says with wide and innocent blue eyes.

He knows she’s messing with him—he’s, like, ninety-nine percent sure. He still can’t stop his heart rate from increasing or banish all the tempting images that fill his mind. “Nice try,” he forces himself to say.

She gasps with what he is (almost) positive is fake affront. “See if I ever make out with you again,” she says, turning away to follow Mabel.
The forest is dark green with rainwater, puddles gathering between roots and collecting where the land dips downwards. The wide silver ribbon of the river is swollen past its banks. With her usual unerring woodsmanship, Wendy leads the party down an old logging trail and then off the beaten path to a small stairway hewn into the rocks of the cliff. It looks very old, worn smooth by time and weather. There’s an old caution sign nearby, though it’s no longer standing. It lies partially buried in the dirt, a fat caterpillar making its lazy way across the tarnished yellow paint.

“All the kids in town weren’t supposed to go up here. So we did, all the time,” Wendy explains as they ascend. “You can’t beat the view, though.”

Dipper looks out over the woods at the foot of the cliff; the tips of the trees are nearly below him now. “Yeah, it’s great,” he agrees.

“Just wait ‘til you get to the top, man,” Wendy promises.

She’s right. The stairway comes out into a wide, almost flat empty space of rock. It takes Dipper a second to realize what he’s seeing. They are standing in the ‘jaws’ of the cliff, walking along the floor of the great crevice punched through what had once been a mountain, its back portion blasted into a valley by a careening UFO moving at inconceivable speed. It’s a vast cave without walls, the outside world disappearing into a great bright blur beyond the dim shadow of the stone roof far overhead. The wind cuts through the horizontal canyon with an eerie howl, tugging at Dipper’s clothes. With the exception of a few large outcroppings (which, Dipper uneasily notes, look like they’ve fallen from the ceiling), the stone has been eroded almost perfectly smooth from millennia of scouring gusts. Dipper’s skin crawls as if he were standing in the mouth of some enormous dragon; he feels like the ceiling is about to finally collapse after thirty million years of strain, right when he happens to be beneath it.

“Crazy, right?” Wendy yells over the incessant wind. “You can’t really do anything up here on a windy day. Stay away from the edge, though. Robbie almost fell off one year trying to light a bottle rocket.”

“Check it out, Dipper!” Mabel shouts.

He turns around to see her in a superhero pose; she’s tied her sweater around her neck so it billows out behind her like wooly pink cape.

“I’m flying! Take a pic, quick!”

Pacifica is already on it. “Scrapbook smile, Mabel.”

Dipper quietly moves away before the girls decide that he should also be in the scrapbook. Luckily for him, he’s a less attractive target for scrapbooking when Candy and Grenda are there and happy to join in. The four girls crowd in together for a group selfie, their hair whipping wildly around their smiling faces. The resultant picture probably looks like they’re all on a rollercoaster or sticking up out of a limo’s sunroof.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been up here before,” Dipper says, still marveling at the huge angled cavern.

“That’s my bad,” Wendy says. “I guess every time we hung out, we were always doing something else.”

They follow Wendy deeper into the cliff’s interior. The ceiling gets lower and lower until it finally
feels like they are in a proper cave, albeit a bizarrely well-lit one. At the very back wall, where the roof of the cave is only a few feet above, a square shaft has been cut into the rock. An old elevator, very much in a state of disrepair, sits rusting behind a broken safety gate. There’s a wealth of soda cans crammed into various crevices and gaps, along with cigarette butts and a ratty magazine or two. A wide variety of graffiti is painted and carved on every peeling inch of steel, some of it so old it’s no longer legible.

“I think this goes all the way down, but that entrance is caved in,” Wendy says. She hops easily over the gate and into the elevator. It rattles a little but doesn’t seem to be in danger of budging. “This goes up to the train tunnel. Pro tip: just don’t look down.”

With that, she grasps the heavy steel lattice of the elevator shaft and quickly disappears up into the darkness.

Ford slings his handheld spectrometer over his shoulder. “After you!” he says jovially, hoisting himself upwards.

Dipper steps forward to climb over the gate but stops when he notices that Pacifica is hanging back. He turns to assess the rest of the party, made aware that this kind of effort isn’t mundane to everyone. Mabel, Candy and Grenda seem enthusiastic to begin the climb, so no problems there (not that he expected any less from Mabel). Pacifica looks uncertain, and Grunkle Stan looks downright unenthused.

“Come on, we’ll climb together,” Dipper says, offering Pacifica his hand.

Pacifica purses her lips and eyes his hand suspiciously. “You promise you won’t fall?”

Dipper is stunned to realize she’s worried about him. “Hey, I’m not that accident prone!”

“Please,” she says with a dismissive roll of her eyes. She starts to put her hands on the broken gate to lift herself and immediately recoils when she sees how rusty it is. “Oh, gross. Help me over this thing.”

Dipper dutifully helps her over the gate and then gives her a boost up to the first section of the shaft where handholds are available (Grenda does the same for Mabel and Candy). Just before Dipper starts his own climb, he turns to where Grunkle Stan is still reluctantly dawdling.

“Grunkle Stan, aren’t you coming?” Dipper asks.

Grunkle Stan lets out the mighty sigh of a martyr. “You know, a lot of what you nerds call ‘adventure’ seems kinda like work.”

Despite this, he isn’t far behind Dipper.

At the top of the shaft they emerge into a dusty tunnel. To the left, there’s the faintest hint of light from around the tunnel’s gradual curve. This, Dipper knows, is the way to the trestle that bridges the valley entrance. In the other direction is nothing but total darkness, pierced only by the beams of the group’s flashlights.

The tunnel seems intact and is mostly empty. There’s considerably less trash strewn about, only a few cans and wrappers, but on the wall by the elevator shaft is an old sign that’s covered in carvings, so many that the sign’s original text has been erased. Dipper takes a closer look; most of the graffiti consists of names and dates, presumably from the people who made the climb. He even sees a few he recognizes: Cutebiker, 1990. Durland, ’03. In the top right-hand corner is ‘WENDY C.’ There’s no date under her name. Instead, there’s a series of tally marks totaling six.
Wendy comes up alongside Dipper. “Nice, almost forgot,” she says, and scratches another tally with a pocketknife.

They both freeze as a deep rumble shudders through the tunnel.

“Is that normal?” Dipper asks uncertainly.

Wendy appears equally startled. “Pretty sure I’d remember if it was.”

“Hey, look at this!” Mabel calls out.

She’s pointing her flashlight at the dusty floor; when the rest of the group approach, their combined lights clearly show a path on the ground. It’s a collection of footprints, all roughly the same size. They lead off into the darkness.

“We must be on the right track,” Ford states as another distant rumble reverberates down the long, hollow hall. He’s looking at his spectrometer, and in the light from the screen his face floats eerily against the blackness. “Everyone keep close, and keep quiet. Let’s not give ourselves away.”

They all nod seriously. Grenda picks up a rusted railroad spike that’s nearly as long as her forearm; Soos grabs what looks like the haft of a shovel or pick; out of the corner of his eye, Dipper sees Grunkle Stan’s brass knuckles glinting in the flashlight beams. Feeling unarmed, Dipper momentarily considers whether Great-Uncle Ford would help build an energy weapon like the one beneath his trench coat. However, he quickly realizes that even Ford, for all his risky nonchalance, wouldn’t give a gun to a thirteen-year-old. Not even one that’s almost fourteen.

The air grows even cooler as they press on into the gloom. There’s a dampness in the air that was previously absent; drops of water plink to the floor, slipping through invisible cracks in the ceiling, along with the occasional splash when someone steps into a shallow puddle. Dipper thinks they must be beneath the waterfall which plunges into Lake Gravity Falls. The stone is too thick for them to hear it, but some unknown distance below their feet is the cave where McGucket’s mechanical Gobblewonker was beached and broken. Before too long, the tunnel dries up again.

“How far does this go?” Dipper whispers to Grunkle Ford.

“I never explored all the valley’s depths. It’s a veritable honeycomb: Prospectors, speleogenesis, mole people; you name it,” Ford quietly replies. “I’ve seen portions of this same rail outside, overgrown even back then.”

They walk in silence for another ten, maybe fifteen minutes, the oppressive weight of the mountain above them, the remnants of lives long since lived corroding below. The rumbling continues, sporadic and unpredictable.

Then, they come across a fork in the road. To the right, the tunnel continues its barely perceptible curve, following the valley’s precipitous edge. But to the left is a narrower path that doesn’t look manmade. It’s irregular in shape, asymmetrical, and stalactites stretch down from the roof of its mouth. A distinct sound echoes from within: a distant voice. Just as promising is the dim light shining off the walls from somewhere within.

More ominous are the strange stick configurations that hang from the stalactites, bizarre bundles of twigs held together with tied grass in shapes that are somehow spookily compelling.

“Flashlights off,” Ford instructs them. They stand for a moment as their eyes adjust, and then make their way through the crevice single file.
As they go through the narrow passage, the light grows stronger until it begins to hurt Dipper’s eyes. They emerge into a cavern, the size of which is startling. It is almost perfectly round and rises into a rough dome. In the center of the ceiling is a large hole through which the light is streaming, opened to the surface. A deep pool of water sits beneath it in a crater with raised, uneven sides; it overflows in several places and the small streams disappear into the furrows they have cut through the floor and walls. Dipper wonders if the cavern was formed by one of the meteor impacts Great-Uncle Ford mentioned.

At the far end of the cave, on the other side of the pool, is a sort of makeshift camp. There are tarps propped up on sticks to form a roof, a hammock hung between two stalagmites, a plywood bench and chair, and multiple skins stretched tight on drying racks. There’s a general clutter of detritus everywhere: feathers, empty cans, and bones.

The Windigo is on that side, pacing back and forth like a lion in a cage.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this story because it didn’t already exist.

I know that seems like kind of an obvious thing to say. Of course I wrote in the attempt to provide something new, or at least a newish spin on a familiar idea; most authors do. But I find this fact notable because my primary motivation was not so much to explore the continuation of canon (thought that was a big factor), or even to explore the cast of characters as they try to move on (though that was also a big factor), but rather to write the story that I wanted to read. In a way, I had to write it. It was the only way I was going to read it.

The Gravity Falls fandom is very inventive, but much of that inventiveness is pointed at exploring strange and often very canon-adjacent stories which are rooted less in the show than various ideas of what the show could have been. And that’s fine if that’s what you’re looking for, but it wasn’t what I was looking for. I wanted something that felt as close to canon as possible. I wanted the credits of the last episode to fade to black, and then for some hypothetical fanfic to subsequently unfurl. I didn’t want a different flavor, or something entirely tertiary, something entirely new. I wanted more.

My assumption when I began writing in earnest (the story began as a one shot that grew out of control, and it took me awhile to admit that and commit to it) was that I would be facing fierce competition in the ‘vanilla’ category. I would be one of many stories extending the show. Somehow, this proved not to be the case. There are a fair amount of stories that are closer to canon (though not nearly as many as you would expect), but almost all of them either time jump to the next summer, or age up the characters to their middle to late teens, or do both.

Even now, with years’ worth of fanfic written, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a story with precisely the same premise as mine. And that is crazy to me, because it is the absolute most boilerplate standard premise there is. This should be one canon-extension in a sea of them. Why isn’t it? I don’t know.

What I do know is that I remain grateful for all of your comments and reviews, and I am
excited to still be on this journey together. There’s so much more to see—Summerween, the Fourth of July, and who knows what else. There’s still most of a weird, wild summer ahead.
The Windigo paces at the far end of the cavern with a quick stride, his posture that of anger. Dipper notices he has a replacement antler on his wicker helmet, though this one is held in place by duct tape.

He’s on the phone.

“That’s what I’m saying, I’m busy!” he says tightly, waving his free arm in agitation. “Maybe I already have a job, did you ever think of that? …Not really, but you didn’t know! I could have had a job! Why do you just assume—… Okay, yeah, let’s talk about Brian. Oooooo, Brian, we love Brian so much; Brian didn’t drop out of college, Brian is buying a house next year, Brian bought a hybrid with so much gas mileage— I can FLY, Mom! Can Brian fly?! No, all Brian can do is be a stupid English teacher and owe me thirty bucks!”

The source of the rumbling becomes apparent. The Windigo has his miniature staff in the hand with which he is angrily gesticulating, and periodically a rush of wind blows down through the open dome and shakes the cavern with a loud thrumming.

Everyone has fanned out and is hiding behind various stalagmites. Dipper peeks around the edge of one, wondering if Great-Uncle Ford is going to make a move. If not, it seems like the Windigo will probably notice them sooner or later.

Then again, he’s really into his phone conversation.

“Grandma gave me that money! And I will have you know, that chinchilla farming is totally legitimate, and maybe I could have been great at it if you had just believed in me! Is that too much to ask?!” The Windigo pauses with his spare staff pressed to his forehead, listening intently. “…I don’t care about community college. College was holding me back. I can fly now, Mom! I’m the WINDIGO. I control the wind. …No, I’m not… not like a super-villain, exactly, more like an antihero. Like a force of nature, you know? There’s this documentary… Well maybe I don’t care about Brian’s life, okay?! Maybe I don’t care— I’M THE WINDIGO. I bet he never mentions that, does he! I sent him a letter; I gave him a chance to get in on the ground floor, build some real magical equity, and all he wants to talk about are his stupid kids! Anybody can have kids. I could have ten kids right now! I’m just a little busy maximizing my magical potential, you know, no big deal or anything— hold on, I’ve got another call.” The Wendigo lowers his phone for a second to press a button. “Hello? …Yeah, I called earlier. That pizza you sent me? I asked for double pepperoni. There were twenty-two pepperonis on it. I counted. How is that double? There’s no way a regular pizza has eleven pepperonis. That’s just basic math. …Uh huh. Well, you shorted the Windigo, pal, and now you’re going to face my stormy wrath. …YEAH WELL SAME TO YOU, PEASANT!” Another press of the button. “Sorry. Important Windigo business.”

The Windigo has his back turned to the group now. Ford discreetly motions for everyone to spread out further, partially encircling their strange opponent. Dipper crawls along the cold stone floor until he’s maybe twenty feet away from the Windigo, hidden below the raised rim of the crater pool.

“That doesn’t matter if it pays, it’s important. …No, lis— listen, Mom, I am the Lord of Storm, okay? That’s a real title I made up. You don’t have to lend me money, it’s more like a tithe. …That is so a
thing! LOOK IT UP! I can’t explain every little—” The Windigo cuts himself off. He’s squeezing his spare staff so hard his knuckles are white; the wind in the middle of the cavern is starting to spiral. “Why can’t you just make this easy?! …No, I don’t want a bus ticket home. You just want to control me! Why can’t you just blindly support my dream of becoming an invincible Storm God?! YOU’RE RUINING MY LIFE!”

The Windigo hurls his phone towards the pool and the wind sucks it up through the hole in the ceiling with astonishing speed. Trembling with rage, he stumbles over to his cheap chair and slumps into it.

After half a minute or so, he sighs with great length and feeling. “…I still had minutes on that phone.”

Perhaps sensing an opening, Ford clears his throat and stands up. “Greetings—”

“WHOA!” The Windigo shoots to his feet; his duct-taped antler clatters to the floor.

“Have no fear, I’ve only come to talk,” Ford says placatingly. “I understand you’ve been experimenting with a powerful offshoot of shamanism. Now, I don’t know what grievances you may feel you have, but surely you must be aware of how dangerous—”

The Windigo raises his miniature staff. “SO, YOU HAVE SOUGHT TO CORNER THE LORD OF STORM! YOU DARE CONFRONT JUPITER WITHIN THE VERY HEART OF HIS TEMPEST! OH, HUBRIS! OH, TRAGIC PRIDE!” he booms, the wind once again expanding his voice.

“You can’t keep controlling the weather like this,” Ford says stridently. “You’re barely harnessing powers that will tear you apart! Let me help you. You were smart enough to come this far; imagine how much farther you might go with discipline and study!”

“You SOUND LIKE MY— I MEAN, GREG’S MOM! GREG IS SOME GUY, SOME OTHER GUY. HE’S NOT IMPORTANT. FORGET I SAID… THAT.” The Windigo begins to float, which Dipper knows is not a good sign.

