

“Ephemera”

Episode 1 - “Wanda What’s Going On”

Written by Lee Salazar

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Written by Megan Kostraba

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Episode 1: Wanda What's Going On?

By Lee Salazar

Like a phoenix bent on survival, the trill of a bell twinkles from the boundless silence, cutting through static, looking for a receiver. The abyss is murky and, surprisingly, a deep purple, like the shade of despair or deep thought. Flashes of flesh and specs of moments all crowd together. Hues never before imagined are oft to appear, weaving together this corner and that, birthing a basket to collect experiences and freckles of time. It is easy to get lost here, in the place where soul is both decaying and kicking for life. One moment here, the next wreathed in infinity, a destination balanced on the whisker of an orange cat soaking in the sunlight. But, while the deep, silent darkness beckons, the ringing is a resounding fire parrying away the liminal pool of possibility.

The bell atop the main entrance had been broken for a while. Where it once did its dutiful job of alerting the *MondayMart* workers of a new customer, its sole purpose now was to go off at random intervals and test how quickly a minimum-wage mind could be driven mad.

The bell, having developed into sonic torment, inhibited Benny from doing anything but being present as he restocked the shelves. He had already finished stocking the breakfast cereals and bottles of juices in the next aisle over. Now, he was working on stacking cans into a pyramid—a task, and idea, his boss had relegated to him—which was more precarious than he would have wanted. Like a toddler inventing new words by stacking wooden blocks, Benny wanted to shit himself. The only ladder in the store—and therefore, the ladder he was clinging to for dear life—was rusty and probably a nest for diseases, most of the cans that he was stacking were battered and barely stood up on their own, let alone as part of a sculpture, and, most

frustrating of all, customers kept pulling cans from very illogical and structurally unsound places. Benny was overcome with fear for his life.

Climbing off the ladder, Benny followed a runaway can as it loped toward the candy aisle. Benny never had much of a sweet tooth, but he always enjoyed the saccharine scent of the confections and the vibrant colors. They reminded him of the rainforest birds that were prominently displayed all over the postcards in the stationary section of the store. Rolling to a halt under a rack of bubblegum, the can reminded him of the one expectation of his aversion to sugar: bubble gum. Try as he might, there was just something about the pink powdered gum cubes that he couldn't resist. Maybe it was the honey-sweet sticky memories of childhood, or maybe it was the delicious artificial flavoring that did it for him—perhaps it was the fact that the candy was displayed in the aisle farthest away from both his boss and the perpetually crying bell. Regardless, in between running the entire store essentially by himself—even though it was definitely not within his pay grade—Benny found himself staring at the pink wall of gum. Unfortunately, Benny's boss had also found him in the aisle.

“Hey, Benjamin!” he said, throwing his hands up to pantomime interest. The fabric around his armpits creased and pooled in all the wrong places when he did this.

Benny knew full and well that if Chase Powers was talking to him, it was to inform him of some other menial job that needed to get done within the store. Benny's fiancée often made comments about how the entire store would go under if he quit, but he didn't mind; he likes feeling needed, feeling important. He wore his metal name tag with pride knowing that he played an active role at his workplace. He puffed his chest out even more when he remembered that not just everyone got the privilege of wearing a company-issued metal name tag. Even the

unpleasant Tucker Jackson was stuck with a flimsy plastic tag. Truly, Benny was a king amongst men.

Benny tried to correct his boss about how “Benny” wasn’t shorthand for anything, but, as usual, he was interrupted.

“Anyway, Benbo, I just wanted to tell you that I think you’re doing such a great job.” The way that Chase decided to inflect his words made his compliment feel less genuine than usual. Like a fisherman basking in the orange glow of an early-morning sun, Benny waited for the catch that always seemed to follow anything his boss ever said to him. “Your effort has not gone unnoticed,” he continued. “Between you and me, I’ll put in a good word to the higher-ups whenever conversations about employee of the month come up again.” He winked. It was very toad-like.

Chase Powers was not the worst person in the world, but definitely the worst person people tended to know. He was taller and fairer than Benny was, with blonde hair that held the aura that it was once styled into a steep and environmentally unfriendly quiff. Now, his hair was flatter and a tad thin, sad—a fact that did not have the privilege of deterring him in his endeavors. The way Chase carried himself made it obvious to everyone around him that he considered himself attractive once. Honestly, part of his problem was that he still considered himself to be a real catch and, much to everyone’s dismay, would weaponize his supposed Venus-blessed looks and killer charisma against unsuspecting people. But, for the most part, Chase was harmless. He implicated others in the occasional unwanted scene where nobody but him seemed to know the script, but his head was always held taught and ego reined in by the idea of fiscal irresponsibility. He was like any boss ought to be: hungry for profit and starved of empathy.

Benny thanked his boss, and it was as sincere as survival was involuntary.

Chase clapped him on the shoulder—a gesture measurable by a Richter scale—as he cruised them both out of the candy aisle, away from the bubble gum, and toward the back of the store. “I’m hearing whispers that you’re no longer the favorite candidate. It won’t be easy to uphold your winning streak with Tucker running circles around you. But I like you, Beebo. You don’t have to worry too much. I’m looking out for you.”

Although his smiling face was prominently displayed behind the line of registers, the worry that Benny held about being forgotten and usurped, especially by an upstart, was like persistent vermin. Try to poison and trap them as he might, the little rascals somehow found a way inside, eating the crops that Benny worked so hard to tend and foster. With Tucker making his way up the—surely not rusted—rungs of the *MondayMart* ladder, Benny was getting starved out.

As they continued to make their way toward the back of the store, Chase’s hand still firmly placed on Benny’s shoulder, Chase added, “Oh! I completely forgot to ask. The back storage room needs some cleaning. Think you can handle that?”

Although he asked a question, Benny wasn’t stupid enough to think that the request was anything other than a command. Without much reluctance, Benny complied.

Just as they were beginning to part ways, the bell rang once more, only this time, it was because actual customers had entered the store, a tall buff ginger man and a shorter woman with thick long braids. Chase perked up, something not dissimilar to a border collie laying eyes on a flock of sheep, ready to herd and command. “Excuse me for a moment,” he said as he made his way toward his targets.

Benny prayed for the poor customers but was happy that someone other than him had to endure Chase. He started toward the storage room, but he did not get very far before nearly running into Tucker, who was cruising out of the sleep aid aisle.

“Hey Benny,” he said. As Tucker flashed him a winning smile, Benny could have sworn he saw a slight twinkling accompanied by a faint dinging. Perhaps it was the bell, or perhaps it was the confident perfection of the man standing in front of him, regardless, Benny did not appreciate the theatrics present. He responded out of politeness, nothing more.

“I’d love to stay and chat,” Tucker spoke over Benny, “but Chase wants me to be more attentive to our customers. Shake hands, kiss babies, that sort of thing. Something about being the face of the company...? Anyway, I don’t want to bore you with all that nonsense. It looks like you have your hands full. I’ll leave you to it.”

With that, Benny was left with nothing but a promise of dust and cobwebs to keep him company. He watched as Tucker strode toward the customers, confidence and charisma oozing off of him. The juxtaposition between the both of them was not lost on Benny, but he made the conscious effort not to think, let alone acknowledge it. Besides, he had plenty going for him, things that Tucker Jackson would only dream of having. He convinced himself that he would be fine.

The storage room was to be expected: musty and uncomfortable. Spiderwebs garlanded the walls and added shadows to each corner. Luckily, it seemed like most of the spiders had abandoned their residences, leaving behind a mess that Benny now had to clean. The entire room was dusted with a layer of grime and dirt, the exposed pipes were rusted and an eyesore, and the overhead light struggled to maintain its flickering glow. Benny thought there was no point in

complaining since the work had to get done one way or another. He collected his supplies—a mop, broom, bucket, and rag—from where they rested against the wall and began to assess the room to form a plan of action.

As he cleaned, he turned over this chair and that, running his wet rag against every surface he could find. He individually cleaned each locker and crevice, each box of product and the shelf it was stored in. If he was going to do a job, he was going to do it right.

As he was working on pushing a particularly heavy shelf away from the wall to clean behind it, he spotted movement near his foot. As he bent down to take a closer look, the small brown object scurried away from him, along the nearest wall, and back behind the shelf it had originated from. A tense shiver ate at Benny's spine. He crouched down to inspect. Using all of the strength he could muster, he pulled the shelf back, revealing a nest behind him. Without much thought, Benny exploded upwards, knocking over his broomstick and mop. There were many things in the world that Benny was not a fan of, but at the very top of the list, above every other boogeyman and misfortune, cockroaches could be found. There was just something about their wriggly, nuke-resistant bodies that he simply could not stomach.

His back was pressed hard against a rack of extra receipt paper rolls, surely leaving indentations like the veins of leaves. His vision was beginning to tunnel, the walls around him pulsing to the beat of his panicking heart. Then, a commotion. From the main section of the store, Benny heard a conversation rapidly elevating in sound and fervor. Using that as an excuse to flee the roaches, he practically flew out of the storage room door.

Half-running toward the sound of a kindling fight, it did not take long for Benny to take in the scene and use his common sense to interpret what had happened. The tall ginger man's

face was tight with aggression, he smiled with anger, saliva collecting on his bottom lip. The man stood in a protective stance. Directly in front of him, Chase stood there, looking sheepish and slightly guilty. Behind the ginger, safe from the danger standing in front of them, the girl he was with looked uncomfortable, her eyebrows slanted in on themselves.

Tucker was nowhere to be found. He had likely slinked away at the first whisper of confrontation, leaving Benny to take care of everything, as always. Benny tried his best to diffuse the situation by mediating the conflict, but Chase was unruly and quick to deny any accusations. With each passing second, both men became more angered, a new shade of vibrant pink painted on their foreheads and cheeks.

His first mistake was trying to be a hero and stepping in between two pawing bulls. His second mistake was thinking that Chase was the biggest threat in the room. As he turned to calm down his boss, the ginger's fuse must have completely burned to the nub, because he charged. The target was clearly Chase, but Benny found himself as the filling to the most unfortunate sandwich. All three men toppled to the floor, the cool linoleum doing little to soften heated emotion. The ginger man, the first to recollect himself, began hitting and slapping both Chase and Benny. The sound was grotesque and raw like a ham dropped on concrete. Try as he might to shield himself from the fuming man, there was only so much that Benny could do to keep the man's fist from making contact and sending spirals of hot purple pain throughout his body. He stood up, Chase still splayed out on the floor, gulping for the air that was knocked out of him from the impact. The bell rang once more, a silvery taunt. The man, with one final recoil of his rippling biceps and red in his eyes, punched Benny in the neck, cracking something important and sending him head-first to the floor. He heard the awful cracking of his skull before he felt anything. Then, the sensation of warm, sticky blood coronating him and expanding outward from

beneath his head. The bell rang, and he closed his eyes. He was greeted by the embraces of a murky darkness for the briefest of moments. A sojourn made sweet because of its ephemerality.

When he opened his eyes again, the store bell he thought he heard had shifted into the rhythmic beeping of hospital equipment. It was strange. He didn't remember moving at all. It was like he just woke up in a new place.

Sitting up, the paper lining the hospital bed crinkled underneath him. He touched the back of his head, expecting the gash to paint his fingers a thick crimson, but there was nothing there besides his dark hair. They must have done a fantastic job stitching him up, he figured.

The sterile environment around him was cold and uninvited. Everything was a sickly shade of gray and pale yellow except for a lonely green plant in the corner. Benny did not get a chance to examine much else before the doctor, a tall woman, walked through the door.

She flipped through her chart, "Mr. Calarco, I am so glad that you're awake. You suffered quite the fall there. Ice can get a bit slippery. How are you feeling? Any pain?" She seemed sincere.

Benny was perplexed, but stranger things had happened. The doctor was a busy woman and was probably confused with the events that transpired. Benny's chest did hurt, though, but that was about it. He was surprised he wasn't in more pain considering what happened to land him in the hospital. He reported his lack of symptoms to the doctor.

She smiled at him, "That's great! We'll just have to do a few more exams before you leave to make sure that you don't have any lasting injuries from your trip. I'm also concerned about some of the results from your bloodwork, but I'll let you know more information once we have it. Don't want to worry you before there's something to worry about." She looked at Benny

as if she was expecting a response. “Anyway, you sit tight here, and our nurses will get you all prepped for exams.” She smiled and left the room.

After a few hours of getting poked and prodded, Benny began to suspect that there was reason to be worried. He didn’t think that cracking your head on the floor was generally a good thing for the human body, but he had always been a healthy man. He resembled a guinea pig the way he ate his five servings of vegetables almost religiously. He walked daily and made sure to get enough sleep. He even took multivitamins! Especially in recent months, he and his fiancée had made it a habit to be healthier than ever in preparation for their wedding. Benny had also recently been to the doctor’s and everything seemed to be perfectly normal. The way the nurses and doctor looked at him and whispered to each other made him uneasy in a way he had never experienced before.

