



the  
Easement

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# THE EASEMENT

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## PART 1

The boardroom desk is a huge black triangle built to fill the same room shape, like some corporate death star.

Claire sits down next to Paul and his shit-eating grin. A too thin tie hangs from Paul's white shirt. He wears his good looks like those fish that hang a light to attract prey.

Claire tilts her head.

— I guess you know why we're here?

The chair creaks as I lean back.

— Could it be the DVDs?

— Bingo

As Paul says this Claire looks at him for a moment without expression then back at me. I'm sitting on the next side of the triangle desk. She goes on.

— They went out to fifty clients.

A thousand barbed replies shoot through my head and I grab one.

— I guess Paul shouldn't have screwed up.

Yesterday Paul said he would help burn some DVDs with an application on it. I gave him the disc image and instead of using that to create the discs he burned the disc image file onto the DVD. Claire continues without emotion.

— You were the job manager.

I rest a hand on the table.

— They shouldn't even be on DVDs. What about the cloud system? That would save us this hassle, not to mention the money.

— Really? Which client project do you want me to put on hold so we can build it?

— Fine. Can I go back to work?

— I'll tell you when you can go back to work.

Claire picks up a piece of paper from the chair beside her and slides it across the table to me. She puts a cheap pen down beside it.

— This is a written warning.

— You're giving me a written warning for a mistake? They're supposed to be for when you do something wrong. As a warning.

You know that Paul burnt the wrong thing. He's the one that fucked up. Claire sighs and looks from Paul to me.

— It's not the DVDs. It's that, when something goes wrong, you don't seem to care.

I pause and think about it as she goes on.

— You float through here and do the bare minimum. I'm getting calls from clients and they have to push back their promotion. And all you're doing is arguing.

I sign the written warning and slide the paper back to Claire.

— I still don't think clients-

Claire holds up her hand.

— Now you can go back to work.

\*

## I'm trying to listen to Jen.

It's work stuff. But as soon as she starts to say something, I think of another comeback for what Claire said earlier. I'll make a noise when Jen stops talking, depending on her facial expression. I'm an expert on those noises. If I'm not sure from the facial expression, I'll just nod and take another bite of dinner.

I made pasta, how she likes it. Roasted vegetables with that shell shaped pasta. She looks at me and I catch the end of the sentence.

— and I just sat there. I mean, what do you think I should have done?

First I pause and make a thinking noise.

— There's probably nothing else you could have done. It's work.

When I was a kid, my dad would cut up sausages and put it in the pasta. Jen's a vegetarian. She pauses with her fork just off her mouth.

— Of course, but she can't just keep getting away with it.

I concentrate on what she's saying after that. Normal things. I don't have the energy to go through the written warning. It'll

probably lead to an argument. I go through my day to find something to say.

— John said his band is nearly ready to play a gig. Finally.

She takes a sip of white wine.

— We should go see them.

— Yeah.

Jen cleans the dishes and we watch a Bradley Cooper movie. We go to bed. She strokes my hair, pulling it through her fingers away from my head.

— How's work?

I look at her.

— Good.

— Everything else?

— I think so. What about you?

She kisses me on the cheek and smiles.

We go to sleep.

\*

## The coffee's crap.

I don't know why every workday starts with me making one. It may be the ritual. Sometimes I'll just let the smell permeate the air and empty it in the communal sink. I've always suspected that the smell of coffee is what's waking me up, a Pavlovian response.

I sit in a room with twenty other staff. We make touchscreen applications for businesses and I'm part of the interface team. I spend the whole day working on the animation of the home icons sliding off screen when you select an option. At lunch I read an old mystery novel. No one comes to see me and my email inbox is empty. I'm just glad I don't see Paul.

At home I work on creating iPhone games. At least I try. Most of the time I spend feeling bad for downloading TV shows or movies and wasting my time. So at home I'm either working or feeling like shit for not working, which is not a great equilibrium to maintain.

I'm also constantly remembering things too late. I've always had a bad memory for important things. The amount of trivial facts and lines from movies I've memorised is surprising to most people. The facts will nest in my brain. The exact words will line up correctly. I'm a sponge for pop culture but if someone tells me when my next dentist appointment is, my mind goes blank as I leave the reception.

\*

## I duck into a side street.

I press the wine bottle against my chest as my legs churn. Usually I go farther south to the beach road and walk until I reach my street.