“I’m not here to fight, Greg,” Ford tells him. “Be reasonable! We can talk, just put down your talisman.”

But Windi-Greg is in no mood to be reasonable. “YOU’RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME.” He shoots ten feet up into the air and a gale force wind erupts around him. “NOW REAP THE WHIRLWIND!”

“Can’t say I didn’t try,” Ford remarks as he backs away.

“Alright, enough being nice,” Grunkle Stan grunts, standing up.

“GET HIM!” Grenda roars as she begins to run.

Candy, somehow matching her much larger friend’s speed, yells, “Go for the eyes!”

With a collective shout, everyone charges the Windigo. For a few seconds the man seems legitimately stunned by the sudden show of force, hovering uncertainly. A second later, a barrage of rocks comes winging his way (along with a railroad spike from Grenda) in an attempt to knock him back to earth. He counters them with a blast of wind that slows everyone’s advance and sends stones bouncing off the walls.
Something’s wrong, though. The wind is less focused; it howls in random directions and even seems to be affecting the Windigo, his hides flapping violently as he twists in the air. His power seems unaltered by the loss of his first staff in the sense of its strength, but he’s not in control like he was before. And he’s far past whatever slight self-discipline he’d had.

The Windigo lashes out, sending Grenda and Candy spinning across the floor. Mabel and Pacifica narrowly slide out of the way of that attack and make it halfway to the Wendigo before he pins them both in place just as he had Pacifica on the platform; Grunkle Stan jumps forward and takes a swing, but the Wendigo is too high in the air and the punch just bashes one of his shins. The Windigo twirls like a top and the wind follows suit; Stan gets caught in the whirlwind and splashes into the pool. Soos, who had been trying to get behind the Windigo, is also trapped in the sudden twister and loses his balance, spinning on his back as if he’s breakdancing; it would be funny if it weren’t so dangerous.

Dipper dives to one side to avoid a broken stalagmite that’s rolling across the floor and finds himself next to Great-Uncle Ford and Wendy, who have both taken cover below the lip of the reservoir.

“I can’t get close enough to clock this tool!” Wendy says with frustration, her titian tresses whipping wildly about her face.

“I guess he doesn’t need that first staff!” Dipper shouts over the roar of the wind.

“He’s about to wish he still had it. He’s losing control!” Ford yells back with a grim expression.

It’s true. The wind is so violent that the Windigo is now shaking in the air like a man riveted to a wall, his arms and legs fully extended. The power surging through him seems to be in danger of ripping him apart from the inside. No one can get close to him. Every time it seems like one of them is about to land a hit, he sends them reeling without even having to motion. It’s like he is the wind, like it’s an extension of him; but it acts like a manifestation of a raging subconscious, outside his rational command.

“He must have a focus,” Ford says, “something to ground his power! If we can sever the connection, we can end this!”

“What would it look like?” Wendy asks.

Dipper scans the room, which is difficult with the wind screaming at his face. He’s not sure what he’s looking for—until he sees it. “There!”

It’s not far from the Windigo’s hammock. It’s a normal looking chunk of rock, for the most part. But the top third of it has been carved into a circle with a hole through it, perhaps a symbolic echo of the domed cavern. The wind is howling through the center of the circle with so much force that the whole thing is vibrating across the floor of the cavern, moving slowly to the right.

“Good eye!” Ford draws his energy gun and aims, resting it on the edge of the pool. “I’ll just need to break the circle—”

The Windigo’s right hand forms a fist. A tight gust of wind hits Ford like a huge invisible hand; he flies backwards and skids across the ground. The wind continues to push him until he is pinned to the rear wall of the cavern, no longer conscious.

Dipper can only watch. “Great-Uncle Ford!”

Wendy shoves him down just in time to avoid a similar fate. “Look out!”
Soos goes flying by, waving his arms in a futile attempt to steer. “Awww, duuuuuuuude—!”

Grunkle Stan is stuck in the water, barely keeping his head up enough to breathe. Dipper has lost sight of the girls; he tries to look around the edge of the pool and narrowly avoids catching a chunk of rock to the face.

“The donut!” Wendy screams.

Dipper rolls over to look at her. “What?”

But Wendy isn’t talking to him. She’s miming frantically, pointing past the Windigo to the focus, tracing a circular shape with her hands. “Get the freaking donut!”

He tries to follow her line of sight, but from where he is, he can’t see. She must be motioning to Mabel and the other girls.

Wendy turns back to him with an expression of pure iron resolve. “Gotta run interference,” she says. “Dude, if I don’t make it, I want a Viking funeral.”

He doesn’t even know what’s going on. “Wendy—”

“OVER HERE YOU GOON!” Wendy takes off running, somehow keeping her balance despite the scouring winds.

She makes it about halfway across the left side of the cavern before the Windigo catches her with a burst that lifts her off her feet. She disappears into the shadows at the edge of the room, and Dipper can’t tell if she’s alright.

“Geez, Wendy…” he groans through clenched teeth, fervently hoping she’s in one piece. He’s not sure what she was trying to accomplish, but he can guess. Somewhere else in the cave, someone needs a distraction.

Looks like he’s the only one left to provide it.

Surmising that Wendy ran the way she did for a reason, Dipper decides to follow in her footsteps. He braces himself and counts to three.

One.

Two.

(holy schnikes this is a terrible idea.)

Three.

“H-Hey! Over here!” he yells, jumping out of cover. He finds the Windigo already looking right in his direction. “I’m… not afraid of you!”

The wind hits him like a truck. Unlike Wendy, he doesn’t go far. There’s a stalagmite behind him and he slams into it, a bug pinned to a windshield. The wind doesn’t let up, and he’s soon fighting just to breathe. This isn’t going well. What is he even being a distraction for? He thinks he’ll probably pass out soon.

He sees something brightly colored in the corner of his eyes. It’s hard to look, but he manages it.

It’s Mabel. She’s sailing through the air like a dayglo rocket, launched by Grenda. The Windigo is
looking the other way and as Mabel flies at him, she holds out her sweater in both hands and catches it on his head like a net. She wraps it around his face and latches onto the sleeves, hanging down his back.

The Windigo flails blindly, Mabel’s weight pulling his head back on his neck. The wind turns him in a tight circle, and he rotates in place so quickly that Mabel swings out like a propeller; still, she doesn’t let go. A second later, Dipper understands her purpose; Pacifica and Candy are racing towards the focus.

He struggles against the crushing pressure, trying to free himself and join in, but it’s no use. Despite the Windigo’s preoccupation, whatever spell he cast towards Dipper hasn’t gone away. It’s up to the girls.

The Windigo may be blind, but he’s still dangerous. He’s attacking randomly, and Dipper watches in helpless horror as the Windigo gets lucky; his hand opens right in Candy and Pacifica’s direction. Dipper shouts a warning, even knowing that it’s useless, that they can’t hear him.

The gale-force gust slices the air between the girls. Candy is shoved away, tumbling to the floor. Pacifica, her eyes wide and her mouth forming an exclamation, staggers in the opposite direction. Her left foot catches on the uneven ground and she falls towards the focus—

—and her hair—her thick, obsessively brushed, expertly-styled mane of gorgeous blonde, her follicular pride and joy—is sucked directly into the focus like a bird into a jet engine.

And instantly stops it up.

Silence descends in the cavern so suddenly that it’s deafening.

The Windigo plunges limply to the ground, a puppet with his strings cut. Mabel lands directly on top of him, audibly knocking the air from his lungs.

She stands triumphant on his chest. “Sneak attack!” she gloats. “Spy style.”

“Oh god, no no no— my hair.” Pacifica is bent over stiffly with her hands extended in dismay, clearly afraid to move. “Someone get me out of this thing! Now.”

Dipper is still trying to catch his breath. He manages to get to his feet, his head spinning from lack of oxygen. Grunkle Stan heaves himself out of the pool, spitting water and curses in equal measure. Dipper is relieved to see Great-Uncle Ford and Soos both conscious and moving. He’s briefly worried about Wendy, but she soon emerges from the shadows of the far edge, looking only slightly worse for wear.

“Dude, that was intense,” she says, trading a high five with Soos.

“Ow. Everything hurts,” Stan groans, mopping water from his face.

“We somewhat underestimated our opponent,” Ford says, noticeably limping as he approaches Stan.

“We?” Stan grumbles.

“We’re fine, Stanley,” Ford says, patting his brother on the back. “Not like it’s the first time we’ve faced a storm!”

The Windigo stirs feebly beneath Mabel’s shoes. “Please get off,” he wheezes.
He loses all ability to speak when Candy and Grenda pile onto him. “Stay down!” Grenda instructs him. Candy says something in Korean that sounds equally threatening.

Pacifica, meanwhile, is not happy. “Seriously, get my hair out of this thing or I am going to lose it.” Grenda stands up and reaches for her. “Okay!”

“Uh, that’s probably not a good idea,” Dipper says quickly, wanting to avoid Pacifica’s hair being ripped out.

Soos is examining the focus. “I don’t know, dude. This thing is still going like a vacuum or something.”

Wendy clicks a pocket knife open. “I could just cut her hair off.” Pacifica doesn’t think much of that option. “Don’t you dare!”

Ford approaches Pacifica, adjusting the settings on his energy weapon. “Breaking the circle should break the spell. Hold still, Pacifica.”

“I am. I can’t move,” she says through clenched teeth.

Ford holds down the trigger of his gun and it emits a low-energy cutting beam which gradually slices through the rock. He leaves a thin segment intact, keeping some distance between the beam and Pacifica’s ignitable hair. He grabs hold and heaves, and the chunk of stone cracks loose.

Pacifica stumbles away from the focus. The state of her hair reminds Dipper of the way she had looked after the decompression of the warehouse. She grabs a fistful of her blonde locks and inspects them. “Split ends?!” She turns threateningly towards the Windigo.

Dipper catches her hand and holds her back. “I think he’s had enough.”

“I have,” the Windigo says faintly.

Ford has taken the Windigo’s ‘spare staff’ and is examining it. “Entirely insufficient to maintain that kind of channeling,” he pronounces. “You really should have known better.”

“C’mon, man, you stole my good staff,” the Wendigo weakly whines.

Dipper curiously approaches the Windigo’s spartan sleeping quarters. He picks up a book sitting on the bed; it looks like it’s a journal. He opens it to a random page.

The Windigo’s handwriting is difficult to decipher:

*Every (wind? road?) leads here. Don’t know why. Small place, kind of (?). Found some promising crystals in the woods. Stole them from some weird little dude said they were looking for a queen. You and every other guy, buddy. Promised to hook them up with some dating apps and then took off. Probably should steer clear of the (east?) valley for awhile. NOTE: CALL MOM.*

“You ripped off the gnomes?” Dipper says, kind of impressed despite himself.

The Windigo is not pleased by Dipper’s choice of reading material. “Hey, that’s top secret!” He quickly shuts up when Grenda raises a fist. “Can I punch him now?” she asks.

“I’ll be good,” the Windigo squeaks.
Dipper tucks the journal away for later perusal. Besides, it’s probably best that the Windigo lose his notes.

When they finally emerge from the tunnels and into the sunlight again, Dipper finds himself blinking against the brightness of the afternoon. It really hasn’t been that long since they began their impromptu quest, but it sure feels like it. He had perhaps unconsciously been expecting the purple hue of the late evening, or even the darkness of night.

The Windigo stumps miserably along, held hostage by Grunkle Stan and Grenda. His wicker helmet has been removed, revealing the plain and pale face of a nondescript man in his late twenties or early thirties. He is thoroughly unimposing. Stripped of his staves and focus, he’s also harmless. Dipper has already begun to think of him as just Greg.

“So, Greg,” Dipper says, falling into step with the dour man, “how did you get into magic, anyway?”

“Mail order,” Greg says vaguely.

“But why try it?”

“I don’t know,” he says with monotone apathy. “Figured it’d get me more respect than a nursing degree.”

Ford objects. “Medicine is a very respectable field, Gregory. You should return to pursue your studies!”

“I’d just fail at that, too,” Greg sighs despondently.

Dipper moves ahead slightly to confer with Grunkle Ford. “What are we going to do with him?”

“Send him back to his mother; or his brother’s place. I remain unclear on his living arrangements,” Ford answers.

Dipper is surprised. “Not the police?”

“We could turn him in for assault, I suppose, but it’d be our word against his. I don’t think the charges would stick, especially if the county’s law enforcement hasn’t improved since the eighties.” Ford glances at Dipper. “I take it from your expression that it has not.”

“Oh, no. Not really.”

“We’ll catalogue his Weirdness wavelength before we let him go. If he shows up again, we’ll know about it,” Ford says.

“But he can still make another staff somewhere else,” Dipper points out.

“He could. But I think he’d find it would grant the barest echo of the power he tapped into here.”

Ford looks upward pensively. The pine trees stir in the gentle breeze of the afternoon. As the adventure party and their glum quarry descend the hill to the road, at the opposite side of the valley the trees rise up to meet the other cliff so steeply that it’s as if the horizon itself is a forest, like they are perched on the downturn of a wooded mobius strip and the sky will soon be underfoot.

“He was brought here, Dipper,” Ford says. “Just as we were. There are few places in the world where he could have come even close to harnessing the same energy.”
Dipper supposes he can’t really blame Greg if the man returns someday, unable to stay away.

It’s not like Dipper can.

When they reach the road and pile back into the vehicles, Dipper elects to sit inside the truck with Pacifica. She’s once again doing what she can to fix her hair with her hands, not that she’s having much in the way of success.

“I guess fashion saved the day,” he says, unable to suppress a grin.

She is not amused. “Why can’t monsters and other idiots just leave my hair alone? Why is that so hard?”

She probably shouldn’t be asking him, seeing as he has a minor obsession with her hair as well. “You’re okay, right? Did it hurt your head?”

“A little,” she admits. She drops her hands with a disgusted sigh, giving up. “If only I had a boyfriend to give me a scalp massage.”

He can take a hint (well, sometimes). “Alright, come here.” He’s not really sure how to give a scalp massage, other than it probably involves rubbing the top of her head. But she doesn’t complain when he starts, so he must be doing something right. “Better?”

“Mmmm,” she says with evident appreciation. “You’re not too bad at this.”

Her palpable enjoyment is making him wonder what all the fuss is about. “Do I get a turn?” he asks.

“Maybe if you shove your head into a magic donut and save everyone,” she tells him.

“I don’t know if my hair would have cut it,” he admits.

“Hair this thick and strong doesn’t belong to just anybody,” Pacifica boasts. Then her head tilts slightly in consideration. “…Okay, maybe Candy.”

Dipper is far from being an expert. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Oh obviously.” She sighs dramatically. “My fashion genius is wasted here. I should move to Paris.”

He has the brief mental image of her holding a baguette on a balcony, the Eiffel Tower in the background. But whatever she might say, he knows she doesn’t mean it. Her hair smells like the forest, overlaid with the earthy scent of the cave. It’s a reminder that she—the prestigious, dignified Pacifica Northwest—just chased after a rogue wind wizard and jammed her head into a dirty stone donut to stop him. Not once this summer has she demurred from adventuring. Which, when Dipper really thinks about it, seems as likely as a disgruntled dude controlling the wind.

He slides his arms around her, savoring her warmth, her shape, the reality of her presence and history, just the fact he’s allowed to do this. That he can touch her, specifically, not just any girl. There’s something about that he can’t put into words.

“You are glad to be back,” he needles her.

He can’t see her face, but he’d bet just about anything that she rolls her eyes. “Fine, whatever. It’s not boring, at least.”

He can’t resist. “I told you so.”
She huffs out a sharp breath through her nose, exasperation and what might be suppressed amusement. “You’re such a dork.”

The truck jolts as Soos shifts into gear. The crackle of gravel beneath the tires gives way to the steady hum of the blacktop. Before long, the Windigo will be a bus moving the opposite way, passing once again beneath the trestle and the valley’s mountainous maw. Being banished from Gravity Falls probably wouldn’t seem like much of a punishment to a lot of people.

Dipper can’t think of a worse one.