Once all of the procedures and exams were done, the doctor came back into the room, a fake smile plastered on her face. She scooted a chair close to the bed Benny was sitting on. She took a deep breath and spoke.

“So, I ordered a few tests and exams because I wanted to make sure that all of our T’s were crossed and I’s were dotted, but upon looking at your bloodwork and familial medical history, I had my suspicions.” She trailed off, leaving room for heavy news.

Again, confusion grabbed a hold of Benny. Medical issues didn’t run in his family. The last time he checked, his medical charts had been all clear too. What could the doctor have possibly found?

Another deep breath before she continued, “Benny, you have cancer.”

“Have a great rest of your day, sir,” said the pharmacist as Benny grabbed the bag a little too roughly and made his way toward the exit. He gave her a look from over his shoulder and wished her a good day as well. It wasn’t her fault his bad day just got exponentially worse. He tossed the bag out in a nearby trash can, storing the orange medicine bottle in one of the inside pockets of his coat, the one near his chest, funny enough.

The pharmacy was not too far away from the hospital, so he chose not to call anyone for a drive, instead opting to ruminate in the cooling air of winter. Besides, he didn’t want to bother anyone with his issues. He pulled out a square of gum, unwrapped it from its wax paper jacket, and popped it in his mouth, savoring in the bursting flavor.

As he walked, the images from the day rippled through his head like a lake skin coming to life. Truly, what an odd day it had been. In some sick way, Benny kind of appreciated the excitement, as devastating as it all had been. For quite some time now, he had grown to refer to the *MondayMart* as the *MundaneMart*. It wasn’t that he disliked his job, not really. In fact, he quite liked how reliable and predictable it all was. He enjoyed his routine and how his work gave him purpose. It was just that he was rounding the age in life where everything, if steeped too much, began to feel hopeless and encumbering and overwhelming in nature. Perpetuity. Monotony. The horrors.

When he reached his apartment, he could hear loud talking emanating from beyond the brick walls. Wanda, of course. She had a propensity for communication, a loud inclination at that.

Benny took off his jacket and placed it on his designated hook on the coat hanger. He wiped his feet on the doormat. He walked over to his fiancé and gave her a gentle kiss on the

forehead. She was sitting on the couch in the living room, feet crossed on top of the coffee table in front of her. The TV was on some cowboy western show, but it performed for no one but itself. Wanda Gravesend was too busy talking on the phone with her sister or friend or neighbor or person she met during her yoga class. Wanda was the type of person who had a superpower for talking and making connections. It had been great for her in college, but all it did now was drain her phone battery and cause Benny to invest in high-quality earbuds. At least her voice was dulcet, he thought.

He tried talking to her about his day, but she shushed him with a wagging finger in his face and mouthing things such as:

“Not now I’m on the phone.”

“Tell me about it later.”

“Dinner is on the table.”

“Please, Benny, not now.”

He could take a hint. He understood where he was not wanted.

Benny and Wanda usually ate dinner together. An event in which Wanda would inform her fiancé about every new thing she had heard about and update him on old business she was able to flesh out. She was always very good at staying informed.

Wanda was a beautiful woman with her dark skin and curly hair. Her eyes were a warm nut brown, something Benny could easily lose himself in. And Wanda was very kind, often doing little things for Benny, buying him a gift here, helping him out there. But most of all, Benny appreciated her great conversation. In their relationship, he did not do most of the talking, and

that was something he had grown to appreciate. After all, his fiancé was entirely out of his league. He would go to the ends of the earth if it meant keeping her. He would look for her everywhere. It wouldn't be very difficult, he'd often think to himself, so long as she had her phone, he just have to follow the sound of her voice.

The hospital and pharmacy had taken longer than Benny realized. The kitchen table was usually set up for two, but today, he would have to eat all alone. His food was cold, but he told himself that he didn't mind. At least Wanda got to enjoy her warm meal.

Getting ready for bed, Benny went about his usual routine. He decided not to tell Wanda about his diagnosis. He didn't want to worry her, and, most of all, he wanted to come to terms with all the changes that had happened. Pretending it didn't exist might make him feel better for a little while. Besides, their wedding was so nearby, and Benny did not want to add more stress onto his future bride's plate.

He tidied up the house, did the laundry, hung his uniform up in his closet, brushed and flossed, set his alarm, and went to bed with Wanda.

"Goodnight, Benny," she said before pecking him on the lips and turning the lights off.

Benny drifted off to sleep the way a feather falls to the ground, and he rested for the first time that day.

When his alarm went off in the morning, Benny was ready for another typical day before he remembered the fight that broke out at the store the day before and his visit to the hospital. He shuddered at the thought of what Chase and Tucker would say to him, but he pushed through. He was a man of principle, after all.

Wanda had already left for work, so it was just Benny and the apartment as he got ready to weather the day. In the kitchen, he tried warming up frozen waffles, but they got stuck to the inside of the toaster and did not pop up when they were meant to. Luckily, he mitigated this issue by using a metal fork to pry the waffle away from the wall. There was a small spark when the fork made contact, but everything was fine. Benny held his two chocolate chip waffles on a ceramic plate before really having time to process the danger he had circumnavigated. Yesterday had been bad enough, no need to dwell on things today, especially when it was still only breakfast time.

After he had eaten and washed up, Benny walked to his closet to put on his *MondayMart* uniform, only it wasn't where he had left it last night. In place of the vibrant blue uniform he usually wore, there was a new red one. Benny assumed he had accidentally mixed his uniform with someone else's while doing the laundry. It was no big deal; he would return the wayward apparel to its original owner later today. He had an extra uniform in his locker at work for a situation precisely like this one. The only thing he was upset about was that he'd spend the day lacking his fancy metal name tag, but there were better things to cry over.

The day only got stranger when Benny arrived to work. The neon sign no longer advertised the *MondayMart* and its blue color scheme. Rather, much like his uniform peculiarly hanging in his closet at home, the entire store had been rebuilt from the ground up in a striking red. At the very top of the building, in prominently lit-up white letters, read the new name of his workplace: *TargetMart*.

Benny really must have hit his head pretty bad.

Inside, the aisles all seemed to be in order. Everything was stocked and faced correctly. The bell was still going off. The lights still made everything look ghastly and depressing. Everything still had that *MundaneMart* charm, only, maybe he should start calling it *TorpidMart*. This was all too much for poor Benny.

Benny changed into his uniform, except that the one in his locker matched the one in his apartment. He promised himself that he would go to bed earlier that day.

Back on the floor, he made his way to the candy aisle to replenish his bubblegum stash. He had a hunch that he would go through many pink squares that day in all of his disorientation. Unfortunately, much like the day before, Chase came up to him, only, it wasn't Chase, not exactly.

“Hey Benny,” he said.

When Benny turned around to face his boss, he was expecting something bad, perhaps a stern talking to or a disappointed frown, but nothing could have prepared him for Chase's hair. His boss's once-blond locks were now so dark, they were almost blue. He had also grown quite a beard that reached past his ribcage. He could tell that it was still Chase, but he wouldn't have recognized him if it weren't for his voice and metal name tag.

Benny was still waiting for any reference to the brawl that had occurred the day before, but Chase was business as usual, a very suspicious, uncomfortable thing. It was as if nothing had happened at all. Chase didn't even have a single scratch on him. He seemed entirely unfazed.

The rest of the day was oddly routine. The only other thing that Benny noticed was that Tucker was nowhere to be seen. His locker wasn't labeled, Chase never brought him up, nobody

talked about him. There were certain things that Benny understood were blessings in disguise. He was not going to complain, so he went about his Tucker-free day as joyous as ever.

By the time he was walking home, Benny had convinced himself that everything was fine. He must have had a bad dream, one of the ones that feel like they last decades. The only thing that was really worrying him was his diagnosis and how he would break it to Wanda. Perhaps he should get a second opinion just in case.

Then, the sound of entirely too much friction on rubber and the bell-like honking of a horn.

Benny looked behind him right in time to see a red car hurdling toward him. The driver wore a panicked face as they swerved the car this way and that. Unfortunately, it was to no avail. The driver couldn't get control of the car and was heading straight toward Benny.

He braced for impact, but right as he thought he would feel every bone in his body shattering, he felt the wind of the moving vehicle caress his face. Opening his eyes, Benny was on the other side of the street looking at a blue car as it drove away. He didn't remember moving, but instincts were a crazy thing. Checking himself over, Benny paid no mind to the car that had driven away out of sight. He ran home, too scared to do anything else. He just wanted the warm embrace of his bed, the safety of his blankets.

Reaching his home, he nearly dropped his keys in his haste to unlock the door. Once inside, he slammed the door shut, pressing his back against it and taking a breath for the first time that afternoon. Things were going awry outside, but at least his apartment was the same. He decided to run a bath to calm himself down.

As he prepared, Wanda made noise in the kitchen, getting their dinner ready to dine on. He thought it might be nice, romantic even, if they bathed together.

Her silhouette was outlined in a warm white as she stirred their meal in a pot. He wrapped his arms around her waist, breathing her in, and whispering in her ear. He told her how he felt better with her near, how he was excited to marry her and be with her forever. He told her how she was the one constant in his life he could count on, and that was starting to feel more like reality by the day. She hummed against him before turning the stove off and facing him.

Benny bolted out the door at the sight of the woman in front of him. That was not his fiancée. That was not his Wanda. Instead, it was a deformed version of her, something that looked vaguely human. It was all entirely too much. While Benny was able to look past small things, he didn't think any amount of sleep would help him understand what was going on.

He ran into the street, not caring about his safety, and he did not stop running until his legs gave out on him. He did not stop running until all color faded away. And he certainly did not stop running when he tripped and fell over a precipice and was greeted by a world entirely in black.

Episode 2, “Jane Doe”

By Megan Kostraba

He can feel the crust pulling apart against his eyelids as he achingly opens them to a room of white. The reverberance of bells chiming grows louder in his ears, as the sound of music and chatter begins to poke through the fog. B.C. peels his eyelids open as the view focuses, the golden trim of the room dancing in his peripherals.

B.C. sees that this isn't just a white room, but it's a room *full* of white. Intricate and delicate iridescent ornaments hang from a ceiling covered in plant vines and lights. Golden arches mark the end of an aisle, and with a shock of clarity, B.C. realizes that he is in the middle of the wedding ceremony.

And horribly, he realizes now with a dry mouth, he's standing at the end of the aisle. The wedding bells he keeps hearing are for *him*.

Heart pounding, B.C. closes his eyes to reorient—also trying not to throw up all over what looks like to be new dress shoes.

Maybe this is his own wedding, and he's actually back home with Wanda? Slowly, forcing his breath to remain steady, B.C. opens his eyes again. Rows and rows upon people are seated in chairs, and B.C. immediately knows this is not his real wedding—it can't be, he only talks to a handful of people. Trying his best not to look like he's shitting his pants, B.C. takes a deep breath, truly blending in with the groom behavior. He wants to worry about this more, spend more time wondering why the fuck this keeps happening. With a sorrowful ache, B.C. has to scrunch his eyes to prevent the slew of tears that desperately want to fall down his face.

He's seen different lives, experienced different versions of *himself*, and he doesn't know how to wrap his head around it all. Nothing makes sense. Every instinct in B.C. wants to

desperately answer the five questions you learn to ask as a child: who, what, when, where, and why. But he has nothing. There *is* nothing he can do. At least, not right now. Not at his own apparent wedding, to marry a woman he's never seen in his life.

B.C. forces himself to take one last calming breath, before steeling himself and opening his eyes again. Whoever walks down that aisle is someone he has to be ready for. People do this all the time, he thinks with a bitter stab. Arranged marriages are pretty common, and in a stroke of hope he pleas for, they sometimes work out. B.C. surveys his surroundings as fast as he can, not knowing when some grand music is going to start and the procession will begin. The hall itself is lit with warm lights that shimmer hidden beneath mounds of green foliage. Green, he thinks, must be the theme here. The whole room looks like it's standing in the middle of the forest, and if it weren't for the air conditioner blowing at his neck, B.C. would have a hard time telling the difference. Groups of white and pastel flowers are sitting on pillars all around, but the only flower B.C. recognizes is the water lily sitting in his boutonniere.

Even he can admit that this-world him and his wife-to-be have some good taste.

He's pulled away from the moment with a clap on his shoulder. Turning around, B.C. looks at what must be his best man, maybe even best friend. With dusty hair and a wallop of freckles, this guy looks like he causes trouble—but in a good way.

"Bennett," he whispers, like they're sharing a secret, "How 'ya feeling man?"

"Um, good—I think," Bennett hesitantly responds. "When do you think this thing is going to get started, huh?" He forces himself to laugh as if he's sharing an inside joke with this stranger.

His best man raises his eyebrows in response. Bennett mentally face palms himself—one line in and he's already fucked it up.

“Dude, you know how Jane is—she wouldn’t stop taking her sweet time ever, especially not on her wedding day. You know better than anyone what she’s like getting ready.”

Swallowing the bile that just rose in his throat, Bennett laughs in relief.

“Right, right...” he trails off. “I guess it’s just the waiting game now. How do I look?”