Jen messaged me an hour ago to remind me to pick up the wine. I got it from a bottle shop near work. Something with a nice label. Thirty years old and I still hate the taste of wine. I always thought that at this point I would acquire the taste but I don't think I've grown into anything in my life. I have the same taste as my high school self.

I've never been in this street though I'm sure I drive past it or walk parallel to it most days. Halfway down the block I pause at a patch of grass just over two metres wide that separates two apartment buildings.

It's an easement passing between two apartments on this street and two on the next about a hundred metres long. It's overgrown with weeds and the grass is peppered with seed husks. Trees grow from within the easement and overhang the fences on either side, casting the thin walkway in shadow. A breeze moves through me and cold condensation nearly causes me to drop the wine. The street is empty but there's a traffic jam on the highway in the distance. The cars sound like they're arguing.

I step into the easement watching my footing. As I enter, the traffic sounds deaden. The high moss-covered fences must act as natural soundproofing but it feels as if I passed through a membrane. I step over shadows and place my feet on the visible grass patches. Whenever I step on the husk of a seed, the crunch

reverberates around me. It's like the noise inside the easement is amplified and everything else gets absorbed. There is an old wooden chair halfway through overgrown with moss. A ladybug sits in the middle of the seat like it understands chair protocol. I smile to myself and continue along the grass. There is a little girl on a bicycle riding along the street by the exit.

I step out of the shadow of the easement.

The world stops.

The silence is the first thing that hits me. It's not the dull ambience of the easement. For the first time in my life there is a complete absence of sound. I twist a finger in an ear. The little girl is five metres away frozen like a statue. A car driving in the opposite direction has stopped dead. I can't detect any movement as I look around the street. In the sky two birds are in place as if they are stuffed and hanging from wires.

I step forward to make sure I'm not frozen. As my shoe hits the grass I hear tiny hard taps. I look and my foot hasn't sunk into the grass. It's resting on top as if the blades are made from metal. I watch my foot slowly sink in. The grass blades bend underneath my weight. I realise that I've dropped the wine. But when I look it's frozen in the air. A touch of my finger doesn't shift it.

I'm not lightheaded. I touch my right arm and examine my body. Internally everything's fine. I don't feel like I've lost my mind.

I stumble up to the bicycle girl along the crisp hard grass. It's uneven and difficult with my feet sliding and sticking against the blades. As I step onto the pavement it feels more normal. I stand in front of the little girl and wave my hand in front of her face. She must be nine or ten. A determined look carved into her face. I touch her cheek and it's warm stone. Her eyes look through me. A sculptor finally managed to create a perfect human statue, tricking the human eye.

Somehow I don't doubt what I'm seeing. Crazy people can't tell they are insane though, so I can't rule that out. Maybe I just had a stroke or something and this is what happens when you die. The world freezes and this is the last bit of information you get out of it. Like a frozen computer not changing what's on screen no matter

what you press. You simply walk through this still world as a ghost for an eternity.

\*

## I met Jen when I was 22.

It was a hot summer even for the Gold Coast. Fucking hot. The only reason I still live here is because I was born here. Thirty-degree sweat was dripping off everything.

She was in one of those non-chain clothes stores that don't seem to exist anymore. I needed a tie for a friend's wedding so that's why I was stumbling into the first clothes shop I could find. I couldn't see the name of the place, just clothes in the windows. That was all the rage at that point, mostly for bars. Tiny signs you can't see because they're too cool for branding.

She turned towards me as I walked in.

— Jesus, it took you long enough.

She was wearing a t-shirt with cut off sleeves, shorts and giant boots.

— Hi.

— Hi, Asshole. I hired you from ten am. It's ten to eleven.

— I... I may be in the wrong place. I just wanted to buy a tie.

— Oh my god.

She covered her face with her hands. She always does that because she goes so red when she blushes.

— But, now that I think about it, it looks better without a tie.

I looked down at my t-shirt and jeans.

— I don't think it would go with this anyway.

She pulled her hands away from her face and touched my arm.

— I am so sorry. I've got some idiot that's supposed to be helping me move stock out.

— It's OK. I do look like an idiot.

— No, it's not. Look, this crap is all going. This is my last day as a storeowner. Can you please pick out your favourite tie and it's on me.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

— You'd be helping me out. This guy isn't going to show up anyway.

She sat in a chair and I could see she was fighting back tears. I hate people crying. When people can't control their emotions it makes me uncomfortable.