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& Brand the Ground With Storm and Song by The Shivering (Alone, 2004)
The street is awash with the soft glow of candlelight, backed by the glittering dots of porch lights spreading their pools of illumination across grass lawns and concrete sidewalks, rarely reaching the asphalt. Streetlights stand at attention at steady intervals, a runway cutting through the gathering dusk and pointing the way to candy or home, depending on direction. Summerween arrives later in the day than Halloween, drifting into a darker time of night, waiting on the stubborn summer sun.

Mabel isn’t super thrilled to be recycling her Ghost Harasser costume from the party, but she and Dipper did work hard on them. Plus, they have both been pretty busy lately. It hasn’t been that long since the bash at Tambry’s and with all that’s been going on, Mabel probably wouldn’t have had the time to make a new set of costumes. She still feels like she’s kind of settling.

Clad in their costumes, Mabel and Dipper have paused beneath a streetlight at an intersection while Mabel consults her phone. Pacifica waits nearby, once again dressed as a princess of some description. Soos, a rotund Batman, is ostensibly their chaperone but is mostly just along for the ride.

“So where are you meeting Candy and Grenda?” Dipper asks.

“I thought it was here,” Mabel replies. She checks the street signs again and scrolls through her texts. “Wait, where’s Poplar Street?”

“Back that way,” Soos says, pointing the direction they had come from. “Or… maybe that’s Popular Street? But nobody really goes there.”

“We can’t be lost in this town. There’s, like, five streets,” Pacifica says impatiently.

That’s an exaggeration, but she has a point. Mabel wonders if Grenda’s text was autocorrected. She wants to meet up with her friends, but she knows that tonight, all lost time equals lost chocolate. “Dipper, you start here, and I’ll look for them,” she says, wanting at least one of them to get started.

“Dude, Mabel—I don’t think you should go alone. ‘Specially not tonight, you know?” Soos cautions.

“Soos, how about you go with Mabel and me and Pacifica will start here,” Dipper suggests.

Mabel is cool with that. “The sooner I get Candy, the sooner I get candy-candy. Come on, Soos!”

The group splits, Pacifica and Dipper heading for the first house on the row while Mabel and Soos backtrack towards Poplar (or Popular) Street. It’s a beautiful, balmy late evening beneath a clear sky. Clusters of other kids pass by, talking, laughing. Mabel loves everything about Halloween (save for the meaner stuff some jerks get into) and its summer equivalent is, if anything, even more delightful. Better weather, better-tasting melons, and a whole town where the supernatural is super-real!

But as much as she is enjoying the gentle warmth of the incipient night, it would be all the sweeter if it came with a fat pillowcase of sugary treats. The sooner she finds Candy and Grenda, the better.
She and Soos wander for maybe fifteen minutes or so. Mabel soaks in the ambience, gliding through the temperate darkness between the flicking light of the jack-o’-melons. Still, she’s starting to worry. She pauses at another intersection—there are fewer lit houses here. One of the signs says ‘Poplar,’ so she follows it.

But the street meanders around a copse of pines and dead-ends at a cul-de-sac. There are only two houses. One has no jack-o’-melons and the porch light is out (spoilsports). The other is under construction. One side of it has partially collapsed and the windows are boarded up; there’s a pickup truck parked on the untended lawn and a couple big pallet stacks of two-by-fours and drywall. Two portable toilets sit side by side on the scrubby grass.

There’s also no sign of Candy and Grenda.

“Dang it,” Mabel sighs. “Where the heck are they?”

“Hey, I know this house,” Soos says, pointing to the damaged one. “This is Brendon’s place. I haven’t seen that dude in, like, forever.”

“What happened to his house?”

“Portal shenanigans,” Soos says, making an O with his fingers. “That was lit, but also kinda crazy destructive.”

Mabel winces slightly. It’s not that she regrets keeping the portal on, but this is a reminder that bringing Grunkle Ford back hadn’t happened without collateral damage. There are less obvious signs of the gravitational anomalies all over town: the occasional patch of redder bricks; fresh black roof tiles; new glass in old frames.

“Yo, since we’re already here,” Soos nods towards the portable toilets, “good a time as any to empty the tank.”

Mabel is still itching to get started, but he’s got a point. She’s been forced to hold it through multiple streets before and it’s never fun. “Well, okay. Don’t take too long, just make enough room for candy.”

Soos gives her a thumbs up and walks into one of the stalls. Mabel goes to the other and pulls open the floppy plastic door. The inside appears oddly pristine, as if it has gone unused. The rays of the cul-de-sac’s sole streetlight filter in through the screened slots just enough to see. Satisfied that the porta-potty isn’t too gross, Mabel steps inside and lets the door clack shut behind her.

Instantly, she is plunged into complete darkness.

Confused, she turns around and pushes against the door. It doesn’t budge. “Soos?” she calls out, pushing harder. “Okay, you got me. Great Summerween scare! …Soos?”

The silence is her only reply. The first pangs of panic begin to gnaw at her. Soos isn’t above a practical joke, but he usually can’t help giving it away, and at this point it’s too mean-spirited to be him. If he had been holding the door shut, he would have opened it with a chuckle the second she said his name. She’s genuinely worried now. Why can’t he hear her? He’s not far away, and the portable toilets aren’t even close to being soundproof.

She pushes the door again. There’s no give at all, not like there would be if someone was holding it. Well, she’d better step it up. Moving as far away as she can, she leans forward and throws her full weight against the barrier.
It bursts open and she tumbles to the ground, rolling to a stop. She just stays down for a moment, enjoying the fresh air. “Hey, Soos, the toilet tried to eat me!”

Still no response. She stands up, brushing grass from her costume. The other porta-potty is empty, its door ajar. But there’s more reason than that to be concerned.

The world is different. Like, really different. Everything is colored wrong. The grass is black, and the sky is a milky grey with black stars. It’s like looking at a photo negative, or maybe a TV with really bad settings. There’s no wind, not a slightest rustle from the trees. The silence is total, and deeply eerie.

“Well this isn’t right,” she mumbles, taking in the inverted scenery.

What is this? Did the portable toilet mess up her eyes? She rubs at them experimentally; it makes no difference. Soos is gone, anyway, so she doubts it’s her eyes. Is she in some kind of mirror dimension? Is that even a thing?

Well, if the porta-potty got her into this mess, maybe it can get her out of it. She goes back inside and shuts the door. This time when she tries it, the door swings open easily. Everything is still weird. She tries several more times to no avail.

Darn it.

Looks like she’s not getting back to normality that quick.

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Soos emerges from the portable toilet with a sigh of relief. “Lucky these were here. I feel kinda sorry for the next guy, but better out than in, right, hambone?” He crosses the short distance to the other toilet. “You still ocupado?”

There’s no answer. Concerned, he raps his knuckles lightly on the door. “Mabel? Dude, did you fall in?”

That’s when he notices the door isn’t locked. He hesitates, weighing his worry against the possibility of interrupting Mabel in the midst of some very personal time. “Say something, dude, you’re freaking me out!”

Nothing.

Finally, he grows too concerned to leave it alone. He puts one hand over his eyes so all he’ll be able to see is the floor and, with any luck, Mabel’s feet. “Okay, I’m gonna open it! Hope it’s not about to get real…”

He pulls the door open, but even with his eyes partially covered it’s obvious that Mabel isn’t there.

He spins in place, surveying the cul-de-sac. There’s no sign of anyone, let alone Mabel. “Not good,” he mutters to himself. “Not good. Mabel?” He jogs back to the intersection and calls again. “Mabel?”

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So now Mabel is stuck in some kind of mirror dimension (maybe). And there’s no Dipper around to figure out what’s happening.

“Guess it’s up to me,” she muses.

She checks her phone and isn’t surprised to see there’s no signal. No, it couldn’t be that easy.

She needs to use her noggin on this one. Not spy style—science style. What would Grunkle Ford do? She tries to imagine him, all bookish and professor-y, explaining that mirror dimensions are something something and so she should something. Except without the ‘something.’ He’d be just like Dipper, more excited to be in such a weird place than worried about getting out of it. He’d know just what to do, which would be… tests! That sounds right. She needs to know stuff to do stuff. Duh!

“Test number one,” she says. “What happens if I…” she spins around, looking for a suitable subject, “…pick up this rock?”

She picks up a nice, hefty rock from the ground, about the size of a tennis ball. It’s a strange inky black, and the texture of it is all wrong. It’s too smooth. It feels kind of like glass.

She tentatively touches her tongue to it. “Yep, that’s glass,” she declares.

The only thing around that looks normal is the door to the porta-potty. It’s the right color, and it doesn’t have the weird, shimmery quality that everything else does. Bits and pieces of the rest of the cubicle also look normal. An aluminum bar which serves as a handhold appears to be real. Mabel pockets the glass rock and goes back into the stall; she gives an experimental tug on the metal bar and it comes free of the wall with a splintery crunch. Looking closely at where it had been attached, she sees that there’s a layer of glass-stuff over the regular plastic. The toilet cubicle is a cross-dimensional hybrid!

Man, Dipper would be so proud of her for coming up with that. Too bad he isn’t here.

Nothing else seems to be like that. The other portable toilet is all glassy and strange, along with the rest of the scenery. Even the grass feels cold and untextured when she bends down to touch it. It’s not glass, but it’s not grass, either. And it’s so quiet. Not a whisper rises from the lawn or the strange black trees.

Mabel shivers a little. It’s not noticeably colder here, but it’s really, really spooky.

“Great Summerween setting, I guess…” she says to no one. “I’m scared for realsies. Not as much fun without everybody else, though…”

*Think*, Mabel! What would Grunkle Ford do? Tests, sure, but what else? How would he figure it all out and get home? She tries not to think about the inconvenient little fact that he spent thirty years roaming the multiverse and never did figure out how to get back. Not that she has to worry about that. Everything is made of glass or whatever, so she’ll starve way before she turns forty.

Ugh, bad thoughts. Be positive! Soos is probably already looking for her. He’ll get Dipper and Pacifica and Grunkle Ford and Grunkle Stan and they’ll all work together. They’d never leave her here. She just needs to figure stuff out on her end to make it easier. That’s all.

So, if Grunkle Ford were here, he’d say…

“Interesting predicament you’ve stumbled into. What is this, glass? Some manner of *glass*
dimension? Well, at least we aren’t breathing glass… unless glass is breathable here,” Grunkle Ford says, appearing from nowhere.

Mabel gapes at him for a second, then charges forward to hug him in relief. But something blares a warning in the back of her mind, some sense of sheer wrongness. Where did he come from? Why didn’t he come out of the porta-potty? She skids to a halt and looks at him with tentative suspicion.

“Wait… are you the real Grunkle Ford?” she says, hoping she’s just being dumb and that he’s totally real and ready for a hug.

“Very astute, Mabel,” Not-Ford says, and her heart sinks. When he turns to face her, she can see that he looks just like the real Stanford, with the exception of his irises: they are a glassy black.

“If you’re about to turn into a glass demon or something, I’ll whomp you good!” Mabel threatens, brandishing her aluminum bar.

“Yes, there’s that boldness, that spark!” Not-Ford says appreciatively. “Always ready to defend yourself or those you love. I wish Dipper had that same fire. He could learn a thing or two from you.”

Feeling a bit disarmed despite herself, Mabel slowly lowers her makeshift weapon. “Um… thanks?” She looks behind Not-Ford, but there’s no door or anything. “Were you here the whole time?”

“An interesting line of inquiry. Let’s follow it, shall we?” Not-Ford suggests. “You are the brightest of us, after all.”

“Well… I was thinking about you, and then you just popped up.”

She’s tempted to make someone else appear by thinking about them, but quickly stops herself from doing so. This Not-Ford is weird with his glossy black eyes and overly complimentary manner. Mabel is not the ‘brightest’ of her family. She can admit that and it’s not even hard to do. She’s always known Dipper is the smarty twin. If Not-Ford is trying to butter her up for sneaky reasons, he’s wasting his time.

“Perhaps this place fulfills our desires,” Not-Ford muses. “You wanted to talk to your great-uncle. Or, perhaps I wanted to talk to my favorite nibling!”

Okay, now Mabel really doesn’t trust him. Grunkle Ford loves her, she knows that, but she’s Grunkle Stan’s favorite. Plus, this gloomy glass dimension doesn’t look interested in making anyone’s wishes come true. She’s been to Mabeland already; this place isn’t anything like that. And even if it was, she’d be just as desperate to escape.

Not-Ford is wrong, in more ways than one. But he’s not totally super wrong; just mostly wrong. So… how? Has he been spying on everyone? Well, maybe. He doesn’t really seem that powerful, though. And if he has been, then he’s not very good at it.

Unless it’s not that at all. What if the glass is in her head? What if… what if the glass reflects her thoughts? But not like they are in her head, and more like a funhouse mirror. Tall and wiggly, short and wiggly, all fractured and mottled. Bits and pieces of everything, refracting shard to shard. If she looks down for a minute, she can make out her own reflection in the black-and-rainbow dirt, nothing but a jagged outline and slivers of shapes.

Darkly. Through a glass, darkly. She’s heard that somewhere before. Maybe Dipper said it.

(Whoops, she shouldn’t think too hard about anyone in particular. Better not make any more glass
She’s starting to think she summoned advice from the wrong grunkle. She reaches into her pocket and hefts the glass rock, solid and smooth. If everything is a mirror, then what’s on the other side?

“This sure is a good huckin’ rock,” she declares, tossing it up and catching it again.

She’s watching Not-Ford closely to gauge his reaction. His expression remains pleasant but becomes fixed. “I’d be careful with that, Mabel,” he warns her. “An unknown environment like this could react in unpredictable ways.”

He could be telling the truth. Throwing a rock in a world made of glass might not be the best idea. But standing around isn’t getting her anywhere, and she figures anything Not-Ford doesn’t want to her to do is probably worth doing.

She cocks her arm back, ready to fling. “Go, rock! FOR SCIENCE!”

She hurls it towards the second porta-potty, the one that seems to be entirely glass. It hits the door and shatters it with a crash that’s shockingly loud in the silence. Glittering shards tumble to the ground, leaving a large hole in the door.

There’s an image shimmering in the space the rock tore, jagged and uneven, constantly shifting. It looks a lot like Grunkle Stan’s old television when the antenna gets overwhelmed by the valley’s bizarre and unpredictable signals. The picture turns into banded colors that scroll up and down randomly, only occasionally snapping together to form a something recognizable for a brief and blurry instant while voices hiss and fade in and out of static. There’s red and blue in the fragmented door, and maybe motion, like it’s following someone.

“Mabel?” the statics sighs. “Mabel.” And then, for just a second, the static coalesces into a recognizable voice. “Mabel?” Dipper shouts.

Mabel jumps in place, waving her aluminum bar wildly. “Dipper! I’m right here!”

With a fizzing pop, the distorted image vanishes. The rest of the porta-potty looks damaged in its wake, cracked through and on the verge of collapse. Something about reality bleeding in hurts the glass, it looks like. Either that or she can throw a rock a lot harder than she thought!

But it worked, sort of. Now she just needs to make a bigger gap and get someone’s attention.

“That was foolish, girl,” Not-Ford says severely. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“Nope!” Mabel admits.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You’ve always been careless.” Not-Ford glares down at her accusatorily. “It was all your fault, you know. Yours and yours alone. You carry the blame for what happened. So blithely destructive, so careless. Did you really think anyone would ever forgive you? It’s your fault, Mabel.”

Hurt spreads through her chest, despite her knowing that he isn’t Ford. All the doubt she’s carried is still there, in one way or another, even if she’s parceled it away. Not-Ford’s words are just close enough to some of her own thoughts to cut.

But then she remembers all the healing truth given to her above the earth, below the sky; and she remembers what real Ford said, down in the basement. She sniffs, tightens her jaw stubbornly, and quickly wipes the first hint of tears from the corners of her eyes.
“What is?” she says.

Not-Ford frowns. “What?”

“What’s my fault?” She grips the aluminum bar in both hands. “Huh? What is all my fault?”

Not-Ford is silent for a long, awkward moment. “…Everything,” he finally says.

“You don’t even know!” Mabel exclaims. “And my grunkle wouldn’t have said that anyway.”

She leaps forward and swings the bar against Not-Ford with all her might.

He explodes with a tremendous crash of shattering glass, and the destruction doesn’t stop there. The entire world splinters; the sky is crisscrossed with widening lines and the earth shakes itself apart. All the houses and trees collapse with a deafening concert of jumbled glass. It’s as loud as it is terrifying; Mabel isn’t sure what she’s still standing on. She covers her ears and waits for it to stop.