Doing his best to exemplify “scared shitless groom,” Bennett makes himself look nervous, which really wasn’t all that hard, and turns towards his unnamed best man. The guy gives him a hearty once-over, even asking Bennett to “give him a spin” at one point. Then like a mother would, he begins picking invisible lint off of Bennett’s dark blue suit.

“Okay, okay,” Bennett interrupts, as this is turning oddly obsessive, “I think you got it all, man. Do I pass the test or what?”

His best man looks at him, and then without warning, to Bennett’s horror, begins *crying*. Bennett looks around the room, to see if anyone else watching could be of help here. The few people sitting that *are* looking, just sigh and audibly “aw” at the emotional sight. Bennett gives the grandmothers a small, awkward smile before moving back to his... friend? He can only wonder if this is normal behavior between friends, because Bennett would probably want to die if he cried in front of someone so easily.

“Hey, hey there,” Bennett begins with a painful expression, clumsily patting his hand against his friend’s back. “I thought I was the one who was supposed to be a mess, what’s going on?”

His best man must be too overwhelmed to notice the panicked tone in Bennett’s voice, because he reacts by flinging himself into the aisle, and then into Bennett’s arms. Not expecting this at all, Bennett takes a step back to steady himself, now with an armful of a grown man

crying. Forget wanting to go home, Bennett could be sent to literally any other reality, and would be preferable to here.

“Alright, alright,” he continues consoling, obviously not doing a great job if the onslaught of tears is to tell anything. Bennett tries to think from a best man’s perspective—the problem is, he’s never been one. “Look, dude, I’m going to kind of need you to pull it together here, because if you lose it, then I’m going to lose it, and we don’t want the future Mrs. Bennett to see that, do we?”

Snuffling loudly against the crook of his shoulder, his best man slowly retreats from the protection of his arms. Holding him out, Bennett takes the pocket square from his suit and hands it over. Still sniffling, his friend takes it and steps back into his place as best man.

“Look Benji,” he now says quietly, probably embarrassed by the emotional outburst, “it’s just that you deserve something nice, and I’m really happy for you. Just, enjoy the day, okay? Don’t worry about me.”

Strangely serious, Bennett nods his head in response, and turns back to the doors of the ceremony hall. Crisis averted with the best man, he now has to prepare for his own crisis—the wife-to-be. The hall begins quieting down as the officiator steps to his post next to Bennett. With a glum realization, and a sharp pang in his heart, Bennett realizes that he’s getting married—and to a stranger. He has no idea who any of these people are; not his best man, not the officiator, not even his wife. Bennett is a stranger to them just as much as they are to him.

The doors begin to open. Whoever this woman wants him to be, he has to be it. He’ll recite the vows for a woman now lost, and pretend it’s her face he’s staring at. One way or another, this is just a passing moment. If he can’t find a way to fix this cycle, what happens next won’t matter anyways.

How he makes it through the entire ceremony, honestly, Bennett doesn't know. He kind of blacked out somewhere, between reciting his vows that he originally wrote for Wanda and putting the ring on Jane's finger. He finally was able to figure out her name when the officiant said it right before the I-do's—just in time, too, because Bennett was going to be really screwed otherwise. Her face was shining with excitement and her eyes were glistening with tears—she really was a beautiful woman. A slim figure but curvy in all the right places, Bennett was sure that he could fit her waist in his hands. Jane looked like she *actually* loved him, too, with bright eyes and a matching smile.

He won the jackpot with her, and he couldn't even tell you her middle name.

Not a single tear fell from Bennett's eyes during the ceremony, no matter how hard he tried.

"I love you so much darling," Jane had said to him in her vows, tears piling in her dark eyes, lightly covered in just enough makeup to accentuate her features. Bennett had grabbed her hands in his, her delicate and skinny fingers rubbing against the grain of his bitten nails.

"I love you too," Bennett said in response.

Making small talk with Jane on their big day wasn't as hard as he thought it would be. With so much pleasantries and happiness, and more importantly, *distractions*, Jane stayed a happy flower the whole night. She lit up every table they ventured too, floating on air as she greeted well loved family members that Bennett pretended he loved. Jane was playing the conversationalist well and surprisingly, Bennett could tell that she genuinely cared. He on the other hand, stoically stood off to her side, occasionally taking a sip at the drink Aidan, his best man, had thrust into his hand (Bennett was secretly thrilled to now know *two* names).

Jane was the best acting partner he could have asked for. It was easy to play a man in love when he was around her. As he sat at the head table, watching Jane dance with all of her friends from college, absolutely wasted, Bennett couldn't help but wonder if he would have this with Wanda. Would she have shed tears for him, like Jane did? Would she have been out of the dance floor, breaking it down with all friends and family to watch? Or would Bennett be playing the same game, portraying the same act, with a woman who he planned a life with? Bennett doesn't know—there's a lot he doesn't know.

The night went as well as he could have hoped, and when Jane dragged him back to their empty hotel room, he didn't argue against her. It's a crowded, messy room, full of all the things the bridesmaids left in their rush to make the ceremony. Shoe boxes and bags cover the ground, making it hard for Bennett to navigate his way out of the little doorway. Jane closes the door behind him, the shutter of the lock leaving the room in pindrop silence. Her intricate hairstyle has been left loose after the intense day, falling in ringlets down her neck. Bennett's eyes trail the shadows left on her collar bones.

“What are you looking at?” Jane asks, taking a step closer to him. Bennett says nothing. “Anything in particular?” she continues, arms now reaching out to Bennett's tie. He doesn't stop her. Aidan did tell him to enjoy the day—Bennett doesn't want to disagree.

And when Jane pushes him against the mattress, he doesn't protest that either.

“And then, my Aunt Rita just went on and on about how her grandchildren don't visit her anymore, which then turned into a whole thing about her daughter, Tina. I swear, Bennett, that if she knew we weren't even planning on children her head would just pop off,” Jane pauses her

rant with a sip of her morning coffee, sitting on the countertop. “It’s like I didn’t even want her there in the first place, but you know mother—she’d be insulted if I didn’t invite her dear sister.”

“Well,” Bennett starts, “The only thing I heard from your mother was how happy she was that the whole family could show up, so it was probably worth it, right? For our big day and all.”

“Yes, yes—alright. I suppose I could forget about it for a little while.”

Jane drifts her fingers lightly over the countertop, the aroma of her coffee and of the stale morning air mixing together in Bennett’s face. The silence stretches, but not uncomfortably. Bennett picks at the stray strings poking out of his socks, looking over at Jane. Her ankles are daintily crossed, and the flush on her cheeks begins to show as she looks back. Jane hops off of their countertop, walks over the worn carpet of their shared apartment, and stands in front of Bennett.

“Is there a way you think you could help me forget?”

There’s not a lot in this reality that Bennett hates—not yet.

“Sweetheart, I left the coffee pot on the stove, and there’s some bacon in the fridge for you. I know it’s a shame that we don’t get to honeymoon until next month, but we’ll make it through! Have a great day, love you!”

Laying in bed still, Bennett hears Jane yell all of this, unnecessarily loud—might he add, in her rush to hit the Monday morning train. She likes to go at this time, just before the sun peaks its way back into the living world. Bennett remembers, because it was all Jane would talk about this morning when he didn’t realize they both had work, and not a honeymoon.

Without Jane in their apartment, Bennett can finally take a look around and see what his life is like. He’s barely been hanging on, just haphazardly agreeing to whatever Jane says. He

was able to conclude, so far, that Jane works at a clothing boutique down the block, and that his new mother-in-law is a piece of work—it's painfully little to go on. Luckily, as the groom at his own wedding, no one really cared if Bennett was acting off or straying away from others. Wedding-day jitters are normal, but every-day jitters aren't. Now that he's back to reality, and supposedly back to work, he doesn't have any more excuses to distract Jane. It's time to figure this shit out.

Bennett drags himself through a morning routine, easily finding his assorted products throughout the bathroom cabinets. The closet he and Jane share, he notes with a scoff, is probably about 20% his, and 80% Jane's—sounds about right. Their small apartment is basically broken down into three rooms—the bedroom, the bathroom, and then everything else that's important is smushed together in one open area. Throughout his discoveries, Bennett knows that this version of himself has to be a minimalist. If the 4-in-one shampoo bottle that he found in the shower says anything, it's that this Bennett was a simple man. Small collections of books litter the coffee table, and to his amusement, next to the TV stand sits the lego set he always wanted as a kid—the Royal Knight's Castle. It's the only childish thing in the entire living space, the rest of the decorations looking hipster and trend-ish to Bennett. He leans closer, picking up the knight that was perched meticulously on the top of the castle. Each lego figure was carefully placed, mid-fight for the battle of freedom or whatever was being imagined. The entire project was obviously important to whoever crafted it, and Bennett has a suspicion who did. He cautiously sets the knight back on top of the castle, a watchful vigilante.

Bennett takes a seat at their small kitchen table, and sets his face in his hands.

He thinks back to what Aidan had told him, when he said that Bennett deserved something nice. He really doesn't, though. Not like this-world Bennett does. Whatever he's

doing, whatever is happening to him—Bennett is basically *stealing* someone else's life. Even if it was just a different version of himself, there was something here that was real. And Bennett took that away from these innocent people—he took away moments that should have been for someone else. Bennett's legs begin to shake up and down as his thoughts keep sinking.

What's really fucked up, too, is that Bennett is now married—a fact he had honestly yet to think about. He did the full ceremony, became a husband, and not to his fiancée that *is* real—not whatever this fantasy world has turned into. Bennett stands up, pacing the kitchen. This is all junk he already knows. What he doesn't know is glaringly obvious, and is much more concerning than anything else.

Bennett reaches towards the counter to grab a set of keys that he discovered was his. He searches through his tags on the key ring, remembering one he saw the other day—perfect, a library card. Knowing his luck, Bennett would turn on his laptop to find a password that he wouldn't know. So, he grabs a coat for the sprinkling rain outside, and makes a mental checklist for what he has to do today.

1. Look up near-death experiences at the library—it's the only pattern he can recognize so far. See if anyone has experienced this before.
2. Buy lunch. Whatever's near and cheap to match the thirty dollars he found in his wallet.
3. Experiment.

Bennett just needs to figure out what the fuck is going on. And he needs to do it today. Jane deserves a real husband. Wanda does too.

He's lucky he even got to use his phone GPS to find the damn building. Explaining why Bennett couldn't remember his password to Jane seemed too complicated. He had to ask her to hand it over to him *and* open up the passcode lock. It was not easy to do both.

What Bennett forgot though, was that he was walking around a town where people knew him; and knew him well, he guesses. Just walking down the street he ran into every Karen, Debbie, and old-Bettie that were so thrilled to hear about "the wedding of the year". Apparently, he was the talk of the town, and unfortunately, all anybody wanted to do in this town *was* talk. The librarian, Ms. Finklestein barely let him over to the computer section—she kept hounding him with questions about how the wedding was, what kind of cake we ordered, what her dress looked like, and yadda yadda yadda.

"And you suit dear, don't forget to tell me about your suit! Did it match the color themes Jane picked out? I heard from Mrs. Graph that she was going for a neutral-green tone, but you know I can barely keep up with what's trendy these days. I remember, back in my day, you know, puffy sleeves were all the rage. I tried suggesting them to Jane when I saw her out the other day, I think they would really compliment her slim figure, don't you dear? But you know how she is—busy busy. Couldn't even stop for a chat..."

All Bennett could notice was that she spoke with a smile, but her words had thinly veiled notes of jealousy. Listen, if an old lady can't handle young people getting married, well, Bennett just knows that's one thing not actually his fault.

It was hard to get work done with Ms. Finkelstein's pelican eyes on the back of his head. Bennett was forced to sit where everyone could see what was on his computer screen, as Finklestein had so graciously led him over to this particular seat. To make things even harder, finding information about back-to-life experiences was pretty limited. As time passed further in

the clock of the computer screen, the more worried Bennett became. He figured it wouldn't be as simple a solution as this anyway, but *god*, had he hoped. He found countless conspiracy theories, several articles referring him to follow "God's Plan," and got so deep in the Reddit blog-o-sphere that Bennett had to get up and break for food.

He was eating his overpriced sandwich from the gas station where thank god, no one spoke to him as if he were a member of their family. Squished into the single chair in what was called the "cafe area" of the place, Bennett realized that this whole plan was fucked from the start. He took a bite of his turkey and provolone cheese on white bread—stale.

Bennett essentially has two options here.

1. Continue living his life in this world. That includes Jane, Aidan, his crazy mother-in-law, and all the people in this town. That also means taking over what the previous Bennett left behind.
2. Experiment. Maybe go back home. Maybe see Wanda. Possibly die.

He knows what the obvious option should be. *Just live here*. With his wife that clearly loves him, a family that's crazy but actually notices him, and a town so enamored by him that they care enough to ask about *suit color*, Bennett's life doesn't actually suck. Not like he was expecting it to, at least. Here, there wouldn't be anymore demands from Chase or condescending remarks from Tucker. There's a woman here that loves him and listens, not someone who won't get off the phone to ask him about his day. Bennett could forget about everything he used to have—wipe the map clean and start new here.