I helped her pack up the stock into boxes and I gave her my number. I think the only reason she let a stranger help her out was because she was so distraught. It was her business and she was closing up shop. She put everything she had into it and it wasn't enough. I haven't put that much effort into anything in my life.

She always tells people I turned the worst moment of her life into the best by coming in and asking for that tie.

\*

## I walk up to the frozen guy in the car.

The soft sound of the car gets louder with each step. It's not the normal undulating engine sound though. It's a steady low note as if the sound is stuck as well. As I walk up the sound never gets louder than a bug.

The handle weighs a ton. With two hands I can lift it up but the door's too heavy to pull open. There's no way I can make it budge. I stare at the man sitting in the chair and I tap on the window – no sound.

I walk up to the closest house and I try the front door handle. It's a small horizontal metal bar. It's heavy as well but when I manage to lift it slightly it doesn't try to spring back like normal. It just stays turned. I have to kick the handle to get it turned all the way up. All I have to do now is push on the door. Everything I have goes into it. My muscles scream. It would look comical for someone to see me put this much effort into opening a door. If there was anyone else in this frozen void. The door starts to move. It doesn't use the momentum of the force. It nearly breaks my body to push the door open enough for me to slip through.

I walk through the home. I feel like it's the end of the world. A dystopian future and it's just me left. I'm looking through houses

for canned food or supplies. And I have statues of the dead to keep me company. Everything froze in a flash. A meteor of liquid nitrogen came through and missed me somehow. I couldn't imagine anything sadder. Wandering the world seeing frozen reminders of the people that were once a part of your life.

A woman is lying on the couch watching TV. The image on the TV is of one of those chat shows with the live audience. It's an LCD TV so the image looks normal. If it was an old cathode TV, I imagine it would be a frozen uneven image as the horizontal lines display one after another. The woman is wearing a business shirt and skirt. I feel like I'm invading someone else's life now, and I leave. I guess I just wanted to see what I could do.

I glance at my watch and of course it looks broken. The second hand is as still as a corpse. I need to see if I can get out of this. The longer I am in here the harder it may be to leave. I have to get back to the easement. If I'm there, maybe I can undo this.

\*

## I smile at the bicycle girl.

I laugh at the wasted human impulse. Then I step into the easement.

Nothing happens. Or continues to happen. The silence is absolute. I look around the entryway for anything strange. I walk back out but nothing changes. My feet continue to slip and lock on to the hard blades of grass.

I continue down the easement retracing my steps. It's dark in here for the afternoon. Dust mites are visible in the shafts of light but they are frozen in the still air. As I walk by a shaft I wave my hand through and they shift position. I wonder what liquid would be like.

The easement has changed the least with time freezing. Besides the hard grass, everything looks similar. The grass is easier to walk over with the seed husks everywhere. As I walk through, I try to figure out how to go back to normal.

I don't believe in god, or any higher power, or spiritual energy, or anything I've heard from people at dinner parties. All of which would make this situation easier to accept. So scientifically, I have to assume that the fabric of the world is playing up, like a glitch in the time space continuum. And as it's just me that's still moving around, it's my body, my mass that's causing it. Or the electrical current flowing through my body, the electrical signature of me has clashed with a glitch in this easement. I just need to hit the side of the world with my hand to knock it back into place.

Or I'm dead and I'm stuck in this still world forever. One of the two.

There's nothing strange in the easement. I keep walking around, trying to trick the world into falling back onto the rails. I'm near the other side of the easement now and running out of ideas. I walk through the exit onto the grass by the footpath.

There is sound. A car drives by. The undulating sound of the motor comforts me. I am alive.

If this wasn't a glitch, if this was a message from a higher power, maybe that was the point. Don't take time for granted. The ability to create and exist in the world is always overlooked.

There's one thing I need to know now. Will it happen again? Walking one direction through the easement froze time. Walking back the other direction started it again.

I rush through the easement again. Ladybug. Seed husks. I get to the exit and take a breath. A car is driving past. When it gets close, I walk out.

The car suddenly slows down and stops. It takes half a second, and the world is frozen again. I look around and I hear the slight note of the car, different from the previous one. The wine I bought is in the grass by my foot.

I retrace my steps again, back through the easement and step out.

The world starts again. It's repeatable. Whatever is causing this to happen, whatever glitch, or god, or power, is still here. It's not just a freak accident. It must mean something.