When she dares to peek through one partially opened eye, she finds herself in a black void. The glass world has vanished, its remnants disappeared. She stands on nothing and is surrounded by nothing.

There is only one exception.

In what she thinks is the spot where the porta-portal (ha ha!) once stood is another glowing, twisty image that expands and contracts. She can’t tell what it is, but it’s the only thing that exists other than her, and that’s good enough reason to approach it. The sound is fuzzy and distorted, but she thinks she hears voices.

Well, only thing to do, she supposes.

She takes a deep breath and plunges forward through the shifting colors.

Once again, she finds herself falling forward. She tumbles across the ground, but even in her disoriented state she begins to feel relieved. She can hear the trees again, and the grass that tickles her arms is warm and appropriately grassy. When she rolls to a stop, she just stays down for a second, enjoying the smell of the earth and the sounds of the wind.

When she raises her head, the first thing she sees is Pacifica. The other girl is facing towards the woods and hasn’t seen Mabel.

“Mabel?” Pacifica calls. “If you’re just hiding in the woods, it’s not funny! I’m serious.” She sighs and folds her arms tightly, clear worry in her posture.

“I’m here!” Mabel says, staggering to her feet. “I’m okay!”

Pacifica spins around, eyes wide. “What the heck? Oh my god, were you actually just hiding? I’m going to kill you—”

“I wasn’t hiding, I promise,” Mabel assures her. “I got trapped in a glass dimension. It was super glassy, you don’t even know!”

“Oh of course you did,” Pacifica says with an elaborate roll of her eyes. She walks over and brushes some grass off Mabel’s shoulder, then surprises her friend with a hug. “…At least you’re okay.”

Mabel wholeheartedly returns the hug. Suddenly, she gasps and pulls away. “Oh my gosh!”

“What?” Pacifica says, startled. “I thought you were okay—”
“What time is it?” Mabel frantically pats her costume down until she finds her phone. “There’s still time! Come on!”

“W— hey!” Pacifica is nearly pulled off her feet when Mabel grabs her hand and begins running towards the exit of the cul-de-sac.

They run into Dipper and Soos just past the intersection; Candy and Grenda are with them. Dipper is on his phone, his face creased with apprehension. Soos hovers nearby, equally concerned.

“I don’t know why she’d run off. We checked the whole block. I think we’re gonna need help, Grun — Mabel?!” Dipper nearly drops his phone when he sees her.

Mabel snatches the phone from his hand. “Everything’s okay! Talk to you later, candy now, byeeeeeee!” She hangs up.

Dipper is sputtering in disbelief. “Mabel, what the heck, where have you been— gah—”

Mabel takes hold of his arm and starts running again. “I’m okay, mirror dimension, porta-portal, butthead glass-grunkle! CANDY TIME.”

The whole group runs after her, all talking over each other, confused and relieved. Mabel tunes them out and keeps moving, her eyes on the prize. There will be plenty of time to explain later.

Right now, it’s Summerween!

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Quiet World by Gatherers (Equal Vision, 2015)

Chapter End Notes

The last story arc was an anomaly in that I’ve never done a five-part chapter before (never done more than two, for that matter). In a sense I have because part one had multiple instances of several chapters covering the same event, but I never repeated a chapter title until ‘new summer season.’ On one hand, segments like the whole Windigo business are easier to write because it’s a series, a bunch of things happening with the same end goal in mind. I don’t have to come up with a new premise every chapter. On the other hand, it may be more interesting to know that each new chapter will bring a whole new ‘episode.’ And on the other other hand, a five-parter like ‘& brand the ground with storm and song’ more closely resembles the actual format of the show. It’s long enough that you probably could make a twenty-two-minute script out of it. Can’t say the same for this chapter.

In contrast to part one, ‘new summer season’ has always been intended to be a lot more episodic, even if it still continues all the plot threads and characterizations from part one. But since I’ve accepted that these chapter do in fact constitute a second part rather than an aimless epilogue, you can expect certain plot elements to come closer to the forefront. The structure of part two won’t change much, but there are things that need to be established and then built upon, as opposed to each chapter serving purely to explore a
different idea and push the characters forward slightly. In this sense part two will come to resemble the show even more.

I’d be interested to read opinions regarding the general presentation of part two thus far. Do the constantly changing concepts of each chapter undermine interest in the core plot, or is it a welcome return to the format of the show? Ideally, we could have both.

As always, let me know what you thought of the chapter itself. I greatly appreciate any reader taking the time to share their thoughts.
In the light of the late afternoon, the portable toilet certainly doesn’t look threatening. There’s nothing unusual about it, as far as Pacifica can tell. To be fair, she probably wouldn’t know if there was, seeing as she’s never used one before.

“There wasn’t any noise at all?” Dipper is asking, scribbling away in his journal.

“Everything went super dark and then the door wouldn’t open,” Mabel says. “I didn’t hear anything.”

Ford stands on a ladder nearby, running one of his many gadgets over the top of the porta-potty. “I’ve got a reading,” he tells Dipper. “It’s slightly higher than expected background levels, but that doesn’t tell us much, if anything. It could be the trace remnants of a dimensional rift, or I could be picking up any one of a dozen other things.”

Dipper taps his pen against his teeth contemplatively. “I guess all the activity around here can work against us.”

Ford descends the ladder and begins scanning the door of the cubicle. “We’ll begin cataloguing the Weirdness wavelengths of whatever we encounter. We should also work backward through my specimen collection, or at least whatever portion of it survived Stanley’s oversight.”

“Man, if we put together a database like that, we might be able to group things by type, or even figure out if they have the same origin!” Dipper says excitedly.

“I share your enthusiasm, but it will be a long time before we have that kind of data,” Ford cautions. “The sheer variety of Weirdness in the valley will keep us busy. The reading from this toilet, for instance, has no point of comparison. It could be the remnants of an aperture, or perhaps a magical curse, or some form of teleportation. Or, maybe it’s just fecal matter.”

Dipper blinks. “The spectrometer would pick that up?”

“When you eat local, Dipper, you’re eating Weirdness!”

“You should scan the other potty,” Mabel snickers. “I think Soos left a lot of Weirdness for you.”

Pacifica wrinkles her nose, less than pleased at the path of the conversation. “This is gross. You’re all gross.”

“Come on, Pacifica. Everybody poops!” Mabel teases.

The four of them are arrayed around the two portable toilets in front of the house on the cul-de-sac. It’s not quite evening yet, but the sun is beginning to dip down towards the tips of the trees, stretching long shadows across the shaggy lawn and empty street. Pacifica has seated herself on the edge of a plastic-covered stack of roofing tiles, waiting for Dipper and his great-uncle to finish their
examination of the porta-potty that had sent Mabel on an odd adventure last night. The only reason Pacifica has tagged along is the lack of anything else to do.

Well, that’s the only reason she’ll admit to, anyway. She’d never tell him because his head’s already big enough as it is (like, for real), but there’s something appealing about watching Dipper at work. The way he gets all serious with that little line between his eyebrows when he’s thinking, those deep brown eyes so focused and intent.

She loves his hair, too, though she rarely glimpses its soft curls without his hat in the way. She’s debated with herself before over whether he’s actually attractive or if she’s just nuts for this nerd, but, no, she’s sure now. He’s cute. He has those kissable lips and a jawline that gets a bit sharper every month, the last vestiges of rounded youth giving way to a masculinity that Pacifica finds very appealing. The new broadness of his shoulders makes her want to put her arms over them, to lean into him. She wants to go swimming again and see him shirtless at Lake Gravity Falls, where the way his swim trunks hung low on his narrow hips made heat twist through her.

She swears he’s gotten half an inch taller just since summer started. Mabel is also a bit taller, though she’ll probably hit her limit soon, if she hasn’t already. Meanwhile, Pacifica’s growth seems confined to other areas. That’s nice and all—she’s liking what she sees in the mirror, but she wouldn’t mind a little vertical growth to go along with it. Instead it looks like she’s resigned to looking up at everyone for the rest of her life. Well, some people, anyway. At least she’s taller than Candy, for whatever that’s worth.

“Do you think the portal was a trap?” Dipper is asking his great-uncle.

“Difficult to say,” Ford muses. He’s on his knees now, scanning the base of the toilet. “It may be an artifact of Weirdmageddon, or it may be another one of the cursed doors that pop up now and again. Whatever the case, it’s gone now.”

“Yeah… I kinda smashed it up good,” Mabel says sheepishly.

“Possibly. It’s also possible that this ‘glass’ you encountered has simply moved on.” Ford gets back to his feet, looking dissatisfied. “There are many pocket dimensions accessible in the valley, but it’s rare to find a reliable way to access one. It may be that this particular entryway only appears at night, or only on Summerween… or if the person entering has an especially full bladder.”

“It’s not the last one,” Mabel says. “I only went in for important trick-or-treating reasons.”

Ford clasps his hands together decisively. “This requires further observation. Dipper, do you know what this means?”

Dipper’s face lights up. “Stakeout?”

“Stakeout! We’ll need a tent, recording equipment, a spare spectrometer, and snacks. I’ve taken a liking to Cheese Boodles, but we can negotiate.”

Pacifica doesn’t like what she’s hearing. It’s muggy out and the mosquitos will be in full force once the sun goes down, not to mention the temperature probably won’t dip below eighty the whole night; it’s almost enough to make a girl miss all the Windigo’s cooling storms (almost). Sweating in a sleeping bag while Dipper stays up all night with Ford isn’t an appealing prospect. She’ll gracefully bow out of this one.

She’s about to tell them so when Mabel appears from nowhere, her hands descending on Pacifica’s shoulders. “Pacifica, it’s finally happening!”
Pacifica is confused. “What? Mabel, you’re squeezing kind of—”

“GIRLS’ NIGHT!” Mabel trumpets. She releases Pacifica and twirls in place. “I’m talkin’ painting each other’s nails! Ordering way more pizza than we can eat! Jumping on my bed! Jumping on your bed! Jumping on Dipper’s bed! Talking and laughing and bonding like only the best future sisters-in-law!”

That’s a lot of jumping. It takes Pacifica a second to process all of that. “…So, what, like a sleepover?”

“Not just any sleepover,” Mabel says, leaning in with eager eyes. “The best sleepover anyone’s ever had ever. Two-thirds of the Mystery Trio living it up all night long!”

Pacifica still isn’t crazy about the whole ‘Mystery Trio’ thing, but she’ll let it slide for now. “Okay, but how is that different from the rest of the time? We hang out almost every day.”

“But not every night!” Mabel enthuses. “And it’ll be just the two of us, without Dipper around to be lame.”

“Hey!” Dipper says from somewhere behind Mabel.

Pacifica is far from being a sleepover expert—and, now that she thinks about it, the only one she’s ever had was the one in Piedmont. Ones in Piedmont? Does falling asleep after a breakdown count? Probably not.

“Yeah, okay,” she says, not fully sure what she’s agreeing to. But as is often the case with Mabel, it’s probably easier to just go with the crazy flow.

Pacifica manages to keep her balance through Mabel’s high-energy hug. She must be getting used to this kind of thing.

When the girls announce their departure, Dipper manages to get his head out of his journal long enough to give them a vague wave; Ford doesn’t even seem to notice, still circling the porta-potty and calling out readings at intervals. Pacifica and Mabel leave the boys to their gross stakeout and walk back to the Shack. The first orange tones of evening spread on the horizon behind the pines. Birdsong follows them down the gravel road, along with just enough of a breeze to take the edge off the fading heat of the day.

There’s something different about the woods. But is it the forest that’s different, or just Pacifica? Dipper’s right. There’s magic in Gravity Falls, and it’s not only the literal kind. Now that she’s been there—beneath the shifting canopy where footsteps fall on matted needles and the air is wild with the scent of summer—she’s not sure how she missed it during all those years spent lording over the town. The town is just a landmark; it’s something known in the midst of all that is unknown. There are secrets out there, in the overgrowth. Sometimes she feels like if she just waits close enough to the pines as they whisper with the wind’s passing, they might share a few.

Or maybe she’s just been spending too much time with her obsessive, paranoid boyfriend.

(…but there is something about this place… and it calls to her, now that she’s listening.)

Mabel is chattering nonstop, talking up the sleepover like she’s trying to sell something. “Bestest sleepover ever! Just me and Paz, doing girl stuff!”

Pacifica curls her lip in a mixture of disbelief and revulsion. “What?”
“Paz! It’s a cute nickname, sleepover style. May May and Paz!”

“No,” Pacifica says firmly. “It doesn’t even make any sense. There’s no Z sound in my name. It’s not like you don’t know that.”

“How about Pacifi-riffic?”

“How about May-butt?”

“Pacifica and Mabel, sleepover BFFs for infinity plus one!” Mabel declares, abandoning her nickname attempts as easily as she began them.

With the Shack closed for the night and its two resident scientists out in the field, the only occupant left is Stan. The girls find him firmly planted in front of the television, watching Baby Fights with his tie undone and his belt hanging loosely over the arm of the chair. It’s clear that he’s done for the day.

“Grunkle Staaaaaaa-aaaaaan!” Mabel sings as she skips up to him. “Pacifica and I are having a mega-awesome girly sleepover! Can we order a pizza?”

“Do I have to do anything but hand you money?” Stan asks.

“Nope!”

He produces a twenty from somewhere in his jacket and lazily drops it in Mabel’s general direction. “One pizza. And don’t go crazy with the toppings. And I want my change!” he yells after them as Mabel scampers upstairs with Pacifica in tow.

In no time at all Pacifica finds herself in her pajamas, ensconced on Mabel’s bed within a ring of stuffed animals. The attic is cooling off as the sun dips behind the trees, its last rays blooming against the vaulted ceiling. This is, according to Mabel, ‘prime gossip time.’ But the two of them have spent most of the summer together; there’s not much to share when it comes to the broader topics because they were almost always both there. The conversation quickly turns personal.

“I should have just talked to him,” Mabel says. She’s on her back with her feet propped up high on the wall, her hair dangling over the edge of the bed to brush the floor. “That’s what we always do, we just talk, but, I don’t know… It was easier not to. Then the power went out and I was like whaaaaaattt…”

“You could have said something. To me, I mean,” Pacifica says. She’s not hurt that Mabel didn’t. Pacifica understands she’s very new to all this ‘sharing’ junk and probably isn’t anyone’s first choice for a confidante.

“Yes!” Mabel blindly flails her hand around until it finds Pacifica’s knee. “I should have told you stuff. You know what it’s like.”

“Like what’s like?”

“To see him fall.”

“Oh.” Pacifica doesn’t care to reexamine that memory. “It was an accident.”

“I know,” Mabel sighs. “Dipper said that too.”

“Well, he’s right.” Pacifica shakes her head. “I can’t believe the power went out right when he cornered you. It’s like he planned it.”
“Nah, Dipper’s not that sneaky,” Mabel says. “It was probably that Windigo jerk.”

“Forget that nerd,” Pacifica says contemptuously.

Mabel rolls over on her stomach and the sudden conspiratorial slant of her smile makes Pacifica wary. “Speaking of nerds…” she drawls, a wink implicit in every word.

This was inevitable. “What do you want to know, Mabel?” she sighs.

“Everything!”

“I don’t know how you aren’t grossed out by this stuff,” Pacifica says bluntly. “He’s your brother.”

“Guess I’m just a true romantic,” Mabel says with an awkward shrug against the mattress. “Who can resist all that love? You guys are the cutest!”

There’s that word again. ‘Love.’ What is that even like? Dipper is Pacifica’s first boyfriend, there’s no point of comparison. She likes him. She’s comfortable thinking that, and she likes him a lot, as much as she’s ever liked anyone. But she likes Mabel, too, and it’s the same word for a very different feeling. Mabel is her best friend. Heck, she could probably say she even loves Mabel, the way Mabel loves Dipper. So, logically, Pacifica could say she loves Dipper… but she teeters on the edge of that thought, because it’s not the same when applied to him; it means so much. She’s only almost fourteen. What is she supposed to know about being in love? She likes Dipper. She like-likes him, if she’s going to be juvenile about it. But does she love him? Are they in love?