It would be easy.

"I can't do it," he whispers to himself.

“What was that?” Wiping the deli counter clean, a worker in a blue vest looks expectantly at Bennett.

Bennett looks back.

“I just... I can't do that, ya know? I won't be able to forget what I had before.” Bennett looks at the guy, trying to explain himself to an audience that doesn't exist. “You guys have a real person you care about, missing. I need to try to get him back.”

Without thinking twice, Bennett stands up and runs straight towards the medicine aisle of this crappy little gas station. He barely looks twice at whatever bottles he's grabbing—all Bennett knows is that he has twenty dollars left, an experiment to do, and he's using it all up on this. He approaches the pay counter, and dumps the boxes towards the guy who's staring at Bennett, wide eyed. He barely notices, just watching the scanner add up his total. \$25.63.

“Um,” the worker starts, looking at the twenty dollar bill in Bennett's hand. Bennett doesn't let him finish.

“Just take off whatever's cheaper to get it down to twenty. Please,” he adds as an aftermath.

Eyebrows raised, the guy does exactly what Bennett asks, and takes off the cheapest bottle—the motrin gets put off to the side. He hurries up the cash exchange as fast as possible, but the worker hesitates before handing him his change.

“Aren't you that guy that just got married? I've heard a few people in here talking about it between the coffee machines.” His face looks like he doesn't want to bring it up, but Bennett recognizes the curiosity in his eyes.

“Yeah, that's me. Mr. Happily Married,” not waiting for a response, Bennett grabs his change out of the guy's hand and heads right out of the store.

It's as he's walking to the docks that Bennett realizes why he is so upset—he doesn't *want* to lose this place. Living on a quiet seaport, with a community of people that want to know about Bennett's life and his thoughts, it was just nice. Not that he's not grateful for what he had before—Wanda's good too. But this was different, these people liked him even though he was just pretending to be the real Bennett.

There's a gate blocking the dock entrance, but Bennett just bows under it and heads towards the end. There's not a lot of choice in Bennett's life—this is something he also thinks as he walks down the worn wooden boards, all structure washed away. He didn't ask for this. Bennett didn't raise his fist to the sky and demand to be a seeker of the universe. Nor did he want to have to question his reality on a daily basis, unsure if what he's woken up to is a dream or a new nightmare, or a new life altogether.

If he's going to die, he at least wants the water to be his last view.

Bennett's legs dangle off the last board on the dock, dirty sneakers just coasting the water. He opens the two bottles of pills he was able to buy, and pours a good amount of each into the middle of his palm, and stares at the ocean.

Bennett isn't sure to think. What's one supposed to think about before they kill themselves? He knows his past, and has thought about it over and over. Nothing is flashing before his eyes, no precious moments of childhood, or memories of mom and dad. Just the empty water, and a flock of seagulls that occupy the rock over, squawking over one unlucky fish.

Bennett's not sure if this is the answer. He might not return to his home, but to an entire new world. Or, he'll die permanently this time. That doesn't seem so bad at this point. Whatever he does, he just hopes it brings this-world him back. Bennett doesn't want to leave Jane a widower.

Raising his palm, Bennett eats each pill one by one, his fingers pinching the pills and sending them back like an assembly line. By the time he finally closes his eyes, all Bennett can think about is how sore his mouth is, and how putrid the air smells.

Episode 3 - "The Wyatt West"

By Myles Allan

When his eyes opened again, utter pandemonium erupted around him. There was a field of bodies stretching towards the horizon, all covered in golden armor that glittered in the limited sunlight breaking through the smog. The singing of steel rang from all sides, and the dying cries of horses echoed in his ears. One of the toiling soldiers came at him at full speed, upon which B.C. noticed their pointed ears and pale-green skin. He managed to dodge their lunging sword at the last possible moment, but the near-miss was enough to send him spiraling towards the ground.

His body landed, but not in the grass. His neck found itself upon a divot, just a foot off the ground, with his hands enclosed in the wood beneath him. He realized he had fallen upon a stage, overlooking another crowd of bodies. This crowd seemed to be composed of human beings, but they all gazed up at the platform with scorn heavy on their faces.

"We hereby sentence Bernard Cornelious to death by guillotine for crimes against the public," a voice proclaimed beside him, further up the length of the stage. The crowd cheered, and at that moment, B.C. realized what was hanging above him.

"Wait," B.C. muttered, but no one could hear his voice above the applause, and it was already a moment too late. There was a man standing to his left, pulling a dark hood over his eyes. The executioner reached forward and grabbed the rope that kept the blade suspended above B.C.'s neck.

He shut his eyes as the executioner toyed with the rope, listening to the blade creak and ring above him. The cheer around the stage fizzled out into a concerned whisper.

"This fucking thing is always getting stuck," the executioner muttered, his voice escaping as a muffled groan through his hood.

B.C. opened his eyes to assess the issue, but by the time his eyelids hit the back of his head, he was in a different room. This one looked familiar – the couch, the curtains, the television. Once B.C. recovered from the threat of imminent death, he sighed upon realizing where he'd landed. Home.

He'd made it home. He nearly wept, but his mind was frozen in bewilderment. He searched the room for Wanda, assuming from the commotion in the kitchen that she must be nearby. B.C. opened his mouth to speak, to call out her name, only to hear a sound that was foreign to his brain.

A squeak.

He tried to clear his throat and speak again, assuming that he'd lost part of his voice in all the commotion. More squeaks. The squeaks only got louder as he experimented with his odd vocal condition, alerting whoever was in the kitchen. When they crossed the threshold into the living room, B.C. was ecstatic to see a familiar face, someone who might be able to solve his conundrum. Only it wasn't his fiancée, not as he'd known her. He wasn't entirely sure what he was seeing. The creature that entered the living room was as tall as a human being but covered in more hair, with the face and build of a rodent. His fiancée was in the body of a giant guinea pig, in all of her human clothes, stretched to encompass the mass of fur atop her skin.

B.C. barely heard her questioning squeaks over the sound of his own squeals of terror. Of all the realities he'd crossed into, this was by far the most horrifying he'd seen. He stumbled and fell off his chair, knocking over the TV tray that had previously held his dinner. When he hit the carpet, the silverware followed him down, with his steak knife landing just inches from his furry face.

He reached to touch his own body if only to confirm that he still had one. When his hands made contact with his torso, he felt his skin-covered fingers make contact with denim, and the lights around him had dimmed.

He found himself on the sticky, muddy floor of a saloon dining hall. He sat among the shattered glass of his beer mug, beneath his capsized table and discarded chair. The music playing in the far corner of the saloon stopped for just a moment before the crowd laughed off the commotion and the band continued with their song.

B.C. took a moment to breathe, still trying to cope with the image of his lover as a giant, anthropomorphized house pet. The thought was only compounded by memories of pills and weddings and blades. And now he was somewhere new, with its own set of atrocities. Sure, it looked like a normal bar to him now, but perhaps everyone had a second mouth in this reality, or all the streets ran vertically. His chest heaved like a deflated balloon, and his vision started to go blurry from hyperventilation.

“You alright, doll?” A female voice asked from above him. He shuttered before looking up, afraid of what horrors he might see in a humanoid shape. Thankfully, the voice belonged to what looked like an ordinary human woman, with dark skin and corkscrew curls tied up off her face. She continued, “Maybe too much to drink.”

“I need to go home,” was all B.C. managed to say. He was grateful to find his voice again, and for someone to hear it, though it was still barely louder than a whisper.

“Come on, let’s get you up,” The woman decided, reaching down to help him off the floor.

“I need to go home,” B.C. repeated. As he stood, he felt the blood draining from his face and struggled to steady the tremor in his fingers.

“You feeling okay? You look mighty pale,” she asked.

“I need to go home,” he said one final time, breaking out of the woman’s grasp and making a beeline for the door.

“Hey! You still have to pay for the broken glass!” She called after him, but B.C. had already taken a step out of the swinging double doors.

He was greeted by a dirt road, bustling with passersby and horses, some drawing wagons and others with lone riders. It was an image out of an Eastwood film, with the stirring dust creating an orange-brown fog over the street. All B.C. saw were more potential deaths and dozens of near-misses, all of which could send him spiraling into a new reality, one far less stable than this one.

His feet staggered backwards, away from the road, and he felt his back slide against the wall of the saloon. He sat on the bar’s front porch, trembling in his blue jeans, utterly terrified of every moving element in the world around him. He muttered to himself the same five words, over and over: *I need to go home.*

“Booker?” A voice called from somewhere behind B.C.’s left shoulder. He spun around wildly, half-terrified and half-hostile, ready to defend himself from whoever was threatening his meltdown. He saw a man flick a lit cigarette into the road and rush down to help B.C. stand.

The stranger was reaching out to comfort him, but quickly retracted his hand upon seeing B.C.’s outburst. His dark eyes softened for a moment, clouded with familiarity and concern.

“Are you alright?” The stranger asked. B.C.’s chest was heaving, and he blinked rapidly in an attempt to get the spiraling sand and dirt out of his eyes.

“I need to go home,” B.C. repeated, his voice barely a whisper. The stranger moved a little closer, his eyebrows bending inwards. “I need to go home.”

“Okay, alright. Let’s go home,” the stranger continued, grabbing his shoulder and peering down the street, as if he were looking for the thing causing him distress.

B.C. finally let the stranger pick him up off the ground, realizing that the two of them might have a home in common, or at the very least, this stranger knew where home was. After all, this stranger had called him a name. Booker.

Booker let himself be dragged across the street and around the block, the stranger rubbing a comforting hand across his back the whole way. They arrived at the storefront of a butcher shop, which had a set of stairs leading to an apartment above. Booker hobbled up the stairs, afraid that one loose foot might send him into a whirlwind of new skins and new strangers.

The apartment he was brought to certainly looked like one he might call home, with a similar couch and similar curtains and a similar radio. The living room bled into the kitchen, which is where the stranger led him. He sat Booker down at the table and got to work putting beans into an odd contraption on the counter.

“What happened in there, Book? I’ve never seen you so frazzled,” the stranger continued. He began grinding something within the contraption, and from the smell, Booker realized what it was. Coffee. He allowed himself to relax for a moment. He hadn’t had coffee in quite a few realities.

“It’s hard to explain,” Booker replied. It was odd, having a conversation like this. The other man clearly understood the nature of their relationship, but Booker hadn’t a clue who his new roommate was. He wasn’t sure if introductions were even worth the effort. One stubbed toe, and he could be thrown into a new one.

“Try me,” the man said. “Was it Hank again? What’d that bastard say? You know I’ll fuck ‘im up if you ask, right?”

“Who?”

“Hank,” the man repeated. He turned from the coffee maker and looked at Booker a little closer. “Did you hit your head or something? You’re freakin’ me out.”

“No, I—”

Booker paused, weighing his options for a moment. On the one hand, he was still convinced that this whole situation was a waste of his time, and that he could be pushed into a

new reality at any moment. He didn't know who this man was, and he probably wouldn't believe him if he'd told him the truth. On the other hand, any sort of ally in this could be useful, and he was going to have to spend some amount of time in this reality, in any case. Could be a minute, could be a month.

He connected one final dot, one that led him to his eventual conclusion. This man, in this apartment, was another version of a constant in all his lives. This man was his fiancé. Some version of himself, at some point in time, had chosen to trust this man enough to let him into his life. He deserved to know.

"You're going to think I'm crazy," Booker started.

"I already think you're crazy. That's why I like you," his fiancé replied. Booker smiled, knowing now that he was right with more certainty.

"So... I'm not Booker," he replied. The man dropped the coffee contraption and looked at him with a crooked eyebrow. "At least... not Booker as you know him. I'm Booker from another reality. Another version of Booker, whose name is actually Benny and doesn't live in the Wild West and works at a grocery store and is engaged to a woman."

"A woman?"

"Really? That's what you got out of that?"

"Sorry, sorry," the man said, waving a hand in front of his face. He walked across the room and sat at the table across from him. "It's a lot to process. So... you don't know who I am?" Booker shook his head.

"I mean, I can guess that we're together. But until I woke up in that saloon, I was someone else. I have no memory of you, or being 'Booker,' or being here. And every time I have a near-death experience, I change realities, so I probably won't be here for very long, either. At least, once that happens, you'll get your Booker back. Probably," he explained.

The man stared at him, and Booker wondered if any of this was actually getting through to him. His expression was blank, and for a moment, he simply zoned out while staring at the table. He looked back up at Booker and searched his face for something that might indicate that this was a joke, but found nothing.

"You hit your head pretty damn hard, huh?" The man said, breaking his silence. Booker groaned and he smiled, shoving his shoulder. "I'm kidding. I believe you. I think. But if you're here... where's my Booker?"

He hadn't really thought about it in that way before. Perhaps every other version of him was going through the same thing, being shuffled through a thousand different lives, or perhaps the Booker he replaced was now flying through an empty void of consciousness. In any case, the thought was horrifying, and he certainly didn't want to share that terror with the man in front of him.