I have to get back home. I walk along the street to the highway and I walk parallel to the easement towards my house. Is this

happening to everyone who walks through the easement? Would I know about that? How can you explain to someone else what happens? You would look crazy. A miracle exists in the world but you can't tell anyone because they won't believe you.

If it's just me that it's happening to, I may not be able to share it with anyone.

\*

I get home and Jen is shaking her head.

— We should have left half an hour ago.

— I'm sorry. I got out late.

— Where's the wine?

I look down and realize it's in the grass by the easement.

— We'll pick some up on the way.

— So we'll be even later? Why didn't you message me?

I walk to the bedroom and take off my shirt and grab a fresh one from the closet. I walk out as I button it up.

— What time did we say? Six thirty?

— Six!

— We're not far off.

She's holding the door open, and I walk through it quickly.

Jen is driving. She looks straight ahead. I get out and pick up the same wine that I did earlier.

— It's because you just don't care.

— Of course I care.

— If you cared, you would have been home when you said you would.

— It's that simple?

Jen's parent's house is a big one-story place that looks like it's out of a magazine.

— Hey sweetie!

Jen's mum Sally kisses her then me. I shake Bruce's hand. Jen's dad started off life as a builder so he's muscular and tanned. Now he's a local political something. We walk in and Jen holds her mum's arm.

- Sorry we're late. Someone got held back at work.
- No problem. I didn't even realize the time.

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Shit.

Jens' dad raises his eyebrows at me and clears his throat. His eyes track me like lasers.

— What about you? Jen says you're saving up to have some time off.

This is fantastic. I'm sure Jen's middle-aged parents would love to hear about weird computer games I'm making. Bruce has close cropped hair and a silver goatee. He looks like an angry guy but he's always smiling and shrugging, like he's making up for his face.

— Time to work on my game, yeah.

Jen's mum tilts her head and smiles. Her long earrings dangle down at an angle.

— What is it about dear?

— It's just a game I'm making by myself. For fun.

Jen makes a head motion. I don't flinch.

— Tell them what it's about.

I lightly scratch the table. It's a long wooden table set with rough grain you can feel.

— It's...you are this guy. And it starts off as a first person game. That's when you are basically playing through his eyes. You walk around in a normal world and slowly you start to separate from the person, into a third person view, where you're floating above him. And the view floats further and further back.

I take a sip of the wine and try not to wince.

— The point of the game is that you are collecting these, what's called 'moments'. Each time you collect one, you come back closer to the person. The moments explain why he's like this, why he's so detached, sort of. So you have to keep collecting these moments or you float off too far and you can't even see him, to move him around. I'm still trying to figure out an ending. I've been making it for over a year now. Oh, and you have to just restart the game if

you lose, because it will keep pulling away until you can see the earth sitting there in space.

After a pause Jen's mum pipes in.

— It sounds really interesting, don't you think dear?

Jen's dad raises his eyebrows and nods.

Jen smiles at her dad.

— He's part of a few people in computer games that are trying to create like, art. The normal things you see are people shooting each other and stuff.

Jen looks at me.

— Right?

I wish I could change the subject in front of her parents.

— I don't know. I mean, that would be good. Games are interactive, so I think you can tell really personal stories that you can immerse yourself in.

Jen's dad's expression is blank so I try something else.

— Hey, I saw that movie the other day, the new Wes Anderson one. I thought it was really good.

— Really? We'll have to check it out.

\*

## Jen leans forward on the drive home.

I try and bring up things that her parents said but she answers with single words. We argue as we walk up the stairs to our apartment and go inside. As we get inside, Jen brushes past me.

— Jesus Christ, I can't do this again.

She's getting undressed in the bedroom. I kick off my shoes.

— I know they probably like me, but it's always... I think it's just because my parents are so crazy.

— That's true.

— Your parents are so normal. And nice. It seems fake, or passive aggressive, because I'm not used to it.

I walk up to her and hold her from behind.

— I didn't mean to be late. I was out of it.

— I even messaged you. I shouldn't have to message you. You realize that you are a grown up?

She spins around in my arms. I put my forehead on hers.

— I love you.

— I hate you.

— Well, I love you.

— Big whoop.

She ducks under my arms and kisses me on the cheek and goes to the bathroom to take off her makeup. I take off my pants and shirt.

I read a book in bed while Jen does some work on her laptop beside me. She always sits cross-legged on the bed when she's working. I run a finger down her arm.

— I think I'm going to call in sick tomorrow.

— Really?