There’s a part of her that wants to scream ‘YES’ to the sky and ask Mabel for help putting together a scrapbook of wedding ideas. But that part of her is still small and easy to push down beneath decorum and common sense.

Of course, there’s the other side of the same attachment, the one that recoils from the end of the summer, from a mother and father rent apart, from a future trapped in a place not yet known. The one that makes her feel like there’s something tensile and sharp constricting around her heart. Is that also love? That ache and the burning frustration, the impossible panic. This inability to confront the possibility of leaving Dipper—and Mabel, and Piedmont, and Mr. and Mrs. Pines, and a life she has only just learned she needs—and going back to a hollow echo of what she once had and never wants again. To let go would be to lose everything she now knows is precious. She can’t lose him, can’t even examine the idea of it (if this is love, then it hurts).

It’s all just too much.

Dipper is her boyfriend, and he’s cute and hot and she wants to kiss him and hold his hand. And that’s good enough for now.

The sudden chime of the doorbell saves Pacifica from having to pick which of these thoughts, if any, to share.

“I’m not getting up,” Stan calls from downstairs.

“Piz-za! Piz-za!” Mabel chants, hopping to her feet and racing downstairs to greet the delivery person.

Pacifica pushes herself off the bed at a more sedate pace. She pauses before leaving the attic room, noticing the absence of a familiar weight in her pocket. She pats herself down; her phone is gone. She turns back to the bed and shoves a few stuffed animals aside, but it’s not there.
She sighs in irritation and goes to ask Mabel to call her phone in the hopes the ringtone will make its position clear. But just before she leaves the room, out of the corner of her eye she spots the familiar turquoise case of her phone lying on the floor by the closet. She frowns down at it, unable to fathom how it ended up there. She bends down to retrieve it.

It moves.

“Ah!” Pacifica shrieks and leaps backwards as her phone scuttles across the floor and under the crack of the closet door.

She stands there for a moment, not sure what to do. It takes a couple seconds for her curiosity to overcome how startled she is. She opens the closet carefully, peering inside.

Her phone is still moving. It bumps up against the wall a couple times before fitting into a narrow slot at the bottom of one of the boards.

Pacifica’s eyes widen as she realizes what’s about to happen. “Hey!” She throws open the closet door and makes a grab for her phone, but it’s too late. It wiggles and then slides through the gap, disappearing behind the wall.

“What. The. Heck,” she breathes, staring murderously at the spot where her phone betrayed her.

Mabel comes back into the room with a pizza box in her hands. “The pizza guy says hi,” she tells Pacifica, depositing the pizza on Dipper’s bed. Then she notices that Pacifica is crouched in the closet. “Are we playing the closet game?” she asks excitedly.

“No! My phone just— wait, what’s the closet game?”

“I don’t know. You’re in the closet so I thought we were playing something,” Mabel says. “What did your phone do?”

“It ran away!”

Mabel’s mouth drops open. “For real?”

“Yes! It went behind the wall.” Pacifica puts her cheek against the floor, but she can’t see anything but darkness. She looks back at Mabel. “Is this, like, a thing you know about? Does this just happen?”

“Wow!” Mabel crawls into the small space, blocking what little light had reached the bottom of the back wall. “Show me!”

“I can’t believe this,” Pacifica mutters. Only in Gravity Falls. “Maybe there’s something in one of Dipper’s books.”

“Nah, I read the journals. I don’t think there was anything about phones running away.” Mabel pokes a finger at the hole, managing to get her index finger in up to the knuckle.

“You’re going to get your finger bitten off,” Pacifica predicts.

“Your phone got teeth, too?! That’s so cray-cray!”

“That’s not what I…” Pacifica stops, realizing that for all she knows, her phone might have teeth now. It might have anything. “I don’t know if it grew legs or if something took it, I just want it back. I don’t want some creepy thing going through my texts!”

She sighs in irritation and goes to ask Mabel to call her phone in the hopes the ringtone will make its position clear. But just before she leaves the room, out of the corner of her eye she spots the familiar turquoise case of her phone lying on the floor by the closet. She frowns down at it, unable to fathom how it ended up there. She bends down to retrieve it.
Mabel narrows her eyes dramatically. “Pacifica, do you realize what this means?”

“I… have to get a new phone?”

“We’re going after it.”

Pacifica stares at her friend, but for once Mabel appears to be completely serious. Pacifica has no idea how to respond. Go after it how?

Mabel leaps to her feet. “But first, pizza. For energy!”

Pacifica just witnessed her phone gain an apparent life of its own and flee the room like an expensive turquoise cockroach; despite this, she has a very strong feeling the evening is only going to get weirder.

Chapter End Notes

Of all the characters included in this story, Mabel is the one I stress over the most.

Dipper’s character isn’t usually difficult to write. His character arc is very clear in the show and he is the de facto main character; episodes tend to be colored by his point of view and it’s not hard to pick up the facets of his personality. It helps that those facets often have entire episodes dedicated to them, and that he more or less states in dialogue how he changed over the course of the show. To carry him forward from the last episode is to continue several of the show’s clearest threads.

Pacifica was once more difficult. There wasn’t much to work with, both because she didn’t show up that often and because her character arc was somewhat incomplete and, outside of Northwest Mansion Mystery, largely implied. She had the familiar arc of a character that you might expect to move from being secondary to a main cast member in the next season, had you seen it in some other show which was planned to continue. It was that kind of development; groundwork for episodes that never came to be. Accordingly, I had NMM and a handful of lines from Weirdmageddon to work with. The further I got into my story, the less of a problem this became. I changed her, slowly, and very carefully. I didn’t want to change her too much, lest she become unconvincing or unrecognizable. I hope she still comes across as being who she is, while still being changed.

Mabel presents all kinds of problems. I take issue with the people who say she had no character arc on the show, because I don’t think that’s true. However, I would be hard pressed to defend the pacing of her character arc. Mabel doesn’t undergo significant change until pretty much the last three episodes. (Her secondary arc, comprised of getting over her need to have a boyfriend and learning to be complete without a relationship, is delivered almost entirely by implication alone). She learns that growing up is inevitable and that’s okay, that letting go is something you sometimes have to do, and she decides to support Dipper’s possible decision to stay with Ford despite the fact it would cause her immense personal pain. But all of this happens at the very end. We don’t get to see Mabel deal with the pressures of changing and staying changed. Dipper spends most of season two trying to handle the fallout of Wendy’s rejection and let those
feelings go. Mabel gets a couple lines where she tells Candy and Grenda that it’s okay the summer is ending.

I struggled with discerning exactly where Mabel’s head is at following the finale. And this may be why in those early chapters she’s mostly concerned with helping Dipper cope, and some of her trailing baggage is only now being excised. Mabel has more pathos in the show than I think most people tend to remember, but it’s usually in the service of Dipper’s character, not hers.

I want to do Mabel justice, and that doesn’t just mean maintaining a certain level of her wackiness—though I do have to admit, writing in Mabel’s voice is really, really hard for me at times. I don’t think I ever make her as funny as she should be, but I do try. But just as important is ensuring her character isn’t set aside in favor of the Dipcifica Show. Mabel’s got a lot of wild energy, but she’s also got a lot of heart.
The lowest basement level is chilly and damp, complete with the occasional small puddle in various corners, remnants of the recent rains. Obviously, Ford has some work to do on the walls and roof. There’s a constant deep hum from the weird orb of the generator, and Pacifica is glad it isn’t audible upstairs, because that would get old pretty quick. There’s scientific-looking junk crammed into pretty much every available space in the first room, while the second, much larger room is mostly empty. There’s a clear sense of a work in progress about the space, like Ford is still unpacking, and it’s been almost a whole month since the summer started.

Then again, Ford clearly has a lot of stuff.

Pacifica has made her way down here once before, though that time the laboratory had been occupied by its owner. Now she’s wondering if she and Mabel should be poking around Ford’s space. “Are we supposed to be down here?” she asks.

Mabel seems unconcerned. “I’m sure it’s fine. We can science just as well as the boys can!”

That is objectively false. Pacifica is no slouch in the smarts department, but she has no idea what any of these consoles do, and very much doubts that Mabel has a clue, either. Unless Mabel is speaking generally and just means that girls can be equally skilled scientists. Which is true, but not particularly relevant.

“Just don’t get us in trouble,” Pacifica says.

Mabel only laughs. “Come on, Grunkle Ford will be cool! Why are you always so worried about—” She swallows her next word, stopping in her tracks. When she turns to face Pacifica, her eyes are apologetic. “Sorry… I forget sometimes.”

There’s the sliver of an instant—just a fraction of a fraction—where Pacifica is furious at Mabel for the reminder. Then it is wiped away by a sweet swell of recognition: She has a best friend who cares enough to remember, and to apologize.

Not that Pacifica is willing to express either emotion. Besides, they quickly pass and she’s fine. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.

“What are we even doing down here?” she says, brushing off Mabel’s concern.

“Grunkle Ford went over to the crystals to stop giant rats from happening, remember?” Mabel explains. “And I bet he took some science-y samples.”

Pacifica tries to imagine how making things bigger is going to help them. They could make themselves huge and… what? Literally tear the Shack apart to find a phone?

Mabel rummages around through various drawers and boxes. She soon finds what she’s looking for: a thick plastic bag about half full of crystal segments. “Called it!” she says. She grabs a flashlight off
a nearby workbench and turns back to Pacifica. “Who’s ready for a Girls’ Night adventure? These gals!”

“I don’t think you should take your great-uncle’s stuff,” Pacifica says cautiously. Ford is a strange man and Pacifica isn’t sure where she stands with him.

“I’m not! I’m borrowing one crystal. Just one.” Mabel opens the bag and retrieves a medium-sized piece. “We’ll put it back when we’re done.”

“Okay… done doing what?”

“We’re gonna get your phone back or die trying! Come on!” Mabel rushes to the stairs.

“Wait, die?”

Back in the attic room, Mabel spends a few minutes fiddling with the flashlight, the crystal, and some tape and string. “I think this is how Dipper had it,” she muses, her fingers moving with the deft motions of an arts and crafts master.

“What are we making bigger?” Pacifica says.

“Us! Well, not right away. First we’ll make ourselves smaller so we can find your phone.”

Pacifica belatedly remembers that the crystals can also shrink things, not just make huge gross rats. So, this will be interesting.

Especially since her phone may not want to be found.

But gosh darn it, she’s got a really cute picture of Dipper on that phone. More than one, in fact, and she hasn’t had a chance to print them out for the scrapbook. She wants those pictures. And, you know, the phone itself would be nice. She could buy a new one, but it would be such a hassle.

“I have to get those pictures of Dipper at the lake back. Uh, for the scrapbook,” she quickly adds.

“Exactly,” Mabel agrees.

Pacifica rocks back a step when Mabel suddenly forces something into her arms. She holds it out and sees it’s a teal sweater and that Mabel has thrown on a matching one. On the front in gold yarn are two girls whose hairstyles identify them as Mabel and Pacifica; they’re arm in arm while their free hands are raised triumphantly. The text above them says ‘SLEEPOVER SISTERS.’

How long has Mabel had these?

“Now we’re sweater-prepared,” Mabel declares. “Do you want to go first, or should I?”

Pacifica points to the standing mirror. “Why not just use it on the mirror?”

Mabel grins at her. “Pacifica, you’re a double genius!”

When they line up in front of the mirror and Mabel points the flashlight at it, Pacifica braces herself, perhaps subconsciously expecting it to hurt. There’s no pain, though. It doesn’t feel like falling, either. There’s so little sensation involved that from her perspective it’s as if the room is getting larger; she watches in awe as the bed swells to loom overhead, as the mirror becomes a long, vertical silver lake.

Being small is beyond weird. The floor of the attic is an uneven, dusty plain, all the furniture in the
room bigger than most buildings. It’s hard to tell, but Pacifica thinks she’s maybe six inches tall. The triangular window is so high above that it might as well be the moon. There are all sorts of nicks and scrapes and knotholes she never noticed before. Dipper has at least two pairs of socks wadded up beneath his bed, and she makes a mental note to tell him to wash them.

Mabel notices Pacifica’s focus. “Only four?” she laughs. “Dating you is great for Dipper’s laundry—there would have been a whole hamper under there before. Plus, he showers all the time now, so he’s fifty-percent more huggable!”

“More like a hundred percent, so he’d better keep it up,” Pacifica says.

The door to the closet is a gate like a mountain, like the cliffs that bracket the road into the valley. There’s a floorboard that noticeably hums beneath Pacifica’s feet, and it takes her a second to realize there’s a pipe beneath it. The girls enter the shadow of the closet and approach the gap between the wall and floor. The slot which had once seemed tiny now looks like the crevice of a cave. They lie down on the rough wood of the floor and peer into it.

“That’s some quality mustiness,” Mabel notes.

“Ugh.” Pacifica squeezes her eyes shut for a second, preparing herself for a future of horrible grime. “Let’s just get this over with.”

They descend through the murk of the inner wall. This is the in-between, the spaces usually invisible laid bare. Pacifica is relieved to see it’s mostly just dusty. No leaky water pipes or—god forbid—sewage. The path is clear, too; a multitude of little footprints in the dust lead the way, scattered along next to a long shiny tube of conduit. Studs and crossbeams fade in and out of the gloom. They’re going down, descending deeper and deeper. Pacifica keeps expecting the path to end, confronting her with a sudden drop through the layers of the Shack, but it never happens. It’s like the path was built for just this purpose.

Pacifica looks more closely at her feet. “Mabel, I don’t think this is part of the wall.”

The wood they’re walking on is rougher than the studs of the wall and appears to be held in place by glue instead of nails. There’s a distinctly slapdash quality to it and it doesn’t look original to the house.

“That’s kinda weird,” Mabel says. “Maybe whoever built this took your phone.”

It’s starting to seem that way. And it makes a little more sense that her phone was carried off by something instead of suddenly sprouting legs.

A little more. Slightly.

Down they go for what feels like forever. The Shack is a mysterious building; Pacifica can usually navigate between her room, the living room, the gift shop, the kitchen, and the twins’ room without difficulty, but every now and then she’ll get lost in a way that doesn’t seem possible in a place that isn’t even that big. It’s bigger than most houses, and Stan and Soos constantly change the layout of the museum area, but it’s not exactly sprawling. Heck, she used to live in a mansion! And yet, there are routes that seem to defy memory, doors and dead ends perpetually unfamiliar.

From her newly diminutive perspective, it is this aspect of the Shack which has been amplified. Even being six inches tall, she thinks they should have reached the ground floor by now. There’s a strange light beaming through the old slats; Pacifica presses her face to a hole and finds herself looking out over the living room, now an enormous vista from her lofty perch. Stan is aslee...
muted television, morphing colors and flickering brightness emanating from the screen. It’s a tableau that would have been mundane, even funny, had she come across it under other circumstances. Viewed from inside the wall, the sleeping giant and the silent images take on an eerie cast.

At some point they reach what they think is the ground level. A string of Christmas lights glows in cheerful colors along the hidden corridor.

“Yeah… I don’t think your phone did this,” Mabel says.

“Great. So there’s probably a whole lot of, I don’t know, dumb golf ball people,” Pacifica says.

“Nah, it’ll be something else,” Mabel says, confidently striding ahead. “It’s always something new!”

“How is that better?” Pacifica mutters rhetorically as she follows.

The tunnel leads beneath what Pacifica assumes is the kitchen, judging by the dusty fork wedged in a floorboard crack. At this point it appears to exit the Shack; grass roots dangle down like a bead curtain where the tunnel suddenly turns to dirt. It would be pitch black if not for the Christmas lights that continue to stretch on ahead, leading the way.

There’s also a spiderweb stretched between two boards above, and a fat spider which is, from Pacifica’s tiny viewpoint, about the size of a small dog.

She stops dead in her tracks. “No. Nope. I’ll buy a new phone.”

“Aw, he’s just a harmless, guts-eating spider-puppy,” Mabel says, gesturing for Pacifica to continue. “He doesn’t care about us, we’re not bugs!”

Pacifica does not take a single step forward. “I. Am. Not going near that thing.”

“Pacifica, think of the scrapbook!” Mabel says, her eyes huge and pleading. “Dipper might never be that cute again!”

“That spider is the most horrible thing ever and it’s going to eat us and suck out our bones.”