"I don't know," Booker admitted. "But I'm sure he's okay." The man nodded, and put out his hand.

"I'm Wyatt."

"Wyatt. Nice to meet you," he replied. "You can still call me Booker."

"What's the plan, then?" Wyatt asked. Booker shrugged.

"I don't know. As much as I'd like to give you your partner back, I don't really want to change realities again. Some of them are... really scary. This one might be my best bet."

"So we have to keep you here. Avoid near death experiences."

"I guess, but it's harder than you think. I've almost died in some very stupid ways," Booker explained. "Maybe I should just stay in this apartment, swaddled up in a blanket and shoved in a closet."

"Well, what's the point in that?" Wyatt replied. "If you're gonna live here, you gotta live. You can't spend your whole life on shore 'cause you're afraid of drownin'. We'll just be careful. Avoid unnecessary dangers."

"Fine," Booker conceded after a moment. "I guess we'll see how long I can keep this up."

"We'll keep you away from the heist, too, then," Wyatt continued. He stood up from the table and returned to his coffee, retrieving the ground beans.

"Heist?"

"There's a train from Denver passing through the valley tomorrow to refuel. The town's been struggling with TB for the past few months, and the cargo is loaded with medical supplies. The gang's coming over later tonight to discuss strategy," Wyatt explained, brewing the coffee as he spoke. "It'll probably be too dangerous for you, though."

"Probably," Booker confirmed, though it was hard to pretend like he wasn't interested. "So... this gang. We're like, cowboys, then?"

"Kind of," Wyatt said. "Don't drive cattle, though."

Booker nodded, realizing that he had very little idea of how to assimilate into a different time, as if being in a different reality wasn't confusing enough. He felt like there were some things off about this version of the West, but he didn't know enough about history to put his finger on it.

"Any other questions?" Wyatt asked, leaning over the table and handing Booker a mug of coffee with a smile. Booker smiled back, feeling a warm stir in his stomach. It was only made warmer by his next sip.

"Several."

The two spent the next couple of hours swapping stories and refilling their mugs. For the first time in several times, Booker felt almost normal. There were times when Wyatt spoke and Booker swore he heard Wanda's voice come out, and other times when he couldn't imagine a reality where he'd managed to be with someone like this. Wyatt was a very intense man, the kind of man that Booker had wanted to be when he was ten or fifteen or twenty-two, before life handed him the truth of things on a rusting platter. After a few awkward exchanges, listening more about the kind of person "Booker" had been, he managed to feel like could understand himself here, though there were many things that still felt out of place.

"Excuse me if I sound rude, but... is it normal for men to be with men here?" Booker asked.

"Of course. Is it not normal where you're from?"

"I wouldn't say that. Some people think it's wrong. I'm certainly not..." Booker trailed off, finding his cheeks going hot. "I've never been attracted to men, but, y'know. I see no problem with it or anything. Different strokes, and all that."

"Sure. More coffee?" Wyatt replied, clearly trying to avoid the conversation.

"Yes please," Booker agreed, also happy to direct his attention elsewhere.

A few moments later, as Wyatt stood from his chair and made his way over to the counter, Booker heard a rhythmic drumming against the front door. Wyatt perked up from his mug, and looked over at Booker with wide eyes.

"They're early," Wyatt said, twisting his lips. He put his mug back down on the counter and wiped his hands off on his jeans. "Look, it'll be too much to explain to them, so just... make yourself scarce."

"Who?"

“The gang. Just... go to the bedroom. Down the hall. I’ll say you’re not feeling well.”

Booker wasn’t in the mood to argue, but was a little upset to be separated from his coffee. He conceded and disappeared down the hallway. As he shut the door to the bedroom, he heard Wyatt open the front door and a loud symphony of cheerful greetings.

Booker turned to face the room. Their bedroom was far more lived-in than his room back home. Maps, prints, and pictures decorated the walls, and knick-knacks littered their bookshelves and bedside tables. Booker approached the mosaic of portraits on the far wall and studied them. It was the first time he saw the body he was inhabiting; it looked much like the body he was used to, but a bit taller, a bit filthier, and a bit – well, healthier. There was a photo of him and Wyatt embracing in front of a large canyon, and Booker’s silhouette actually looked filled in and strong around his bones. His face was flushed and his eyes seemed humorous. There were some other men around them, jeering and throwing their arms up around each other. He looked... content. Happy, even.

Looking around at the other objects that inhabited their space, Booker saw compasses and model ships and expensive-looking pens and piles of leather-bound journals and foreign paints and cracked teacups and postcards signed by people he’d never met, but had certainly known him well enough to think of him in far-off, exotic places. It was far more of a life than he’d ever had, and though he hadn’t technically *had* it, something about it felt right. Even though he was living his days in a run-down, tiny apartment without electricity and hot water, making his living off of train heists, something about it was familiar. He thought, rashly, that he might be able to get used to a life like this.

Even though he knew he couldn’t have it for long. Or could he?

He heard a sudden commotion from the other room, someone speaking loudly followed by a rapid set of footsteps towards the bedroom door. Booker stepped closer to the wall to see if he could understand the conversation happening down the hall.

“Where is that bastard?” A voice called. It wasn’t hostile or accusatory, but the sentiment still made Booker nervous.

“C’mon, August. I said he wasn’t feeling well,” Wyatt’s voice replied.

“I just wanna say hello,” the man replied.

As the footsteps got closer, Booker panicked. He looked towards the bed, which was more of a pair of cots pushed close together, and considered climbing in and feigning a cold.

Before he could make it there, the bedroom door swung open. Wyatt was standing a couple of strides behind him, shrugging in defeat. The man with him, who was apparently named August, was a short, rambunctious-looking fellow with olive skin and a crooked tooth peeking out of his bottom lip.

“He don’t look sick,” August said, though it was clear he was still joking around, not sincerely upset. He took a step forward and affectionately clapped Booker on the shoulder. “How’ve you been?”

“Fine,” Booker replied, trying to put on the devil-may-care attitude that the man in the photos had. “Just, y’know, had too much to drink this morning.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Booker I know,” August said, amusement heavy in his voice. Booker and Wyatt both tried to laugh it off, but August hadn’t seemed to notice, motioning them out of the bedroom. “C’mon. All the lads are here. We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

“Booker isn’t coming to the heist,” Wyatt interjected.

“What do you mean, he’s not coming?” August’s face fell, much of the delight draining out of his voice.

“He’s, um...” Wyatt trailed off, clearly not practiced at lying. Booker wasn’t much better, but he had to come up with something.

“My, uh, doctor said there’s something up with my back. I can’t be doing all that... strenuous activity,” he stumbled. Wyatt nodded along. “I’ve been trying to stay in bed until it passes.”

“Pft, what does he know?” August said flippantly. “At least come out and tell the others. We brought bourbon. Booze is good for the bones.”

August pushed past Wyatt and returned to the living room. Booker looked to his partner for some guidance, but the man just rolled his eyes and gestured towards the hallway.

There were five other people in the living room, aside from August, and they’d spread themselves out around the kitchen table and the sofa. The aforementioned handle of bourbon was on the coffee table, and one of the other men was pouring out the glasses.

“Booker!” A few of them exclaimed when the two returned to the living room. He’d never had so many people happy to see him in his life.

“He said he’s not coming on the heist,” August reported, much to the group’s collective dismay. “Something with his back.”

Booker nodded and shrugged. “Next time.”

“Whatever, just come take a sip of this. It’s an 1803, from Kentucky,” one of the others said, clearly not that disgruntled by the sudden news. Booker took the glass that was handed to him and sat down at the far end of the living room. He figured that if he just kept himself out of the conversation for as long as possible, he could pass by without suspicion.

But it was harder than he’d thought to keep to himself. The gang around him had an electric kind of energy. They’d clearly all known each other for years, perhaps even a handful of decades. They were all from different walks of life – some older, some barely teenagers, some women, others somewhere in between, all different shades of skin – but there was a contagious kind of camaraderie shared between them. They cracked jokes that Booker didn’t understand, made light of each other’s troubles in a comfortable, earnest way, and talked very little of business. Booker even found himself joining in here and there, and though he didn’t know their history, or even his own, the conversation was natural. No one seemed to notice that there was something different about him, and if they did, they brushed it off as easily as they did most things.

Most striking, as Booker was disquieted to realize, was Wyatt. He was charming enough on his own, but around all of his companions, he was the center of the Earth, pulling the room in around his gravity. It seemed like every discussion came back to him at one point or another. The others looked to him for validation, for wisdom, for a punchline. It was confusing to Booker, but comforting in some other ways. He still didn’t think he loved men in that way, but he was glad that some version of him did. He could understand why. He would even say that that version of him was lucky.

“Y’know, Booker, we’ll miss having you on the job,” one of the women said. She was holding one of the other folks in her lap, her arms comfortable around their torso. “You have such a way with the horses.”

“It’s just the once,” Booker replied. “I’ll be back to my old self soon enough.”

Wyatt looked at him with knowing eyes, and smiled weakly. Booker couldn’t imagine the kind of turmoil he was in. On the one hand, Booker was glad that he’d believed him and agreed to help him stay, keeping him from a whirlwind of possible atrocities waiting for him in a thousand different realities. On the other, it would be so easy to get *his* Booker back. He

wouldn't even blame him. A simple trip, a knife a few inches from his face, a stray bullet, and Wyatt would have his whole life back to as it was.

And yet he kept him there. And that was why Booker found himself loving him.

"You don't have to climb nothing," one of the others added, a younger Black man with a missing finger. "You could just be a lookout. It's safe."

"Maybe," Booker replied with a shrug. He looked back to Wyatt, who also lifted his shoulders. Something like that could be easy enough, but any added variable seemed like too much of a risk. Then again, with the kind of luck he'd been having lately, the apartment was just as much of a danger as the open world.

More importantly, he didn't want to be cooped up here alone. After an afternoon spent with this crew, he couldn't get enough of it. He remembered what Wyatt had told him about drowning. All of the others were risking their lives, too, even if it was a different circumstance. Not to mention, Wyatt was sacrificing so much to keep Booker here. Staying home felt like a waste. He owed Wyatt a little carelessness.

"I guess I could tag along," Booker said. Everyone's face lit up. Wyatt seemed confused but didn't make a fuss about it in front of the group.

"He can do something small. Keep an eye out for Hank's crew, or something," Wyatt agreed.

There was that name again: Hank. Booker had been through this enough times to fathom a guess at who that might be.

"Do we think he'll show?" One of the women asked.

"He'd be stupid not to. Anything to steal the spotlight," Wyatt replied. The room nodded in agreement. Some of them looked to Booker to add something, but he had nothing to say. "In any case, we're ready. The train'll be stopping in the valley at 8:23pm tomorrow. We can't afford to lose a second. Be there and move fast."

The group sounded off with affirmations and slowly began trickling out the front door. Wyatt let out a breath once the last of them filed out and looked over at Booker with concern in his eyes.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Wyatt asked.

"No," Booker replied. "But it seems just as silly to stay here."

Wyatt frowned and lifted his eyebrows, deciding after a moment that pursuing the conversation further was pointless. He took a step towards Booker, reaching for his hand in a practiced motion. Booker flinched back by mistake, forgetting for a moment that he looked like someone else, someone that Wyatt might've held the hand of for comfort.

"Sorry," they both said in unison. They both paused awkwardly, and Booker wondered if he should try to move in for a hug or something similar. They both stood there in heavy silence, before Wyatt nodded and walked off.

"Let's get some sleep," Wyatt offered, moving past him and down the hall.

Booker wasn't sure how the heist was going. He couldn't hear or see much of the train itself from his lookout spot, which seemed counterproductive to him. Wyatt insisted that he'd be able to see anyone entering the valley from the plateau, and it'd be just a short ride down to where the rest of the gang was unloading the train. It was a simple enough job. Safe enough. Booker hadn't seen so much as a tumbleweed blow in from town.

Then he heard it: a gunshot. Alone and deafening and echoing against the walls of the valley. At first, Booker was confused, as he still couldn't see anywhere that it would've originated from. He then realized that it had come from down the hill, where the train had supposedly stopped. His blood turned to ice in his veins and he urged his horse down the hill.

He'd never ridden a horse before, at least not that he could remember, but his muscles seemed to hold onto a memory that his brain didn't. As he raced down towards the train, he and his steed moved as one. His heart was thundering in his chest, and for once, he wasn't overanalyzing every stone that his horse might trip on or worrying that something might fall from the sky. He was just hoping that he hadn't failed them, that he would arrive at the train and everyone would still be breathing.

When he made it to the rest of the gang, he didn't immediately see any signs of carnage. Everyone seemed to be moving at a regular pace, moving boxes from the frozen cargo car and onto the wagons that their horses were drawing. The car they'd chosen was towards the end of the train, so it seemed that the people conducting were none the wiser to their scheme.

When Wyatt looked up from his work and saw Booker, he stopped, dropping his crate at his feet and pulling the bandana down off his face. Panic was evident in his expression, but Booker was just relieved that nothing seemed to be wrong on his end.