— Yeah, I haven't had a sick day in a while and I think it will be good to clear my head. Work on the game a bit.

— OK. That's a good idea. Hey, you can come and have lunch with me. Oh shit, I've got something at lunch. Don't worry.

She goes a little red. Jen always gets embarrassed when she thinks she looks stupid.

— Well, I'll make something good for dinner.

Later the lights are out and we're in bed facing each other. Jen is studying me.

— What are you thinking?

I was wondering why you're looking at me weird.

— What if you could freeze time?

She props her head up with her hand.

— Like a power? Time travel?

— Just stop time still. And it's just you there. You could do whatever you want.

She bats her eyelids.

— I'd go and find you.

I smile and nudge her.

— For real.

— Jesus. I don't know. I'd probably be able to actually figure out my life a bit. Sometimes things go so fast, you know? Like I'm

going to open my eyes one time and I'm going to be some old woman who inexplicably likes bingo.

— Wow.

— And I'll be scared to ever blink again.

— Well that's depressing.

— Is that why you're taking tomorrow off?

— What do you mean?

— To figure shit out?

— I guess so.

Jen stares into the ceiling.

— You know, you have so much... creativity and brilliance. You're constantly focusing it at your games, or banal things. Never us. I've never been with someone less romantic.

— Come on.

— Do you ever think of me when we're not together?

— Of course.

— I think of you constantly. And I'm always talking about you with everyone. At work, at...

She stops talking. It hit me that I don't do that. I spend too much of my time thinking about what I'm doing with my life, or being anxious about not being productive. Somewhere along the line, I've not only taken her for granted but I've associated her with the part of my life where I'm not working. Where I'm wasting my time and not doing worthwhile things.

— Well, I'm sure it will be good to have some time to think. Maybe think about how you could just check your phone's calendar more.

She rolls over on her side, facing away from me. I put my arm around her.

I don't know why I'm not telling her about the easement. I know she wouldn't believe it. I don't know if I even will when I wake up. And it wouldn't look good if whatever glitch made it happen fixed itself. I drag her out there in the middle of the night all frustrated and crazy to look at an easement. It's a bad idea.

Jen's hair is tucked behind her ear and I can see the two freckles on her earlobe. They've always been cute to me.

## The room smells like bleached plastic.

After a while the constant hum of machines and the smell fades into the background. The chair is actually pretty comfortable. As I do the crossword, I ask the questions out loud. Every Saturday morning mum would walk through the house asking people what the collective noun for owls is, or how to say goodbye in Italian. Even if she knew it, she wanted to get people involved.

I never get through it. There are always a few answers that I can't figure out, no matter how long I sit.

I stare at the tubes and wires going into mum's body, filling her up and measuring her.

I think of the woman I saw lying frozen on the couch when the easement stopped time. What would it be like to come here during that, when everyone else is just as still? Just like the woman on the couch, mum never looks empty. She's always full of life. As if she's waiting. She's always just about to wake up.

If I'm not working, I'll come by in the morning and drink coffee by her. The hospital coffee is as bad as the crap at work. Maybe I just don't like coffee.

\*

## I'm going through the code line by line.

The main character in my game isn't moving his legs when he should. He's just sliding along the ground, moving at walking speed. Instead of trying to figure out the bug in my game, I'm thinking about the easement.

After an hour of unfocused work, I haven't gotten much done so I leave the house and make my way there.

I sit by the exit and wait for someone to go through so I can see what happens. I wish I'd brought a book. I've got some podcasts with interviews of indie gamers that I'm half-listening to.

If I walked out of this exit, I know that time would stop. Then if I walked the other way, the exit on the other side would start time

again. What if I walked out of the other side first? Would time speed up and flash before my eyes?

An old man walks out from behind some bushes from within the easement and I watch him slowly walk towards me. He's wearing a bright coloured polo shirt and dark slacks. He is focused on where he walks as if he knows what it would cost him to stumble. As he walks up to the edge of the easement, I stand up. He walks through.

And nothing happens. Or, more precisely, he continues to walk. He looks at me for a moment and goes back to watching his feet. Time goes on, for both of us. He didn't disappear and show up somewhere else. It didn't work.

Either it's stopped working or it only happens to me. So I go around the block to the other side and I walk through. I don't want to test the reverse direction. I pick up a stone from the grass in the easement and test the weight on my palm. As I draw closer, I toss the rock through the exit. It flies through the air and skitters on the road. I'm glad there wasn't a car driving by at the time. I hold my breath and I walk through.