“Come on, spiders don’t even like bones. If he tried to eat us, he’d be like ‘oh no gross, they have bones!'”

Pacifica is not swayed. The spider hangs silently above, watching them through the glittery black beads of its eyes. It’s truly unnerving to see up close; Pacifica is uncomfortably reminded of the Boss-Lobster and that’s not an association she wants to make. She doesn’t know how Mabel isn’t equally upset.

Oh, right: Mabel is flipping crazy.

“He’s probably more afraid of us anyway,” Mabel predicts. “Watch this.”

Mabel picks up a stone fragment and tosses it upward into the web. When it makes contact and the web vibrates, the spider quickly skitters upwards, disappearing into the shadows.

Mabel shrugs. “See? He’s just a big ol’ hairy baby. With fangs.”

“Stop talking.” Pacifica ducks her head, clenches her fists, and walks forward at a pace that’s nearly a jog. She doesn’t relax until she’s well past the point where the Shack tunnel merges with the soil.

“I didn’t know you’re afraid of spiders,” Mabel comments as they continue.
“I’m not, unless they’re almost as big as me,” Pacifica retorts with more than a little hyperbole.

The tunnel gradually slopes upwards. Tree roots pierce the roof before disappearing again into the dark earth. The character of the light has changed up ahead. It’s brighter and seems to be shining inward from a larger space. Distant sounds are audible, what might be voices. Mabel and Pacifica crouch and move more slowly.

Mabel reaches the opening first. Her eyes widen—Pacifica scoots around her until she can see, and she is equally taken aback.

It’s a small hollow, nestled in the roots of a tree. The chirr of the crickets can be heard from an opening that must be somewhere above; the room itself is honeycombed with additional exits, all of them dark tunnels in the dirt. Christmas lights wrap around the veiny-looking roof, draped amidst the roots. Along the packed dirt floor and stacked up against the walls is a bounty of junk: bottle caps, TV remotes, forks and spoons, a wine corkscrew, a roller-skate, bits and pieces of an old off-white keyboard, a controller for a game console, several light bulbs, and about a million soda pull tabs. In the middle of the room is a sort of raised dais made of twigs, upon which Pacifica immediately spots the turquoise case of her phone, stacked on top of another smartphone. Attached to the podium is a slide made from half-pieces of soda cans. It descends steeply and disappears somewhere below.

Two creatures are hard at work, wrapping a rope made from what looks like twined pieces of grass around both of the phones. They are humanoid with big black eyes and rainbow wings, wearing leafy clothing that doesn’t hide the bristles on their limbs.

Pacifica grabs Mabel’s shoulder and leans in close to whisper, “What are they?”

“I think they’re some kind of fairy,” Mabel whispers back.

“But what are they do—” Pacifica quickly shuts up when the fairies start to talk.

“You almost done?” the first one says. He’s slightly taller than his compatriot; Pacifica mentally separates them that way.

“Just about,” Short says. He tugs on the grass rope, then says, “So what do you think he wants these for?”

“I think it’s none of our business,” Tall says harshly. “Finish up and let’s get these on the water, we’ve got to be at Gnasty’s by sunrise to make the deal.”

Mabel quietly gasps and Pacifica wishes she knew what was going on, because clearly Mabel has at least some idea. Still, it’s obvious the fairies are up to no good. It looks like an illicit salvage operation, or something else Pacifica might see on a TV procedural.

Her phone within reach, Pacifica’s reserves of courage are bolstered. That’s her phone. “So, what, are we going to fight them?” she says quietly to Mabel.

But Mabel isn’t watching the fairies anymore. She reaches out and pulls Pacifica deeper into the shadows, then points upwards. Pacifica follows Mabel’s finger and sees a gap in the roof between two lengths of root. There, poised like a bird on a building ledge, stands a gnome. He’s wearing sunglasses and some kind of jacket.

“Po-po!” Mabel hisses.

“There are gnome police?” Pacifica says incredulously.
“Yeah, Grenda told me about these guys.”

Any question as to what the gnomes are doing there is answered scant seconds later when two squirrels with flashing red lights on their heads come skittering down from the roof, quickly followed by about half a dozen gnomes wielding pinecones.

“GPD! STAY WHERE YOU ARE, THIS IS A RAID!” one of them bellows.

Short gapes at them, frozen in place. “What is this, some kind of raid?”

Tall is quicker on the uptake. “Cheese it, the fuzz!” he shouts.

He kicks a nearby lever and a trap door concealed beneath a thin layer of dirt falls open. Tall dives into the opening with two gnomes and a squirrel hot on his tail. Short goes down beneath a pile of gnomes, kicking and shouting about police brutality.

Mabel turns to Pacifica with an expression of determination. “This is our chance!”

Pacifica isn’t so sure. “Mabel, there’s a tree above us; if we try to grow ourselves, we’ll just get stuck!”

“Do you trust me?” Mabel asks with that absolute sincerity only she can pull off.

Pacifica doesn’t even have to consider it. “Yes!”

“Then come on!”

They don’t try to hide. Mabel sprints out of the opening and makes a beeline for the phones. Pacifica stays close at her heels. In the confusion, they make it almost all the way to the platform before one of the gnomes spots them.

“Hey! You two stop right there!” someone yells.

Mabel throws herself onto Pacifica’s phone, reaching out to grip the sides. At their current size, the phone is about as big as a small mattress. Pacifica piles onto the case next to her friend, gripping the rubber and hoping Mabel actually has a plan.

Mabel scoots backwards slightly and sets her feet against the back of the slide.

Pacifica can only watch as Mabel kicks—the phones teeter on the edge, and then begin to tip. “Oh, no, Mabel, what are we doing oh my god—aaaaaaaaAAAHHHHHHHHHHH—”

The slide is wet and the phone on the bottom has been wrapped in slick plastic. The angle is unbelievably steep; this isn’t a slide meant for people, but for packages. Within seconds all light from the root room is left behind and they rush through absolute darkness. Pacifica presses her cheek to the back of her phone case and fervently wishes there to be no sudden obstructions.

Up ahead, light appears just as suddenly as it had vanished. Pacifica braces herself.

Pacifica’s stomach lodges somewhere just below her neck as the phone raft comes shooting out of the makeshift pipe, getting several inches of air in the process. With a watery plash, it lands in a river that must be, by normal-sized standards, just a spring. The water is freezing cold and the phones only float due to their fairy packaging, and not very well at that. Pacifica’s hands and feet quickly go numb.

“Paddle, Pacifica!” Mabel instructs, flailing at the water and doing more splashing than paddling by
Pacifica’s estimation. “Paddle like you mean it!”

The spring isn’t wide, and the girls quickly manage to beach the phones on a rock. Jumping into the mud, they haul the phones onto relatively dry land and collapse, panting, on solid ground.

Mabel catches her breath first. “See? Easy peasy pizza cheesy!”

Pacifica tries not to think about how ruined her clothes are. “You know…,” she says, still breathing hard, “…aren’t you like, a hero after what happened? We probably could have just explained it was my phone.”

“Maybe,” Mabel says with an easy shrug. “But this was way more fun.”

Pacifica looks upwards. The sky of the late evening is deep blue, slowly giving way to the dark blanket of night. She sucks in another lungful of sweet pine-scented air and smiles widely; wet, cold, lost, and so alive.

“It totally was,” she says, and then laughs without really knowing why.

With the aid of Pacifica’s cosmetic pocket mirror, the girls are soon back to their regular sizes. Mabel hands Pacifica her muddy, wet phone and then looks more closely at the other one.

“Hey, this is Soos’ phone!” Mabel exclaims. “Uh oh. Twenty-six missed calls. He’s way behind.”

They aren’t far from the Shack. It’s only thirty feet, and maybe not even that, back to the property line. They cross the grass of the lawn, feet pressing the earth above the tunnel they traversed. Evening has brought with it a cooler breeze and a tint of violet that spreads across the cloud-free skies, banded with orange and darker purple. The moon, faded above that stratified eventide, rises past the tops of the pines that rustle and sigh as if they are restless for night.

Slipping through the door, they move silently past Stan as he slumbers before the silent television, by unspoken agreement splitting up to shower and change. They reconvene in the attic, worn out, accomplished, and content.

Mabel slumps backwards into her stuffed animals, letting out a tremendous sigh. “So, I know I said we would party all night…”

Pacifica is equally tired. The adrenaline of their adventure seemingly ran down the shower drain along with all the mud and sweat. She leans over and pillows her head on a stuffed manatee. “We could take a nap. I mean, that’s not really sleeping, right? It’s just for a little while.”

“Pacifica, I like the way you think,” Mabel says sleepily.

Mabel makes her lazy way over to turn out the lights. Pacifica sinks deeper into the mattress and her manatee pillow, blinking slowly. The light from the window fades by the minute, drenching the room ever more in shadow, a slow and steady accompaniment to encroaching rest. The weight behind Pacifica’s eyes presses her deeper into the realm just above sleep, the cloudy place between awareness and the blissful dark.

“…Best sleepover ever,” Mabel murmurs into the silence.

Pacifica laughs into the manatee, tired and full of victory. “Definitely.”
Chapter End Notes

I forgot to mention it previously, but I’ve partially fulfilled a long-held writing wish of mine. This story has been mentioned on TV Tropes! Two separate entries for two different tropes. I’m a big fan of TV Tropes and have always wanted a story of mine to have its own page there, but this is the next best thing. It’s genuinely awesome to know that something I wrote can stand as an example of a trope and be used for illustration. Tropes are not automatically bad, after all. They’re unavoidable, and the real art of writing is to deploy them effectively. So, my thanks to whatever person or persons created those entries. If you ever see this, know that I appreciate it.
Pacifica blinks slowly against the brightness streaming in from the window above the couch, its strange pattern of stained-glass bubbles tinting the light and casting patches of pink and orange against the wall and the sheets of her bed. She’s overslept. Her floor fan buzzes lazily back and forth, sending cool air rippling over her shrouded body as it turns from side to side.

She’s comfortable and still drowsy enough that she can probably go back to sleep, provided she puts on her sleep mask to block the morning sun. But her mask is in one of her suitcases and she’d have to get up to retrieve it, thus disturbing her luxury. She knows that she should get up anyway. She just doesn’t want to face the waking world yet.

It’s the Fourth of July, and she’s just turned fourteen.

Her feelings on the matter are… complicated. She’s said nothing at all about her birthday to anyone, mostly because she isn’t sure what to think about it. And she’s not testing Dipper to see if he remembers. Really, she isn’t. She can’t decide if she actually wants him to or not.

The memory of her birthday last summer looms large in her mind. It had been quite the event, eclipsed only by the annual party. She’d had a lavish dinner and a mountain of presents, including a front row seat and backstage pass to the Sev’ral Timez show. As it turned out, shaking hands and posing for selfies with the group had been a pretty meagre backstage experience compared to the story Mabel’s told (or briefly inhabiting the Shack with the boyband during Weirmdageddon, for that matter), but it had been pretty great at the time. She hadn’t known the occasion marked one of the last times she would feel right with her old life. That her first step into her teenage years would bring utter dissolution.
If the Pines had ever crossed her mind, it was only with passing contempt. How blind she’d been. How petty.

A walking one-dimensional bleached-blond valley girl stereotype.

That hadn’t actually hurt at the time, it just made her mad—mostly because someone was standing up to her, and that someone was Mabel. But it hurts now because Mabel said it, and because Pacifica knows it was true.

It’s not anymore (she hopes). She doesn’t expect thousands of dollars’ worth of presents, or a banquet. But her birthday is a reminder that she once had, and it also serves to highlight every uncertainty which surrounds her. She doesn’t even know what to ask for. What’s appropriate? It’s not like Dipper and Mabel have any money. What does she really want, anyway?

Besides for this summer to never, ever end.

There is a substantial part of her that wants all the usual things. A cake and presents; the total attention afforded by her special day. She wants to be the birthday girl and be at the center of things, to have her whims catered to. She deserves it! That’s how this is supposed to work. But every time she thinks she’s settled the question, the doubt comes back. The memories put a damper on her enthusiasm, recalling all the versions of herself she’s tried to leave behind.

So, she said nothing about her birthday, because she didn’t have anything to say. And maybe it’s better this way.

But darn it… despite everything, despite herself, she’s still disappointed that no one remembered.

She sluggishly rises, brushes her teeth and her hair, applies some light makeup for the day. She no longer has the money for a smorgasbord of beauty products, but she makes do. She’s begun wearing far less makeup than she used to, a side effect of her new budget and her new lifestyle. Heavy makeup, she’s found, is a liability while engaging with Weirdness, especially in the summer heat.

Finished with her morning routine, she steps out into the hall. The Shack is quiet and cool; Ford’s new air conditioner works wonders, producing cold air at such a rate that he had to turn it down after everyone had spent a freezing night beneath whatever blankets they could find. Between that and the generator built around the Quantum Destabilizer’s core, Pacifica is now living in what is probably the most cutting-edge domicile in existence. The irony of the building’s overall appearance is not lost on her.

Unlike the twins, Pacifica isn’t usually hungry right after she wakes up. She makes her way to the attic room, but there’s no one there. For all Pacifica knows, Mabel and Dipper are miles away, traipsing through the woods in search of who knows what. Sighing, she turns and stumps back downstairs, wondering if she should just go back to bed. What’s even going on today? Probably nothing until it gets dark enough for fireworks. Unless she wants to make a fuss about her birthday.

No. …Maybe. No! That’s what the old Pacifica would do. …But it’s not like she’s asking for special treatment just because. It really is her birthday. Shouldn’t that count for something?

God. She is so over this. Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.

She’s wandering in the direction of the living room, hoping to come across a distraction, when she hears voices from the kitchen. The smell of baking wafts down the hallway and her stomach finally wakes up enough to twinge.

When she approaches the doorway, she’s confused by the lack of light coming from the kitchen. She
looks inside and isn’t sure what she’s seeing at first; there’s a blanket draped over the window and the room is plunged in shadow. The table has been moved to the center of the room and Dipper, Mabel and Soos are clustered around it.

Pacifica blinks, waiting for her eyes to adjust. “What’s going on?” she asks.

There’s the sudden strike of a match. They all step aside, revealing a cake on the table with two lit candles in the shape of a one and a four. The glow of the candlelight reveals their smiling faces.

Pacifica is stunned, mouth hanging open uselessly.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAAAAAAAAY!” Mabel gleefully shouts, spinning in place and then doing jazz hands over the cake. “I made you a cake!”

Dipper, still grinning, steps forward to take Pacifica’s hand, tugging her gently forward. “Happy birthday, Pacifica,” he says.

“This cake’s got the works, dude,” Soos says, giving her a thumbs up. “Chocolate insides, chocolate frosting, chocolate sprinkles… Pretty much all the chocolate.”

Pacifica is shocked to see even Stan and Ford are here. Stan notices her surprise and shrugs. “I’m just here for the cake,” he says.

“I haven’t attended a birthday party in quite some time,” Ford muses. “There was one on Kartonne IV, although on that particular occasion I wasn’t so much a guest as I was the intended meal. Anyway, I believe this is when we sing the birthday song, yes? Is that still customary?”

Mabel immediately launches into a very enthusiastic rendition of the traditional tune, and everyone joins her. Pacifica stands with her hands clasped in front of her, happy, overwhelmed, grateful. In the dim light from the table her whole world has shrunk to this small pool of illumination and those within it; her newfound family, close and welcoming. She fights back the first hint of tears, smiles and accepts their offkey serenade with Dipper’s hand in hers.

When she leans forward and blows out the candles, the afterimage of their flame lingers behind her eyelids like a promise.

“Did you wish for more wishes?” Mabel asks.

“Obviously. That’s always the best wish,” she says, and she’s lying because she didn’t wish for anything. She doesn’t need to.

She gets two new sweaters from Mabel, a framed picture of herself and Dipper from Soos, a very cute blue hiking canteen from Dipper, an LED flashlight from Ford, and twenty dollars from Stan (and she can’t decide if she’s more astonished that he gave her a present at all, or that he gave her money. It’s not a lot of money, but even twenty minutes ago she would have bet pretty much anything that Stan wouldn’t give her a quarter if he had a gun to his head). The cake is delicious, and she eats way more of it than she should.