“What happened? Is everything alright?” Wyatt asked as soon as Booker’s horse was close enough for him to hear.

“I was going to ask you the same thing. I heard a gunshot,” Booker explained.

“A gunshot? From down here?” Wyatt repeated. Booker nodded. His partner looked around and counted off their companions, making sure everyone was accounted for. “Maybe it came from further down.”

Booker followed his gaze towards the front of the train. It was difficult to see much, as the train began to bend and wrap itself around the valley, so that many of the other cars were blocked by the plateau that loomed above them. Wyatt had chosen this spot for that reason. Unfortunately, it meant that they were also blocked off from much of what was going on with the rest of the train.

“What should we do?” Booker asked. Wyatt shrugged and moved to pick up his crate again, and brought it to the wagon.

“Not sure,” Wyatt replied. “There’s only a few boxes left. We’ll be out of here soon enough.”

Booker frowned and wondered if he should dismount and help the others with their work. Even more puzzling to him, though, was the fact that he was the only one who heard the gunshot. Perhaps the echoes in the valley were playing tricks on him and it’d come from someplace entirely different than the train. Maybe it wasn’t even a gunshot, but the sound of one of the heavier boxes hitting the wagon or one of the gang hitting the side of the cargo car, and Booker was just being paranoid.

While he was contemplating the nature of sounds, an entirely new one entered the mix: the sound of brakes, slowly releasing themselves. Every head froze and swiveled towards the train as it slowly rolled forward on the track. Once everyone got over their initial shock, it was all hands on deck, and boxes were being thrown from the car to ground, just desperate to get them out. A few cracked open, and bundles of gauze and bandages spilled across the sand.

“Shit!” Wyatt exclaimed. “Something must be going on up there. They’re moving ahead of schedule.”

A thunder of hooves suddenly joined the cacophony of sounds bouncing off the valley's walls. Booker turned and saw a group of five or six horses turn the corner of the clearing. Their riders seemed unnerved that there were others in front of the train and stopped before they could get much closer to the wagons. It seemed that everyone's plans were being thrown off this evening.

"What the hell are they doing here?" The lead rider snapped.

He had a gun in his hands. Booker heard the click of barrels all around him. Things were moving quite too fast. Booker's hands suddenly felt too empty. He wasn't supposed to be here, in every sense of the word. He heard murmurs around him, curses and naughty names, all thrown from both directions. His brain grew fuzzy, every sound bouncing against his ears like a scream.

One of the barrels was pointed at him. His bones were frozen. This body didn't know how to move. Wyatt still did, and suddenly tackled Booker to the ground, just as one of the riders fired his gun.

"Booker!" Was the last thing he heard.

His back hit the sand, and everything around him faded into a whisper.

EPISODE 4: STRIKER

By Asher Duke

The man with many names lay on the concrete floor of the bunker. It was cold and sterile in form.

When he opened his eyes in a new body, his only action was to check for identification, a designation he could shout out as he was run over or shot. In his pant pocket was a crumpled index card reading “Bari Chayim.”

Maybe it was his; perhaps it belonged to another. It didn’t matter. As soon as he had identified himself, he laid back down; Bari would not be moving.

The ceiling was barren aside from the oxidized copper pipe. Tracing it with his eyes, Bari noticed a small crack directly above him. Continuing down the pipe’s path, he saw it extend into the shadows of the bunker.

Bari couldn’t find it in himself to care about where it went, where he was, or what the world outside his immediate vicinity looked like. No lovers, no death but his own.

Tracing his eyes further, he saw a skylight. It was bright out, but the light that hit the floor below it refracted. There was water above him. Though the view was small, he could see coral and fish of all types.

Resigned to let his body eat itself, Bari continued to lay motionless. If he couldn’t control his life, he would control his death.

As the hours passed, the pipe began to rattle. Small copper flakes began to chip off of it, landing in his mouth and on his eyes. While the taste was bitter and the flakes burned his eyes, Bari remained still. What did moments of discomfort matter in the face of eternal life?

The pipe began to shake even harder; flakes became chips, chips became fragments. The sound emanating from the ever-expanding crack signaled something rushing towards him.

Perhaps this wouldn't be the death he originally planned, but he would let it happen.

The light that had once emanated from the skylight above him had long since dimmed, though the faint glow of moonlight still poured through the bunker. An alarm bell rang, likely for some kind of routine that would keep him alive from whatever awaited him outside. Bari didn't care.

The hours without food or water began to manifest. He could feel the throbbing headache threatening to worm its way out from the recesses of his dehydrated brain. He knew it would only be exacerbated by the mixed bell and rattling pipe.

Bari was right. The bell and pipe merged into a thoughtless hum. Yet, as it grew in volume, the contorted moonlight's pattern quickened until the bunker had the glow of a cheap aquarium. Fittingly, the water that began to drip from the crack in the pipe made Bari feel like quite the bottom feeder.

The dripping got faster until, eventually, a thin but steady stream emerged. The water was cool, and Bari felt his cracked lips begin to smooth over. The stream thickened, and Bari's unconscious relief turned to concern as the water poured over his eyes.

Bari contemplated shifting his position by just enough to get out of the stream, but the feeling of small and hard ovoids that fell onto his face caused a moment of hesitation.

As quickly as the water had come, its rapid cascade ceased, though enough time had passed to coat the bunker's floor in a thin water membrane.

A quick stinging radiated from his left calf. Raising his head ever so slightly, Bari saw a cockroach biting at his leg. He jerked it, scaring the roach away. The ripples that followed the thing as it scurried into a dark corner of the bunker disgusted him.

Though Bari may have gotten to his feet just a few lives ago, his instincts of self-preservation abandoned him as soon as that train crushed his body. The point of living had grown dull.

And so the cycle continued. Flakes in Bari's eyes, then water, then the cockroaches, the alarm blaring the entire time. Months passed; his skin grew taugth against his bones. The roaches had stopped biting him weeks ago, even they were smart enough to realize he was rotting.

The water on the floor had risen, his skin had broken down. Open sores covered Bari's back, arms, and legs. Mushrooms had begun to sprout from the corners of the bunker. When the refracted light shone on them, Bari could see black and hungry eyes peeking from under their folds. He disappointed even the cockroaches.

Even though Bari was bone-thin, his stomach had begun to rapidly extend from his midsection, pill-shape and painful. The ketone gases that filled him exuded a sickly sweet odor. Even as starvation took him, Bari remained still.

The feeling of dripping on his forehead faded, as did the sounds of the alarm. As Bari closed his eyes, he couldn't help but wonder what it was trying to alert him of.

When he opened his eyes, the world that greeted him was strange. Multiple images scattered across his vision. Though Bari could tell the room was dark, his eyesight was perfect. Bringing his hands to his face, he felt something that made his heart skip a beat. Where he expected to feel and see five fingers, he saw ribbed nubs.

Bari opened his mouth to scream, but as he tried, only a soft chirping emanated from him. He ran his forelegs along his oblong body. Feeling the crest of his folded wings caused him to retract his appendages.

The water coating the floor he stood on would show him the truth, but Bari didn't know if he wanted it.

He stood still for a time, yet the rising sun caused him to retreat into the dark corners of his enclosure. Mushrooms provided a sanctuary from the blinding glare of the sun.

Despite the deep feeling of loneliness that permeated his form, Bari was surrounded by brothers. They looked like him. They were disgusting.

They did not speak to him.

Bari spent the first few days of his new life staring at the body across the room from his mushroom haven. Whoever it was must not have starved themselves to death. It still had meat.

Bari didn't want to do it. He would have been fine with another round of famine, but something in his insect brain prevented that train of thought from advancing. Bari could feel his will fighting against his instincts, but 320 million years of evolution ensured he would eat.

The first bite was unpleasant. Bari was still thinking like a man. He was not a man anymore.

As much as he hated to admit it, the body tasted rather good. It tasted familiar. Perhaps his tastebuds in this form were less... refined.

Did he even have tastebuds?

Carving through the cooling body was easy. The body Bari inhabited was made for it. As he bit into the cold flesh again and again, his body told him to continue while his mind screamed at him to stop. Yet, with every bite of the body, Bari could feel himself returning.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed since he had first begun to tunnel into the now rotting body; indeed, enough time for the thing to become waterlogged and bloated. The incessant ringing of the bell had been dampened from the walls of sinew he carved through. All Bari knew was that he was fed, and no longer needing to eat, he turned around and began scurrying out.

While he knew that he had tunneled into the body, the caverns that littered it were complex. Clearly, his brothers had joined him. Following his scent, Bari made his way out of the corpse. The water had risen considerably. Bits and pieces of the cadaver floated in the water around him. Bari could see several of his brothers curled up at the bottom of the water.

His body commanded him to find higher ground. Bari jumped from the carved remains towards the wall closest to him. As he connected with the wall's surface, he quickly scurried up along it.

As he reached the ceiling, Bari made a dash for the pipe. The bunker was flooding, and it showed no sign of stopping. If he followed the line opposite the leak, it could bring him to freedom. Somewhere deep in his subconscious he still didn't want to escape. What would be the point? Was kind of a life was one as a Bari-Cockroach? Another thought: what the hell would come next?

The pipe was cold to the touch. With each shift of Bari's six legs, flakes of copper slid from beneath him. Halfway down the pipe, one jump across the gap and he would be safe.

The water's force increased; the pipe shook with a fury. As Bari crossed the clevis, something gave; some inconspicuous bolt loosened. As the tube slipped from the fastener, it began to crumble. Bari scuttled as fast as his body could take him. He reached the edge just as the pipe fell.

Jumping from the disintegrating tube, Bari's eyes gazed downwards towards the body.

The face was bloated, and open sores littered the surface. Its milky eyes stared up at Bari's, not a shred of consciousness left. The mouth was spread open, in an expression of shock or fear or maybe even pain. Bari could not tell. All he knew was that despite its marred visage, those opaque eyes, he knew that face and body.

Wyatt.

Landing on the dry cavity of the non-leaking tube, Bari froze. His body tried to move its legs, antenna flailing wildly, but it remained still. Perhaps it was too much for the simple neurons of a roach brain, but something shattered upon seeing Wyatt. Bari was in control, yet he remained still.

What was it that he was trying to do? Run down an uncharted pipe to, what, find freedom in a disgusting body? What was the point? He had much more conviction just a life ago. Having eaten his previous motivation, Bari was at a loss. To his left was a dark and foreboding path, maybe to freedom. And to his right was a... a flooding room bathed in the decomposing odorous bits of his happiness. A textured floor made up of his brothers. An incessant and never-ending ringing from that damned... bell?

The striker's speed and force were impressive, as was the sound reverberating from it. It was red, and it reminded Bari of school. It reminded him of freedom.

Bari moved towards the bell, jumping from the inside of the pipe back to the wall. He went slowly. The ringing that had once caused him headaches began to sound like music. It was sweet and had a kind of sad draw. Bari could imagine a Blues singer belting their sorrow into its tempo.

He came face to face with the bell; the white hex bolt stood bold against the red gong. It was like a tiny, snowy pupil against a bloodshot iris.

Above it was a placard that read “Leak Alert.”

Bari positioned himself between the hammer and the bell. The wait seemed longer than before. The body, Wyatt, drifted closer to him. Nearly touching heads, Bari gazed down at him. Even now, despite all the damage the elements wrought on his body, he was beautiful, and as the striker bashed into his temple, Bari knew peace.

Vomit was the first thing that came out of her mouth when she woke. Thick and chunky, it flooded its way out of her esophagus. Stumbling to her feet, Bari felt her legs, her torso, her face. Human again, but not Bari.

The soft glow of the moon gleamed down through the skylight. She let it sit upon her face for a moment. After she finished, she reached into the pockets of her cargo pants. In her left thigh pocket was a wallet. The license inside read Brígh Carr.

Looking at the wall Brígh, saw the alarm. Above it read “Skylight Integrity Alert.” She quickly ripped it off the wall, throwing it towards a corner.

A folded piece of paper fell from the corkboard above as the bell hit the wall. Making her way over, Brígh picked the paper up and unfolded it. It was a note. It read:

“Brígh, I don’t know if you’re alive or not or if you’re even the one reading this. If you are, fair play, but it’s not looking good for me. One of those things nicked my leg, and I’m losing a lot of blood. I managed to stumble my way down here, but I don’t think I’m going to make it. If you manage to avoid direct exposure to the moonlight and find yourself down here, I’m leaving you with enough supplies to live a good life. There’s a cropping system behind the bookshelf and as many canned beans as anyone could ever need. You’re welcome to it all. I’m

going to take the suit off and leave it for you. The leg is a fair bit torn, but you've always been good at fixing broken things. I'm sorry we fought, I'm sorry we weren't together at the end, but I'll never be sorry for the time we had. I think I'm going to go rest by the hill North of here, just for a little bit. We had some good dates there, huh? I love you, Bridie.