Time and sound stop. It's as it was before. For some reason, I'm causing a bug in the world, some sort of random glitch in the programming of existence.

I take a deep breath. It's relaxing to know that no one can see you. You're out in the open but completely alone.

I realize I can still hear my podcast. I'm expecting it to be frozen on a black screen but as I press the button on my phone it comes on like normal. I look at my watch and it has stopped. Unlocking the phone, I start to go through some apps. I can read emails and write down notes. The Internet doesn't work so I can't get new emails. The glitch must extend to things on my person somehow. I'm surprised that I hadn't picked up on this earlier. How else would I be able to walk around? If the glitch did the same thing on my pants and shirt, I'd be fighting with all my strength to walk a step, as they'd be frozen in place.

I let my phone go and it freezes in the air. It doesn't go black, just freezes on the same screen. I put my hand around it but it remains frozen there. As I pull it I can feel it moving slightly. I walk

back through the easement to start time, and then I go around the block, picking up my phone. As I check my watch it's still frozen. I guess it was just broken. I wonder if it happened because of the easement or if it just died by chance. When was the last time I checked it?

I walk over to a café on the same street and order eggs benedict and a coffee. I'm starving because I haven't eaten anything today. The waitress is an Indian girl with green eye shadow.

All sorts of people are sitting at the tables. There's a cyclist in spandex having a coffee by himself. An elderly couple is sitting in front of me, trying each other's meals. When time is frozen, what would happen if I ate food? Would it be frozen in my mouth, refusing to move?

I always wanted to make a coffee table book about places like this. A friend and I would come here with a camera. He would take a beautiful portrait photo of each person in the café. I would write down what I thought about them, invent a complete backstory about each person without talking to them at all. After my friend had taken the photos he would ask each of them a series of questions. The book would be the photo of the person and the two descriptions of them – real and made up. The order would change so you don't know which one is the real description. Maybe there would be a table at the end that showed you what the actual answers were. How close would your first impression be to the person's actual life?

I will sometimes just think of them for fun. The bike rider is an accountant who's taking vacation days to work on his cycling. He adds all the distances together and he's trying to ride the length of Australia. When he's done, he doesn't know what he's going to do with his life.

\*

I walk through again.

I don't know where I want to go. Work will just make me depressed. I walk around for a while and I think about what Jen

might be doing. I walk through the streets to get to her work. There's a man running with his dog. If not for the dog's fur and the man's sweat, they would look like a statue. I walk up to a small bird that's on the ground. It's very strange to actually crouch down by it without it flying away. I run a finger along its wing and it feels like plastic sheeting.

It must be an hour before I'm at Jen's work. It doesn't feel like much time has passed when everything is like this. It reminds me of when I was a kid and I went to a museum with my family. There were these statues of the different evolutionary stages before Homo sapiens. Each set of male and female figures were set up in a scene, like hunting or skinning an animal, something like that. I walked along and the ape like things started turning in to humans. It really freaked me out as a kid. I think because I realised that we are still evolving and we don't know what the end point is going to be.

Jen works in an office. She does marketing for a chain clothing store, online stuff mainly. It's not as good as running your own shop but her boss at least seems to appreciate her. She has a real problem with overworking and putting way too much effort into her job. That could just be my perspective, as I've never cared about any job I've ever had. I've always got a game that I'm creating at home that is really what I care about. It's probably why we have so many problems. She doesn't have that thing in her life that she loves so she needs to get more from me than I need from her.

She works in an industrial area and I'm walking down a street of head offices for businesses of all kinds. A surfboard chain lies next to the office of a gourmet cookie chain. There's a huge truck that was turning around a corner and I walk up to it and put my hand on the front. It's warm and emits a dull low note. I stare into the grill, pat it and walk away. There's a man with a beard in the front seat with a cloud of frozen smoke attached to a cigarette.

There are trees around the office and beside it is a giant driveway used for dropping off stock in the warehouse. It's a sliding door at the entrance and I manage to slide it easier than the last door I tried. I still have to put my foot up against the edge of the wall to open it wide enough. There are different tables with

thin iMac computers and assorted paperwork on them. Everything in the office is glass and wood, with polished timber flooring.

\*

## I find Jen's desk.

It's been ages since I've been to her office but I can tell it's hers as soon as I see her scribbled writing. I look everywhere in the office but she isn't around. She did say she couldn't have lunch today.