She’s crowded at the small table, her shoulders pressing into Mabel and Dipper, the conversation punctuated by swells of rising laughter. It should be, logically, that this dingy kitchen and these few gifts are lesser than what she had last year. But they aren’t; they are so much more because she is, and they all are, and they are all together.

“You beat us to fourteen! Totes unfair,” Mabel says through a mouthful of cake. “Good thing Dipper is into older girls.”
“She’s two months older than us, that doesn’t even count,” Dipper argues.

“When you’re this hot, you can get a younger man,” Pacifica drawls.

“It doesn’t count!” Dipper insists.

When they finish with the cake, Pacifica gathers up her presents with the intention of putting them in her room (most of it can go in one suitcase or the other for now, but the picture she wants to put on her bedside table). Mabel is wrapping up what’s left of the cake but stops long enough to intercept Pacifica before she leaves.

“Having your birthday on the Fourth must be the best. You get all the cake and all the fireworks!” Mabel says.

This used to be literally true, as the Northwests had put on their own fireworks show in addition to the smaller one from the town. Their show had more to do with Pacifica than patriotism, not that this was ever openly stated. But Pacifica won’t be watching from the deck of her parents’ boat this year.

“Are we watching from the roof?” Pacifica asks.

“That’s what we did last year,” Mabel says. “But Wendy says she has an awesome spot where we can see everything over the lake. All the cool kids will be there!”

“Then why’d she tell you about it?”

“Oh-ohhhhhh, birthday girl burn!” Mabel laughs. “Save some of those sparks for tonight, geez!”

On the way to her room, Pacifica holds up the frame and looks more closely at the picture. She’s not sure when it was taken, but it looks like one of the many photographs Mabel’s been taking for the scrapbook. In it, Pacifica is seated on the porch couch with Dipper at her side. They’re laughing about something (she wishes she could remember what); Pacifica is leaning in closer while Dipper gestures out towards the lawn with one hand. It’s a good picture of the two of them, and she won’t be surprised if a duplicate of it turns up in the scrapbook.

She deposits her new belongings on her bed and positions the frame a few different ways on the bedside table until it looks just right. While admiring it, she hears footsteps behind her and turns to see Dipper standing in the doorway in an awkward posture, his hands behind his back.

“So, uh…” he starts, shifting his weight from side to side, “Mabel told you about the fireworks show, right?”

“Yeah, Wendy has a spot picked out,” she says.

“Cool, cool…” He trails off, his awkwardness only intensifying.

Pacifica looks at him suspiciously. “Okay, did you do something that’s going to make me mad, or are you just being weird even for you?”

“Okay, yeah, I am being weird,” he says, laughing a little at himself. He relaxes slightly. “I just… I have something else for you, and I kind of made it, and it’s not… I mean, it’s not like what you’re used to. Obviously. But I—”

“Another present? What is it?” she says, approaching him eagerly.

“Don’t get too excited,” he cautions. “It’s not a limousine or a boat, or a blimp or whatever.”
Her mouth purses dubiously. “What would I even do with a blimp?”

“Throw a fancy airborne party, travel the world, rain terror from the skies. You know, blimp stuff.”

“I don’t know why you thought this through, but I know you’re not hiding a blimp behind your back.”

Dipper brings his arms around and holds out his right hand. “Mabel helped, so it’s kind of from her, too.”

It’s a necklace. The loop is made of pink and blue string twisted together to form a thicker cord, and Pacifica assumes this was Mabel’s contribution. Dangling from it is a piece of polished metal. It’s a little uneven around the edges and obviously homemade, but its shape is clear and recognizable: it’s a llama. There are even some finer marks to indicate its shaggy coat.

“It’s not much,” Dipper babbles while she examines it. “I made it with some of Great-Uncle Ford’s tools, I’ve never done anything like that before and he kind of had to help me out, but I thought it turned out okay enough and—”

“I love it,” she says. She puts it around her neck and snaps together the simple magnetic clasp.


She steps closer, putting her hands on his shoulders and raising up to kiss him—with a sudden thought that at this rate it won’t be long before she’ll have to stand on her toes to reach his mouth. She pours all her gratitude and affection into the kiss and even though it wasn’t her intention, within seconds it all turns so heated. She sinks one hand into his hair—their bodies pressed together with an edge, with something close to desperation—as his fingers at her waist burn against her skin where the hem of her shirt slips up. The meeting of their closed lips can’t content; they press harder, searching, unpracticed and graceless, all teeth and a little bit of tongue and suddenly, all at once, it’s too much, too soon; she’s drowning. This aching need scares her—she doesn’t know how to satisfy it.

She lowers herself and presses her face to his chest, breathing hard in time with him.

“Um… I guess you liked it,” Dipper pants.

She giggles in out-of-breath amusement against his thudding heart. “You’re such a dork.”

They silently stand there together for a time, coming back to themselves, the air heavy with the unspoken weight of what’s happening between them. Pacifica can’t help but wonder, with an internal little thrill, what would happen if they didn’t stop themselves.

Because someday, she suspects, she won’t want to.

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Late that evening, the cars get parked not far from where they had when pursuing the Windigo. Wendy leads them towards the cliff; this time they bypass the stairs cut into the rock and keep following the stretch of forest that steadily thins until they reach the point where the water of the lake laps against the rock face. They climb an uneven pile of rocks and walk along a narrow rocky ledge
about twenty feet above the water. Up ahead the waterfall roars, plunging down into turbulent waters at its base, the setting sun tinting the mists. They pass behind it and keep going, following the curve of the cliffs and lake basin.

Eventually their path dips back down and they stand on the lakeshore opposite the town, with the rearing cliffs at their back and the glittering water stretched out before them. This side of the shore is comprised more of rocks than sand; great round boulders dot the surf and countless smooth stones clack beneath their feet, every shade of grey and brown. The town itself is mostly shrouded behind the pines, an occasional light winking between branches.

“Best spot in the valley,” Wendy proclaims, the grand sweep of her arm encompassing the cliffs, the forest, and the small waves curling onto the rocky strand.

Everyone’s here: Wendy and her friends; Mabel with Candy and Grenda; Stan, Ford and Soos. Lawn chairs are set out, blankets are spread over the grassy patches farther back from the shore. Pacifica settles down on a thick blanket draped over a boulder that’s just right for sitting. Dipper is at her side and she leans into him, watching the water lap against the rocks. A small cluster of boats in the center of the lake will be the source of the fireworks.

Most of the townsfolk are on the opposite shore. Pacifica can see a couple distant bonfires and tiny figures walking back and forth. The occasional loud pop echoes through the valley, fireworks set off in backyards or somewhere in the woods.

The sun sinks lower behind the cliffs. The sky darkens until there is only the hint of light, dark blue scattered with black clouds. Pacifica feels the anticipation race through her, waiting for the first loud shock of the show.

“Man, Wendy is right. This is a great spot,” Dipper marvels.

Anywhere would be great, Pacifica thinks, as long as he was there with her.

The first sharp clap comes roaring across the water. Everyone holds their breath as the glowing trails arc upward in the loaded quiet between launch and detonation. The mortars crackle and boom, glowing against the sky in burning blooms of red, white, and blue. Pacifica cheers with the rest, clapping and hollering, hearing the answering jubilation from the other shore.

The cannonade continues. Fireworks shoot upwards to blast and sizzle against the dark painting of the sky, stars being born and dying in the same bursting instant, sending their crackling contrails to all sides and leaving behind the ghostly imprint of their smoke. It’s a war on eardrums and retinas, achingly loud and searing bright. Every glorious flash of color shines back from the water, mirrored in beautiful symmetry.

Pacifica wraps herself around Dipper’s arm. She turns and watches the shifting lights play against his face, the sparkles in his eyes. Another mortar goes off and the sound breaks across her, the night fragrant with the smell of powder. Her heart swells with it; this summer, this celebration, this boy and everything he has become to her.

She wants to hold his hand forever. She wants to catch the embers in his eyes. She wants to go forward with him, to the future; to wherever. To rise and burst against that glittering canvas, burning brighter, every spark a possibility, a road writ in a sky as vast and endless as everything they can be. There is promise in all that they share. She can feel it. She knows it like she knows the rhythm of his heart and the heat of his mouth against hers.

This is theirs, this moment. And there will never be another exactly like it.
Over the lake, a whole cluster goes off at once, dyeing the valley in purple and orange, the roar of it all sweeping along the cliffs. The sound and the light wash over all the gathered friends and family, bringing some gasps of appreciation and a ‘Nice!’ from Dipper. Pacifica puts her head on his shoulder and closes her eyes for a second, just listening. A cool breeze drifts towards them from the lake.

And it strikes her, and amazes her, how many ways there are to be happy that she never knew before.

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Everynight Fire Works by Hey Mercedes (Vagrant, 2001)
“These stairs aren’t supposed to be this slick,” Great-Uncle Ford says.

Dipper stands at the edge of the sunken stairwell to the bunker, its segmented steps descending into the dank earth. It’s a decidedly soggier sight than it had been last time; the frequent rains have soaked the soil and the stairs.

Ford tosses a small rock down the stairwell and is rewarded with a tinny splash. “Looks like the hermetic layer is no longer impermeable,” he notes. “I can see the water coming in at the seam. Something else we can thank Greg for, I suspect.”

“Gosh, Greg…” Mabel sighs, shaking her head with vast disappointment.


Dipper, Mabel, and Pacifica are accompanying Ford as he takes stock of the bunker. He’s been so busy setting up his renovated subbasement laboratory that this is the first time he’s visited his secondary facility. Dipper and Mabel eagerly volunteered for the job; Pacifica did not. However, she had also been quite unenthused at the prospect of an afternoon alone.

“Didn’t McGucket design most of this?” Dipper says. “Maybe we should call him.”

“I’ve spoken with him already,” Ford says. “He wished me all the best, but he wasn’t interested in revisiting this particular project. I can’t say I blame him. He had a very traumatic experience down here; I’m not sure how much of it he remembers, but he’s better off remembering it somewhere else.”

Dipper frowns, concerned. “Is he still…?”

Ford sighs, a sudden sadness passing over his features. “I can’t say for certain how much is left of the man I knew. But then, how much is left of me? We’ve both had a hard thirty years. I just count myself lucky to be his friend again.”

Once more, Dipper finds himself tiptoeing around the weight of decades. What can he say in the face of it? He wants a fun outing, not for Great-Uncle Ford to keep tripping over old pain.

“Well, I think— WHOOPS.” Mabel’s feet go out from under her and she slides down the wooden steps, hitting her bottom on each one successively while letting out a steady stream of noise. “Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh— WOO that’s cold! This water is cold, guys! Super cold on my butt!”

“Careful, Mabel!” Ford hurries down the steps, his troubled past instantly forgotten. “How cold? Are you at risk of hypothermia?”

“Nah, but I am at risk of hypo-wormia. Look at all these dead worms!”

Dipper ducks his head to hide his smile; he knows a deliberate pratfall from his sister when he sees it.
He puts his foot out to take the first step and is stopped dead when Pacifica catches him by the arm. “Slowly,” she instructs him. “You’ve fallen enough already.”

“I fell once,” he objects.

“Yeah, and that’s enough.”

He rolls his eyes and starts the descent. He quickly realizes his nonchalance is far from warranted; the wood is saturated beneath his shoes, slick and almost soapy. He puts one hand on the wall and takes his time, unwilling to utilize the Mabel method.

“Poor little worms,” Mabel is saying mournfully when Dipper reaches the flooded floor. “A whole generation lost at sea.”

When they enter the base of the hollow tree and descend into the spiral cavity below, the situation isn’t much improved. A steady stream of water follows them down, streaking the central column as tiny rivulets dance along the steps.

“The seal on the upper door isn’t fully intact,” Ford explains. “Not surprising, given that it’s exposed to surface weather.”

Fortunately, the water at the bottom isn’t deep. There’s only about an inch or so. Much less fortunately, this is because the circular stairwell leads directly into the first room of the bunker, so most of the water has gathered there. The drain in the center of the room did its work, but it’s clogged with leaf particles. There’s a wide path of water leading to the drain and a big wet circle around it. The room smells extremely musty.

Ford surveys the damage philosophically. “Well, it was bound to happen eventually. After thirty years without maintenance, we’re lucky to have access at all.”

Most of the objects in the room are either sealed or on legs high enough to avoid water damage. The bed is dry, as are all the objects on the high shelves. The cabinet of weaponry looks a little rustier around its lower portions, but it’s hard to tell. The shelf of supplies is intact, save for the bottommost boxes, which are crumpled and wet.

Dipper reexamines the room with a new perspective. Its mystery has been largely dispelled through the revelations of last summer. Before, every object and detail had seemed a tantalizing clue. It’s embarrassing to remember how obsessively he had read into even the most mundane and simple things.

Of course, a lot of what he’d been obsessed with had turned out to be pretty darn important.

His primary past obsession is currently digging a towel for Mabel out of a cabinet. “A little dusty, but still dry,” Ford says, handing it to her.

Pacifica is poking around with mild interest. “What are all these boxes?” she asks, pointing at the shelf with the date-marked supplies.

Ford turns his attention to her. “Rations, primarily. After I discovered Bill’s true intentions, I panicked. I stocked this room with supplies in the event Weirdmageddon came to pass. Of course, most of the precautionary features were in fact added by Fiddleford; I wanted another lab, and he built a bunker. He was far more prescient than I.”

Pacifica counts the boxes. “Supplies for sixty years?”
“Yes, that may have been… rather optimistic.”

Dipper finds himself slightly piqued when considering how close he had been to revealing everything down here. If there had just been a single document with Ford’s name on it, maybe mixed in with more of his research, or some clue connecting the bunker to the Shack’s hidden lab… Instead, the only clue he found led him to McGucket, a man incapable of revealing a truth he had erased from his own mind.

“I was so close,” Dipper sighs.

“What’s that?” Ford asks.

“When I found this place, I thought for sure I’d figure out who you were.” Dipper shakes his head. “But all I ended up with was McGucket’s laptop. Those government agents beat me to the truth, and I’d been working on it all summer!”

Ford smiles ruefully. “I don’t think this will make you feel better, but you were even closer than you know.”

He goes over to a back corner of the room, a section hidden in shadow behind several large pipes. There’s another metal cabinet mounted there; Dipper remembers checking inside of it and finding nothing but spare parts for the bunker’s water and ventilation systems. Ford reaches up to the top of the cabinet and interacts with something that Dipper can’t see; there’s a loud click, the sound of a latch springing open. Ford pulls on one of the opened cabinet doors and the cabinet swings away from the wall on hidden hinges. Behind it is a flat steel shutter.

Dipper’s mouth drops open. “Are you serious?!”

“Isolating the bunker was necessary, given its intended purpose of containing specimens. But getting power and other utilities out here proved difficult to do in secret even with Fiddleford erasing the memories of the workers, which I was unaware of at the time. I also wanted a way to control the bunker remotely if necessary, and to have emergency access if the surface was inaccessible. That last point became even more important later on, for obvious reasons,” Ford says.

The steel shutter is protected by a flat combination lock. Ford spins the dial with a finger until another click is heard. He reaches down and slides the shutter up, revealing a circular entrance. He extracts a flashlight from a coat pocket and shines it within.

“See for yourself,” he says to Dipper.

Dipper approaches and looks inside. The tunnel is extremely small and lined with cables that snake off into complete darkness. Someone could crawl through, but it would be a very claustrophobic trip.

“This runs all the way back to the lab,” Ford tells him. “It comes out below the subbasement in the maintenance area and drainage system. It’s well-hidden behind some false piping.”

Dipper wants to break something. “I can’t believe I missed this. I was so close.”

Ford pats him on the shoulder. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. When I finally discovered the truth about the portal, I went to great lengths to obscure this tunnel; I even had plans to wire it with explosives so I could collapse it if necessary.”

Dipper supposes if the Shape Shifter never found it in however much time it had been roaming free, then Dipper probably isn’t too much of an idiot for not finding it in one day. Still, it is frustrating. All his efforts—all those sleepless nights—and in the end he’d stumbled into the truth through
circumstances he hadn’t remotely imagined.

Mabel and Pacifica have busied themselves taking selfies and other assorted pictures which are no doubt destined for the scrapbook. Ford returns to the center of the room and surveys it with his hands clasped at his back.