Yours always,

- Wallace''

Brígh didn't know Wallace; she couldn't remember anything before she was herself, but the note stirred something in her. She slid down the wall, holding the piece of paper close to her chest.

The next several months were spent reading, cooking, and farming. Despite her experiences, nothing came naturally to Brígh. Despite all the bodies, all the people, and all the worlds, she was still just a grocer at heart.

Despite the time spent in the bunker, the moon never set and the sun never rose. Though she still feared going outside due to the letter's contents, Brígh enjoyed looking at the moon from the skylight. It was larger than she had ever seen before, with a glow that was almost pulsating. Sometimes, she would spend a few minutes staring at it, only to blink and realize it had been hours.

Crops grew and were harvested; Brígh was especially fond of the corn she grew from a can. Wallace was right; she could live her life down here. She was also thankful for the impressive library he had left her. Thousands of books from authors she had never even heard of lined the walls.

On the false bookshelf were several books on the various religions and philosophies of the world. While some were familiar, albeit with slight alterations from memory, Brígh was intrigued by Lunareism.

Though the text was cryptic in nature, Brígh understood that the core belief of the Lunares was the moon's ability to heal. Several prayers were meant to be done while facing the moon. While the culture was unique, Brígh couldn't help but feel a shiver down her spine once she got to their version of the end.

It described the apocalypse as not a booming ordeal but a quiet, eternal night bathed in moonlight. Unlike other religions she knew from back home, the apocalypse would affect both believers and skeptics alike, affording no discrimination to the faithful.

None of the other books, religious or otherwise, suggested this was a rather large religion. In fact, many books seemed to make fun of Lunareism, chalking it up to a doomsday cult. At the end of the night, however, Brígh honestly could not care if she was in their apocalypse or not. She had enough books to last three lifetimes and plenty of food and water. This bunker's pipe didn't have so much as a crack in it.

As the years passed, Brígh grew old, her hair graying, her once spry body giving way to pops and pains. Though there had been the occasional bang at the bunker's door over the decades, she never got up to check who it was.

Many lives ago, Brígh had learned that people were nothing but trouble, and the good ones were nothing but pain.

She kept journals. Around the sixth year, she had begun to create them from plant leather. She had some furs that she turned into paper. Sometimes, she would refer to herself as Benny. She never entirely understood why.

It was one night of many when an especially vicious pounding came from the bunker's door. There was a voice that went with it. Though she couldn't understand what it said, it was the first real voice she had heard in four lifetimes.

She still didn't move; if she wanted to listen to someone, she could always wind up the gramophone. Wallace must have been some guy.

The pounding, however, didn't stop. Instead, it got louder, as did the voice. This continued for several minutes longer than she had ever heard, and Brígh began to worry. What if this stranger wasn't going to leave? What if they hurt her? She couldn't take that risk.

Brígh slowly rose from her recliner, grabbing the wall-mounted spear. She had made it after the first noise at the door. Whatever Wallace had been hurt by wasn't human, at least not according to his letter.

The tip was made from the melted gong of the bell. Brígh figured if it had killed her, it could kill someone, *something* else.

Spear clutched in hand, Brígh made her way up the stairs to the blast door. Past several feet of reinforced glass, she saw nothing. Not a person, not a monster, nothing.

A loud scraping sound emanated from the interior pipes. Something was heading towards the skylight.

Brígh shuffled her way back down the steps. She placed herself under the skylight and pointed the spear upwards. She wasn't sure what she was seeing. At first, it resembled a pinkish coral spire. It reminded her of her time as Bari.

As the thing continued to move, it pressed itself against the skylight. The pink faded into black as the moonlight was blotted out, leaving Brígh in darkness. It made noises of pleasure.

A week went by before Brígh forced herself to do something. With the constant sounds from above and the glass creaking, she had found herself moving as little as possible. However, the darkness began to play its tricks on her.

Brígh swore she could see cockroaches peering at her from across the room. She felt a body bounce off her leg and float away. It was too much.

Putting on the hazmat suit proved to be more difficult than expected. In her old age, Brígh's joints had stiffened, and raising her legs high enough to get past the back zipper was a workout like no other.

Despite the effort it took, Brígh was able to put the suit on, and after securing it and making sure the tape around the leg would hold, she ventured towards the door.

For some reason, the glow of the moonlight never got past the porthole. She could still see perfectly well outside; it's just that the outside never dared to creep in.

Turning the rusted wheel took all her strength; by the time it gave, Brígh was panting like a dog. How long had it been since she had seen a dog?

Pushing the door was also an affair. It had to have been at least 500 pounds, and there was no way she could open it more than a crack, but a crack was all it took. Wedging the spear between the door's gap, she pulled to the left, forcing the door open.

Stepping outside for the first time in nearly seven decades was surreal. Bari and Brígh had always seen the outside through the skylight, but being outside a cage was always different from looking out of one. What she saw sitting on the skylight made her want to be caged again.

It was tall, taller than any of the trees surrounding the bunker. The thing moved and unglated; its peak was directed towards the pulsating moon. Now that Brígh was out of the bunker, she got a better look at both of the things. It wasn't a moon.

The pillar of ligaments and musculature seemed to notice her as it quivered and opened pores in her direction. Voices came from them. They were combined and unidentifiable. One minute a man, the next a woman. Most of the voices didn't even sound human.

A pore towards the bottom of the tower opened and shot out a fleshy needle. It pierced through Brígh's abdomen, causing her to curl inwards.

In the second it took for the projectile to pass through her, Brígh saw it all. Worlds of flesh, all singing out as one. Moon's bathing alien civilizations in a horrifying milky sheen. The melting, the screaming.

She heard the voices again, but not from the pillar, from her mind. They begged her to kill them and screamed such foul things at her. She could feel the age of some of them. Billions of years old. Billions of years of pure agony.

Brígh felt the moon calling out to her. It promised such nice things if she would only join them. Everything she had lost, everyone. She didn't believe it.

As Brígh collapsed to the ground, she snapped out of her hypnosis. Only seconds had passed, but it had felt like a lifetime.

The pillar began to laugh, grow, scream, and cry. The thing behind her did the same.

When it passed through her, it must have learned things, the kinds of things that she never told anybody, because when it spoke to her, it spoke in Bari's voice.

"Bridie?" it asked. The thing stumbled towards her, its limbs outstretched.

She didn't recognize the voice that had come from the Bari-Thing, but she would be willing to bet on who it was.

"Wallace?" Brígh said, her voice dry and cracked.

"Bridie." it repeated, drawing out her name.

Brígh used the spear to stagger to her feet, one hand on her wound, the other on the weapon. She stood and pointed it at him.

“I never knew you, you’re a fantasy I conjured up from letters on a page.” she said. The lying was palpable.

“Come to me, Bridie. We can be together forever. No more running, no more death.” it said.

The thing spoke with a drawl, its voice coming from the back of its throat.

“I’m not your Bridie,” Brígh said, “and I’m not joining you. I’ve seen your mind, I want no part of it.”

“We’ve seen yours too Bridie.” The thing said, mocking her. “We’ve seen yours and there’s so much to enjoy.”

The thing cracked a smile; its teeth were sharp and yellow. Several of them had grown wrong, with the points of the teeth stabbing into the creature’s gums.

“You’re ours now Bridie.” It said, almost cooing.

“I’m no ones.” Brígh responded.

She turned quickly then, using the spear as a makeshift walking stick. The bunker door was only a few feet away; she could make it.

“Don’t leave us again Bridie.” it said.

Brígh didn’t turn around.

As she reached the door, she felt a long, slimy tendril wrap around her leg. As it pulled away, she fell on her chest. The tear in the hazmat suit let the moonlight in. It burned.

“Let us help you up Bridie.” it said, mocking her.

“Go to hell!” Brígh shouted back at it.

She rolled to her back, feeling the ground beside her for the spear. As the thing advanced, she felt it and grabbed on, pointing the spear in its direction.

“You’ll like it with us Bridie. No one ever leave us.”

Spear raised, Brígh paused. Billions of years old. If it took her, she would never escape.

“We know what you seek Bridie,” the thing said, “and we can give it to you.”

“I do want it,” Brígh said, “I do. No more running, no more loss. But I don’t want your version of it.”

With that, the creature emitted a low screech and threw itself toward her. As it fell onto her spear, the thing slid down closer to her. Its face began to crack and contort. A mixture of pain, pleasure, and confusion flashed across it. Before it had time to say or do anything else, Brígh pulled herself across the top step, quickly rolling down the rest.

As she landed on the floor, Brígh could feel blood leaking from a cut on her forehead.

The creature began to slither down the stairs. It coated them like a fleshy liquid, leaving only hair and blood behind.

Brígh’s moonlight-exposed leg began to bubble. She could feel herself slipping. Yet, as the blood from the cut on her forehead slid down to her eye, she knew what she had to do.

Her skull was so soft, and the floor was so hard.

Smash: The face of Wanda.

Smash: The pouring of Brígh’s blood

Smash: The voice of Jane.

Smash: The crack of Brígh’s skull

Smash: The eyes of Wyatt.

It was good to see them again.

Smash: Acceptance

Episode 5: Dying to Remember

By Valencia Vazquez

The sky is awake, and it is beautiful. It is endless and blue, and it contains life, it is where freedom lies. The sun is a big ball of energy that lives in the sky. It is warm, and it is bright. It is promising of new tomorrows. And it gets brighter and bigger the deeper sleep Ben falls into. He can feel the heat pouring out of it, and it is so bright, that he closes his eyes. Salty streams of wetness hit his cheeks. He is crying, but this time, they are tears of joy. He is smiling because he is finally going home, yet his physical body has not yet realized it. His mind is at peace, but his body is not, so it jolts awake, his eyes jutting wide open. His chest moves quickly up and down, up and down, and the beeping on the machine quickens its pace.

When he opens his eyes, he thinks that this world looks normal. He's in a hospital, he can recognize it. He feels high up, not under the ground anymore, which he is extremely thankful for. He lifts up his arm with such force the monitors shake, but he needs to see his limbs; he has them. The bed sheets get ripped off too. Legs, he has them, two of them. He then remembers the conditions of which he "died" the previous night. So, frantically, he reaches for his head. It pounds through his skull and he winces.

"Ugh, how much longer is it going to hurt." He reaches for the button that calls the nurse, he wants to ask her why he's in the hospital. He waits and waits, but no one is coming to his aid.

"What is taking so long?" He continues pressing the button, each time pressing it harder, almost breaking the bed frame as he is unfamiliar with his new-found strength. He gives up, the harshness of his headache wins the war, making his body feel 10 times heavier. He wants to go

to sleep, perhaps he'll be better once he wakes up. He closes his heavy eyes, letting sleep overcome the rest of his body, when there is a knock on the door, the nurse walks in.

“Hello Mr. Calarco, I see that you pushed the button a few times, is everything alright?” She flicks the lights on and heads over to the machine, checking his levels. “Your levels look fine, your heart rate is normal and so are your oxygen levels.” She pulls the curtain open. “There we go, natural lighting. Isn't that better, Mr. Calarco?”

When she turns around, her eyes fall immediately on his face. Something feels familiar but she doesn't understand how or what. Her brows furrow and she walks closer to him, her heart rate picking up its pace.

His eyes are still closed. It hurts too much to open. He makes no effort to respond to her, and isn't conscious enough to really understand what she is saying either way. He remains still and quiet, that is until she places her hand on his forehead. It's a cool, comforting, and an intimate touch. He reaches out to hold it, the delicate caress of her palm against his. He's held this hand before. His eyes shoot open, and he sits up quickly. The pain in his head did not go away from his quick movements. He stares at her with wide open eyes.

“Mr. Calarco, is everything alright?”

“Wanda? Is it really you?” Tears were beginning to form in his eyes. From the horrible visions he was imagining in the dark. It had felt like months went by since the last time he saw his fiancé, and their last encounter was not a positive one. He had never really liked her, as he always felt annoyed about something when they were in the same room. That was until she was taken away from him, as well as his everyday normal life. When she wasn't there in every life after his first, he had no one to go to who was a familiar face. Past lovers, while he meant

something to them, they were just a placeholder in his life. He is now looking at his fiancé in the flesh, she is that constant he was craving ever since things started to get weird.

“Uh, no, Mr. Calarco here in the hospital its Dr. Gavesend. It’s just a more professional way to address me is all.”

“Come on Wanda, what are you talking about?” He reaches for her arm but she pulls it away quickly and backs up.

She awkwardly laughs and says, “Okay well, it does seem like you’re regressing since last week so I’m going to schedule an appointment with the neurologist who should be able to see you tomorrow, how does that sound?”

While she was talking all he could think about was why she could not remember him. Everything so far was familiar to him. Somebody had finally gotten his name right, and his fiancé was in the same room as him, only she wasn’t always a nurse, was she? He never really paid attention to her life outside of his own before, so he could not have ever known anything about her occupation. Everything has seemed like a blur recently; it's hard to keep track of things. Memories are fading away.