“Still structurally sound,” he says, pleased. “This won’t be as much work as I feared.”

Dipper stands beside his great-uncle. “What’s next?”

“It’s high time I joined the twenty-first century,” Ford says decisively. “No more vacuum tubes and floppy disks. If we’re going to plumb the secrets of this valley, we’re going to need all the technological edge we can get. We need to upgrade, Dipper. A full overhaul.”

Dipper is way onboard. “Yeah! I can teach you to use Linux, if you’d like.”

“I’d appreciate it. However, we’ll be limited in our renovations until we can secure funding.” Ford grimaces.

That brings Dipper up short. “Uh… Well, since Grunkle Stan is running the Mystery Shack, isn’t that the business side of things? I mean, it’s your house, too…”

“Stanley is doing surprisingly well—which never fails to baffle me, given the nature of the enterprise.” Obviously, Ford still has some issues with the cheap, kitschy, and morally questionable nature of Stan’s business. “Regardless, Stan could furnish us with some new computer hardware; perhaps some of the do-it-yourself circuit kits Soos was showing me on the internet. But specialized scientific equipment would be beyond his budget. Or at least beyond whatever we could pry out of him.” He flashes a quick smile in Dipper’s direction. “I won’t bankrupt Stanley’s venture for only a portion of what I need, especially now that we’ve… well. I can’t put a price on what we’ve rebuilt over the last year, not to mention everything else that I…”

After a pause, he reaches out and squeezes Dipper’s shoulder, the gesture saying everything his words imply. Dipper leans into it, his heart swelling.

Ford clears his throat awkwardly, clearly uncomfortable with his own emotions. “Very good. So, I say let the Shack pay for our meals and other comforts while we seek funding elsewhere for our scientific pursuits.”

An idea occurs to Dipper, like a lightbulb over his head—appropriate, given its nature. “What about the lightbulb you made for the kitchen, the one that makes your skin softer and lasts for a thousand years? I bet you could patent that and sell it!” In fact, Dipper thinks it would probably make Ford quite rich.

“I’d need to design a way to mass produce it. If something isn’t cost effective, it’s destined to remain a novelty.” Ford gazes pensively at nothing in particular. “In order to patent or begin marketing my work, I would have to reveal my existence to the government. It’s this point I’ve been the most ambivalent about. On one hand, I might secure a government grant. On the other, they’re going to have a lot of questions I’m not prepared to answer. The last thing we need is some careless agency researching Bill or trying to build a portal themselves.”

“Don’t they still think you’re Stan?”

“Yes, but increased scrutiny could dispel that quickly enough. To be clear, it’s not my identity that matters. What matters is keeping outside forces away from Gravity Falls. Most of the inventions I handed over while I still had my grant money were side projects intended to ensure I wouldn’t be cut
loose. I never shared any of my research.”

“I guess the world probably isn’t ready for that,” Dipper concurs.

“Not just the world—we aren’t ready. We need more data, more evidence; not merely a collection of supernatural odds and ends, but a theoretical framework in which to fit them. We know what Gravity Falls is, Dipper. We must determine how it is, and why it is.”

Dipper isn’t any more eager to have a swarm of government agents and scientists descend on the valley than his great-uncle is. Government funding would definitely be nice, but the cost could easily prove too much to bear. There’s always something in the fine print. And what if other interested parties aren’t as careful as Ford is?

Maybe this impulse is selfish. Maybe it’s just that Dipper and Great-Uncle Ford aren’t willing to share. But haven’t they earned it? No one knows more about Weirdness than Ford. No one is in a better position, with better experience, than Dipper and Ford. Is it wrong to think of it as their work, and theirs alone?

Dipper isn’t sure. All he knows is that there’s nowhere else in the world like Gravity Falls, and the valley needs to be protected.

Well, okay, maybe it doesn’t need to be protected; after all, it has protected itself quite well for the entirety of human history. Dipper is so used to thinking of Weirdmageddon as having been contained that it’s easy to forget the outside world had in turn been kept out. But the extent and limitations of the valley’s ability to hold off the wider world has yet to be established. Powers, Trigger, and all their lackeys represent a worrying anomaly.

“That is why upgrading is so vital,” Ford continues. “The last thirty years have provided the technology needed to move forward. Even if I hadn’t fallen through the portal, I would have remained stymied in the 80s, and quite possibly even through the 90s. Only now can I replicate, or at least build an equivalent to, some of the devices I came across in my travels.” Ford’s eyes grow distant. “Fiddleford once collected my work and urged me to publish it instead of pressing on with the portal. I should have heeded him regarding the portal; however, publishing the work would have been premature. I suppose my absence has a silver lining of sorts. …Still. I find it difficult to embrace the bright side of the affair.” Ford shakes himself slightly, his eyes clearing. His voice regains its usual briskness. “We’ll inventory the equipment here and see if there’s anything worth salvaging. Based on what I’ve seen of today’s personal computers, several rooms’ worth of consoles can be discarded in favor of a single laptop. Efficiency, Dipper! That’s our goal for now. We have space, power, and ingenuity. The funding can come later.”

At times like these, it’s all Dipper can do to contain his excitement. Here he is, just a thirteen-year-old, and he gets to be part of the cutting edge! He has a role in a real scientific endeavor, in something absolutely monumental. How is this his life?

Mabel and Pacifica must have finished documenting the room for the scrapbook, because they reconvene nearby. “Are we going through the room with the crazy wall things?” Mabel asks.

“Ah, yes, Fiddleford’s overly elaborate security trap,” Ford says. “I didn’t have the heart to tell him no, though at the time I felt it was a bit much. Onward!”

They pass through the strange room with its deadly constricting columns, making sure to point out the trigger tile for Pacifica’s sake. On the other side is the observation area, its monitors now powered, Dipper presumes, by the Quantum Destabilizer generator. As Mabel gives Pacifica an impromptu tour, Dipper follows Ford over to the consoles.
“Tapedrives,” Ford says, pointing out the reel-to-reel equipment. “Obsolete even when we were building this place, but we made do with whatever we could get our hands on. Not worth saving; we’ll have better options for keeping records. Now, the surveillance system we may want to leave, if only because I doubt we can afford to replace it.”

“Um, before we just toss everything, there’s actually a market for old computer tech. Like, collectors and stuff, people who refurbish these things for a hobby or for museums,” Dipper informs him.

“Good heavens. I really have been gone for a long time,” Ford mutters, looking briefly discombobulated. “Very well, we’ll keep that in mind. We should keep Fiddleford in the loop as well; he custom built a fair portion of this equipment and he may wish to hold on to some of it.”

“Hey, Pacifica, check out this robo-shower!” Mabel calls to the other girl.

“Just because you’re already soaked doesn’t mean I want to get wet,” Pacifica says.

“There’s a switch inside that can disable the decontamination procedure; upper left, I believe,” Ford tells them absentmindedly as he unscrews a panel.

Ford’s apparent lack of concern is not shared by Dipper, who vividly remembers exactly what lies on the other side of that ‘closet.’ “I think you should wait until we can all go together,” he says to the girls.

Pacifica seems willing to take his advice, though she does stick her head inside the chamber. “Where does this go?”

“A bunch of creepy old tunnels!” Mabel says happily.

Pacifica withdraws, her expression unenthusiastic. “I don’t know. We’ve seen a lot of creepy tunnels already.”

“Yeah, but these tunnels have a popsicle monster!”

Pacifica squints, probably trying to imagine such a thing.

Mabel helpfully adds, “It’s not a monster made of popsicles, it’s a monster frozen like a popsicle.”

“Oh. Okay, that makes a lot more sense.”

Ford slots the panel back into the console and makes a note in his journal. “Since we can’t replace the whole observation system, we’ll have to replace these bulbs. I may have some back at the lab.”

With inventory taken of the observation room, they all crowd into the decontamination chamber, which is just large enough for them to squeeze into, though Pacifica ends up smushed against Dipper, which he’s cool with. The door opens to reveal the branching tunnels, unchanged since last summer. The group click on their flashlights, illuminating the dusty floor and uneven walls.

“Did the Shape Shifter dig all these?” Dipper asks Ford.

“I assume so. This main path was excavated by us, but I’m not familiar with the rest,” Ford says, using the beam of his flashlight to indicate the side tunnels forking off into the darkness. He raises his light to examine some of the nearby pipes. “Looks like our shifting friend made quite a mess. I wish I knew how he got out in the first place.”

Dipper notices that Mabel and Pacifica have already gone ahead, close to disappearing around the
next corner. “You said the Shape Shifter is the only specimen, right?”

“Yes, and the cryogenic tube is still active and occupied. We’re alone down here. I know the earth looks permeable, but that’s true only up to a point. This whole cavern is surrounded by bedrock, and what little of it isn’t bedrock is steel and reinforced concrete,” Ford assures him.

Dipper nods, relaxing a bit. The Shape Shifter had been the only threat down here (give or take some constricting walls), and as long as it’s still frozen the area should be safe.

A second later, a scream echoes through the tunnels, and that comforting thought goes out the window.

Dipper charges towards the sound, Great-Uncle Ford hot on his heels. He rounds the corner and finds Pacifica and Mabel standing in front of the cryogenic tubes. For a moment, he fears the worst; however, it appears that the tube containing the Shape Shifter is still active.

Pacifica stands before the chamber, so still it’s as if she herself is frozen; her eyes are huge, and her hands are fisted in the bottom of her shirt.

Mabel is just behind her, speaking quickly. “I’m sorry, I forgot. It’s okay, it’s the blob monster, it’s not him. Pacifica, I’m sorry.”

“What…” Pacifica gasps.

“Oh, crap,” Dipper says, understanding, entirely too late, what’s just happened.

The fog behind the glass is a little difficult to see through, but the outline of the shape within is unmistakable, as is the gleaming hat of ice perched on its head. Dipper thinks the freakiest thing about his frozen double is the smooth, pupilless expanse of its eyeballs. It seems to be staring at everything and nothing.

Ford approaches the cryogenic tube, eyebrows raised. “Now this is unexpected.”

“I know. I kind of put it out of my head because—” Halfway through his sentence, Dipper realizes he needs to straighten out his apologizing priority. He turns to Pacifica and gently wraps his hands around her wrists; she is still staring at the tube in horror. “It’s not me. The Shape Shifter was messing with me and got frozen that way. I’m sorry. I should have said something.”

Pacifica does not look away from the tube. “Why does it look exactly like you did when the ghost turned you to wood?” she says in a tone which is riding the edge of hysteria.

“It does?” Dipper doesn’t know what to make of that. “Uh… Great-Uncle Ford, does the Shape Shifter have any kind of precognition?”

“Not that I’m aware,” Ford says. He’s sketching in his journal, clearly fascinated by the Shape Shifter’s final choice of form. “Granted, it would be a difficult thing to know unless he chose to tell me.”

Mabel’s eyes meet Dipper’s, her expression broadcasting a loud and clear ‘we goofed.’ Dipper winces in silent agreement. Pacifica is tough and proud, but she carries more than her share of trauma, and Dipper knows watching everyone else be turned to wood is something that’s stuck with her. It probably would have stuck with him, too, had he not been rendered insensate.

He takes Pacifica by the shoulders and turns her away from the tube. “I know it’s weird and I know we should have said something, but it’s just the Shape Shifter. He was trying to mess with me after
we trapped him in there.”

To his shock, she slips free of his grasp and backs away from him, those startlingly blue eyes narrowed in distrust. “Tell me something only the real Dipper would know,” she demands.

He opens his mouth with the intention to argue, then rethinks the impulse. It’s not like Pacifica is wrong to be paranoid. Heck, this is something he should probably encourage, given the trouble they get into on a weekly basis.

“The second time you came to see me, I went out to get you at the curb. You made fun of me for not wearing any socks,” Dipper says. He meets her gaze directly, with honesty and affection. “I didn’t put any on because I was in a hurry to get out there. It was cold, and you looked like you were in bad shape. You were like, ‘you can’t even afford socks?’ But I felt better just to hear you say anything normal, like maybe things weren’t as bad as it seemed.”

The tension leaves her shoulders. “He’s not a Shape Shifter,” she informs the others.

Mabel chortles on the sidelines. “Dipper can afford socks—he just never washes them!”

Ford snaps his journal shut. “For future reference, I regularly scan all occupants of the Shack for biological variations, and I’d be aware if there was a doppelganger on the loose. But it’s good to see you have your own methods of verification, should they be required.” He checks his watch. “Stanley made me promise to have you back in time for that low budget duck show. We should probably head for the surface.”

Mabel eagerly follows Great-Uncle Ford back towards the exit, quacking loudly in anticipation. Dipper moves to do the same but stops when he sees Pacifica staring at the cryogenic tube again with haunted eyes.

Dipper sighs quietly. He really dropped the ball on this one. In his defense, last summer he had tried pretty hard not to think about the Shape Shifter’s final form; and the moment had eventually been blotted out beneath even greater terrors. He doesn’t know what to think about the Shape Shifter accurately capturing his eventual petrification. How is that possible? It seems too specific to be coincidence, but maybe it is. Maybe it’s just one of those seemingly impossible things.

Or maybe it’s telling him something that he isn’t understanding.

“I don’t even remember being wood,” Dipper tells Pacifica, hoping that might help. “Besides, you saved me, remember?”

It takes a second, but she looks away from Dipper’s icy false-twin and seems to regain something approaching her usual attitude. She snatches his hand and walks quickly for the exit, pulling him after her.

“Let’s get out of here before I have to save you again,” she says grimly.

Dipper goes with her gamely enough, though he isn’t quite placated. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he says, sort of expecting her to snap at him.

“I’m fine,” she replies curtly.

Dipper isn’t sure if he believes her. Maybe he should; maybe she’s more than earned the benefit of the doubt, after all she’s weathered. But that whole thing with Mabel is still fresh in his mind, and he can’t quite let himself trust that Pacifica really is fine.
He thinks he’s going to have to talk to her about it. Yeah, he’s sure of that, even if he isn’t sure of anything else.

When the party emerges on the surface once more, the humid warmth of the forest settles over Dipper like an earthy blanket. Once again, he’s struck by how immediate and alive the woods seem after the cool and quiet underneath. Squirrels skitter across low branches as birds sing somewhere overhead. He tramps over moss, rock, and root, knowing it isn’t far to the Shack.

In his head he’s setting out a conversation, designing the right time and place, hoping the right words will follow.

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*Everything Streamlined* by Corm (Contrast, 1999)

Chapter End Notes

The lateness of this chapter is a result of my becoming sidetracked, though in my defense I became sidetracked by this story. Some time back, I took a copyediting class. I learned a lot over the course, but afterwards I couldn’t help but notice the persistent technical errors which I committed in the older chapters of this story.

I resolved to fix them, as well as update and reformat my source files to ensure I wouldn’t have any problems in the future (I wrote part one on a different word processor). I also utilized the chance to tweak some things that always bothered me, some overused turns of phrase or some instances of dialogue that I never felt sounded much like the character in question. In particular, Mabel has a handful of lines in the early chapters that are basically placeholders, but I never came up with anything better. I was glad to take another shot at them.

This was a tremendous amount of work and performing it took away from the writing of new material. My original plan was to upload the newly revised chapters and then upload this chapter, using the author’s note to inform readers that a full revision had taken place. But to my dismay, I’ve discovered a disconcerting number of errors when revisiting the revised chapters. The vast majority of changes are extremely minor, simple grammar and punctuation or rewording. But there are enough new and changed lines that new typos have crept in.

I think I have reached the limit of what I can do by myself. Editing your own work is always, to a certain degree, an exercise in futility. All I see is the process—I see what it’s supposed to say, not what it actually says. Given enough time, I can come to read the story in a way closer to how you readers perceive it, but I don’t really feel like waiting a couple years. Bottom line: Until I can find a suitable beta reader, the revisions won’t be in acceptable shape. This will be difficult, as this theoretical person must be willing to take on the thankless and admittedly monumental task of going over all 200,000 words of this story. Additionally, they have to have enough of a background in writing and editing to catch all the little subtleties I’m trying to address. It’s a tall order, but I’ll see what I can do. In the meantime, I won’t be uploading the revised chapters yet. Which pains me, because they really are an improvement, even if it’s mostly
measured in additional polish.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!