It was the source of many arguments between the two of them. They never had time for each other with her working long nights and coming home at early hours in the morning, to him only working mornings through the afternoon. When one was awake, the other was asleep. He hated the fact that she would have to care for patients who were men. Jealousy was a disease which infected Ben, and it just deepened the wedge between them.

He realized he needed to get out of that hospital and far away from it as soon as possible. He knew his phone was at home, because he left it there the last time he was inside. If

he could get to his phone, he could call Wanda to prove that she indeed does know him. He needs her to leave the room, however, so he can make his escape.

“Yes that is fine, thank you Dr. Gravesend.”

“You’re very welcome. Did you need anything else? It must have been an urgent request considering how many times you pressed the button.”

“No, everything is fine.” He says, smiling through the pain. “I’d just like to get some rest, is all.”

She smiles, nods, and starts to leave, but hesitates by the door. She walks back to the bed with something on her mind.

“Mr. Calaro, something about you is familiar, you remind me of someone from my past, and that in itself is comforting. You’re going to be alright.” Then, she leaves.

Quickly, he flings off the blanket from his legs in a swift motion, and hops to his feet. He can move freely, standing tall. His legs feel a little wobbly, which is what he assumed would happen. Quietly, he walks to the door, and it squeaks as he opens it. He peers around the corners to make sure she doesn’t come back. When the coast is clear, he crosses through the doorway.

Out the door and down the hallway, careful to not alert anyone that he has left his room, his escape was a success. He stumbles past rooms with other patients in them, the beeping of the monitors fading in and out as he passes each one. He looks at the clock, 2am, it should be relatively quiet for it to work.

He reaches the exit of the hospital when he is noticed by security. It was then that he made a run for it.

Bolting out of the hospital like lightning, the first and only thing on his mind was getting home. Wires were flowing behind him in the wind as he ran, the heart monitor was tipped over in some hallway on the second floor, and IVs were still hooked into his veins that were once rigorously pumping fresh blood throughout his entire body. Chants of his name were ringing throughout the corridors, and everyone else could hear them except for Ben, who had his head set on leaving.

Every street he turned on was a familiar one, all streets he's been going along for his entire life. He reaches his house, the house number is the same, the front door is still that same color of maroon that it was before, and the mail he hadn't taken when he left for work the day of the argument was still inside of the mailbox. He notices the names on the mailbox only read his own, but thinks nothing of it considering their quarrel recently. He looked underneath the large rock that sits at the bottom of the steps for the spare key, but it wasn't there. Frantically, he searches around for where the key could possibly be. It is always in that spot, he would have had no reason to move it.

Police sirens can be heard in the distance, he doesn't know they are coming for him. They get louder, and now he knows they are looking for him, they somehow knew where he would be going. They stopped directly in front of his house, followed by an ambulance. Dr. Gravesend steps out of the vehicle after the officer, and they both approach Ben, who looks ridiculous standing there in a hospital gown and barefoot with wires still sticking out of him.

"Mr. Calarco, Dr. Gravesend tells me that you tried to escape the hospital when you are still being treated is that right?" The officer questions Ben.

“No that is incorrect, I didn’t try, I *did* escape.” He’s got a smug look on his face. “But it appears to me that you found me anyway so is there something I can do for you or can I get back to trying to get into my house.”

“Mr. Calaro are you aware that since you escaped the hospital while undergoing treatment for your headaches, the hospital has put you on a mandatory emergency hold and therefore police had to get involved?” The words that left the officer’s mouth almost caused Ben to collapse right there on the ground. Good thing there was an ambulance there waiting for him.

“What do you mean I have chronic headaches?”

“Mr. Calarco,” Dr. Gravesend starts, “would you please come with me back to the hospital? You are clearly not in the right headspace at the moment, and your condition is very serious, we must find out what is wrong.”

Ben thinks for a moment, and all he wants is to stop feeling so lost, hopeless, and confused, that he really is considering climbing into the ambulance with Dr. Gravesend in hopes there is a chance to rekindle their relationship and make some sense of why he’s back to “normal” but everything still feels different.

“I think it would be a good idea for us to have a talk about what’s going on with you.

“Wanda, don't lie to me, tell me what is going on right now. Stop pretending you don't know who I am and why is he saying I have chronic headaches!” His voice gets louder with every word he utters. He doubles over in pain, clutching his head, falling to his knees. Dr. Gravesend and the police officer rush to his side.

“Wow,” Ben lets out, very breathy, “you’re even prettier when you’re not yelling at me.” The officer makes sure he is stable, rolls his eyes, and walks away.

Another awkward laugh escapes the mouth of Dr. Gravesend. “Yeahhhh let’s get you back.” They hobble over to the ambulance where the both of them know hope is waiting.

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It’s quiet for a while, while she tends to Ben. It’s awkward, but right now it doesn’t matter. She presses a cool compress onto his forehead, and he sighs of relief, closing his eyes. Dr. Gravesend attempted to remove the wet washcloth from his forehead, but he grabbed her hand to keep it there instead, she did not protest. She could tell he was suffering in more ways than one, by somehow knowing her name, and insisting that he call her by her name, it showed her that in some way and somehow, he knew her in another life, she just had to figure out how.

He closes his eyes at the touch, how hard did he hit his head before? He doesn’t remember, but it should have stopped by now.

“So, Mr. Calarco-“she begins.

“No,” he says with his eyes closed still. Call me Ben, please.”

She hesitates for a moment; it still feels unprofessional to her to refer to him by his first name. “So, Ben, what do you think caused your headaches?”

“Well yesterday I figured that you know, this whole life thing, I’ve had enough of it, so I started banging my head into the wall in hopes that I’d wake up in a new world, and I did, only, my fiancé doesn’t remember me. I woke up this morning in the hospital, I don’t even know how I got here, and ever since, I’ve been getting intense headaches.” His story does not match the one from the person who brought him in earlier that morning.

“I can clear most of that up for you right now.” She removes her hand, and instead replaces it with his own so the washcloth was still there. She reaches for the clipboard and looks

at her notes. “According to your roommate, the one who brought you in, you two were having a game night and it wasn’t until around twelve in the morning that you guys decided to call it a night. He then said you refused to sleep on a loss, so you decided to stay up by yourself and practice some more. A few hours go by and he hears a thud, so he goes to check on you, and finds you unresponsive on the floor, and that is when you were brought to the hospital. As far as your fiancé goes, I don’t have any information about that or who they are, that is something you need to work on, on your own time.”

His eyes open, and he sits up on the stretcher. “My fiancé is you.” She doesn’t say anything, and instead looks away.

“I don’t have a fiancé.” She offers a small smile.

He scoots up closer towards her. “Just give me a chance, you had to have felt something at least, or else you wouldn’t have ran after me.”

“I ran after you because you are my patient.”

“How about I take you out for dinner as a thank you.” He is very persistent.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Calarco, but you’ll have to wait until you are no longer my patient. It’s not up to me.” She starts putting away the clipboard, there isn’t much else to do in the ambulance until they reach the hospital.

“Okay, fine. I can live with that. Thanks for the tip, see you tomorrow night for dinner.” The delusion he has keeps him going for a little longer, still utterly confused but a little more hopeful than before.

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Back at the hospital, Dr. Gravesend begins preparations to figure out what exactly is wrong with Ben, while the neurosurgeon walks into the room.

“Hello Mr. Calarco, how are you feeling today? Is there anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable?” The surgeon asks him.

“Well, now that I think about it, I would like a different nurse.” He says this without taking his eyes off of the surgeon. He feels guilty but he was thinking about what she said. She would not give him a chance so long as he was her patient, so he had to find a loophole.

Dr. Gravesend looks at him, puzzled, but doesn't say anything.

“Oh, well, how come?”

“You asked if there is anything that would make my stay here a better one, and my request is a different nurse.” Dr. Gravesend starts packing up her things and exits the room without saying anything.

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“Excuse me,” they discharge Ben after diagnosing him with hematomas in the brain and finally agreeing to a treatment plan after arguing for hours. Figuring out a plan feels too permanent, it feels like it is the end, and he knows the end isn't coming anymore. He will “die,” and wake up again in a new life. In a life where his fiancé remembers him and everything is okay, so he is careful not to get too attached this time.

But then he remembers how the previous night he tells Wanda he will see her for dinner, but that was before the diagnosis. So much for trying not to get attached. But still, he wants to go; the guilt of him requesting a different nurse has started to eat at him.

“Do you know where I can find Wanda Gravesend?” he asks the secretary at the check-in desk.

She checks her notes, and says without looking up, “She just left 5 minutes ago, you are?”

“Someone looking for her, thank you!” He turns away quickly and starts for the parking lot. He sees her getting into her car about to drive away, but he makes it there first before she is able to put the car into drive.

“Wait,” he stops her from shutting the car door. “Are we still on for dinner tonight?”

“What are you doing?”

“You told me you wouldn’t go out with me while I was your patient. I am no longer your patient, you’re welcome.” He stands there with a smile, waiting for her reply. As much as she hates to admit it, she is impressed, also a little offended, but she wants to give it a chance.

“You told the neurosurgeon that you did not feel comfortable, and then proceeded to ask for a new nurse. So why should I go have dinner with you?” She questions him.

“You obviously felt something during our conversation, I saw it in your eyes.”

“Your eyes were closed.”

“Just letting you know, I’ll be at the local pasta shop down the street later around 6:30 if you’re hungry, I know I will be.” He tells her in hopes that she would show up.

“I’ll keep that in mind, thank you.” She gives him a promising smile, still hurt by his actions earlier, but she wants to know what’s going on with him.

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He arrives back at his apartment to get ready for later, all of Wanda’s things are where they were before she left the house a few days ago. He hasn’t been inside his actual home since then. Her clothes are spread out all over the floor, open packages of makeup are scattered across the bathroom counter. The liquid eyeliner popped open and splattered across the floor, streaks of black cover the ground. He doesn’t bother cleaning any of it up, because the messes are

reminders. Maybe if he could somehow convince her to come over to the house they once shared, her things would trigger her memory, and she would once again remember who he is.

Running a little late, he reaches the restaurant just before 6:30. Wanda had not yet arrived. Surely she would not have stood him up. He looks around the room, people watching of course. Happy couples share spaghetti as if they were the reincarnates of Lady and the Tramp. A meatball falls to the floor and rolls to another couple sitting far apart from each other. They silently eat their penne alla vodka, never making eye contact. They remind Ben the most about him and Wanda. Long nights of awkward silence, until it was taken away, and he didn't have her anymore. He was alone in every life he visited, every life she was something or someone different. It was not until he saw her again that he knew he had to start over, but he did not expect the diagnosis of hematomas in his brain. He decided he would tell her tonight, he felt like she deserved to know, even if it meant nothing to her.

It's been almost 10 minutes, and she still has not shown up. He gets up to leave, thinking to himself that it was foolish of him to have such high hopes. He probably scared her away with all his delusional talk. No wonder, he regrets everything now. Regrets not loving her the way fiancés are supposed to, regrets not asking about her day every time he would see her, just regrets not being the type of person she needed him to be.

Outside the restaurant, an ambulance waits. Lights flashing, sirens wailing. He gets closer to the scene, and sees that the person laid out on the stretcher is Wanda. Her eyes are closed, her leg bent out of shape, breathing labored. There's a car with a dent on the hood; he surmises that she was hit while trying to cross the street.

“Sir, sir! Please step back.” One of the traffic police officers warned.

“Absolutely not, that is my fiancé!” He pushes past the crowd and gets into the ambulance with her, immediately taking her hand.

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The hospital room is cold and gray, too silent it feels eerie. He hates hospital rooms and visits; they always end in despair. He continues holding her hand, telling her about what his version of her was like, in hopes that it would spark some sort of life into her, but it never does. She doesn't move, the beeping gets slower, and the air gets warmer, why is it getting warmer? Everything is crumbling around him and his vision starts to get blurry. She's leaving this world, the one thing he found familiarity and comfort in, and she is leaving it.

But it's okay, right? Because soon he will be gone too, and there will be another life, hopefully one with her in it, and this time she will remember him, and everything will be fine.

The monitor stops beeping, it is now one singular flat sound. She has moved on, leaving him behind and stuck in the past. As for him, the pain is too much for him. He sees the pill bottles lined on the counter across from the bed, and goes for them.

Just take the pills, and it will be over soon, perhaps they will even make you forget. His inner monologue has taken over, trying to convince him he is making the right decision. He pops them in his mouth, and waits for the affect to take place.

He can see the sky, and it remains beautiful. It is still big and blue, and endless. The sun, is it warmer than before? Definitely closer, that's for sure. It's also brighter, his eyes close, his mind heavy, and far away. A place that isn't so familiar anymore, a place where sleep is everlasting. He is crying, again? But this time, they are not tears of joy, he is sad, but he is also

smiling? He is smiling because he is finally going home, unlike the first time, this time it will work, he is confident in it, and if it doesn't work, he will do whatever it takes.

A doctor walks in, notices the two of them in their spiritual state, and says, "He really wanted to go out with a bang." He rings a bell that summons the call of the removal of the bodies. The room sits still, remains dark, time does not appear to be advancing.