I go back to her desk. It's not exactly giving off clues. Her computer monitor is still on so she mustn't have left too long ago. She has her phone synced to her computer because I can see a phone message on her screen:

— Meeting at 12:15

The message is from someone named Stacy C. I'm not sure what she said she had on today. A meeting with a supplier maybe. I try and think if any of her work stories had a Stacy in them.

I move through the office and try and find a desk that might belong to a Stacy. There aren't any names anywhere so I have to go by names written in notes or if they have their email up on screen. There are about three out of the ten desks where the people are still there, staring blankly at their computer screens. I hope they would look different if time started again.

In the back room there is no one around. I manage to open the filing cabinets so I start to crank open the folders one at a time until I find the staff file. Stacy Cinder.

I find the name on screen for three of the desks without people in front of them. That leaves four that could be Stacy. The first one has a sports car desktop background so must be a guy. The next computer is off but the letter 'i's on the post-it notes are dotted with hearts so it could be Stacy. I find another computer that has flowers so I'm not sure.

I go to the back room again and write down Stacy's address in my phone and put the files back. Then I go try and leave a note on

Jen's desk but her pen doesn't work. It also feels like lifting a hammer.

\*

## I go home.

Maybe Jen wrote down something about the meeting. It's probably in her phone but she does love to hand write lists and plans in notepads around the house.

I'm not sure why I want to see Jen so badly in the stillness. I think it will help me somehow to see her like that. There's something purifying when you look at someone without any defenses. When I stare at people in this state on the street, naked of their insecurities, it's like I get hypnotized.

There is nothing in our bedroom that sheds any light on the meeting. I go through her books with all my strength and there is page after page of lists. Most of them are recurring and updated with things appearing and disappearing. Work things to do, things for the apartment, things for a happier life. After a while I start to lose focus.

\*

## I decide to go to Stacy's house.

The only reason that I can get there is I recognised the street name. That's one problem with time freezing. You can't access the Internet. There may be something there, a calendar or a note, anything that will let me know the name of the restaurant.

With time frozen, the world doesn't really affect me like normal anyway. I could walk through the stillness for hours and it would feel the same as seconds. Besides, I feel like a character from a Raymond Chandler book.

It's an old wooden Queenslander house that's been redone. At some point it was painted light blue with yellow trim. Anything green outside has been replaced with cement and brick. Someone decided to rip out an old house's soul.

The front door is locked or it's too heavy for me to budge. The wooden side gate has a latch I can reach through a hole in the fence that is surprisingly difficult to lift in this state. It's an awkward position. I push through the gate, which is easier, and I'm greeted with a narrow cement lane with several windows but no door.

Around the back of the house is a double glass sliding door, unlocked. I open this one pretty smoothly. I may be getting used to opening doors in the stillness. I walk into the living room. There's a TV a bit bigger than mine and a table and chairs. The table is bare so I go into the kitchen. There are some papers on the fridge but they're mainly bills. There's also a drawing of a car by a small child. Nothing on the benches looks promising.

I walk down the hallway and I hear something. Very faint, but it's a note. As I walk up to a door I can hear the noise a bit louder, but it's still unrecognizable. Through the open door I see my wife.

Actually it's a naked woman from behind astride a man who's lying down on a bed, but I can recognize my wife just the same. I take two more steps inside the room but I can't understand what I'm seeing. I freeze. It's like a statue of a nightmare. Suddenly I realize that the sounds are their frozen voices. The two sounds have turned into notes and they are harmonizing softly in the air.

## PART 2

Jen moved in after six months.

She was yelling at me one night and I was being overly calm as usual. I know the worst thing that I can do is tell her to calm down but I haven't really figured out the correct response yet. Maybe act upset that she's yelling or yell back and get in a fight. Usually it's something that doesn't really involve me but this time I screwed up.

I hadn't remembered the anniversary. I have the worst memory for important things. She started to raise her hands in front of my face, gesturing wildly.

— You obviously don't give a shit, this means nothing to you.

— That's not true.

— But I reminded you two weeks ago!

There's no easy way out of this.

— I know you did. I don't know what happened. I'm truly sorry, I don't know what happened. I love you.

— I can't keep messaging you to remind you to care about me. At some point you have to actually start caring.

It pretty much just went in circles for a while until she asked me to get out of the room and leave her alone. I hate doing that. I can't understand it when people can't control their emotions. I've never felt anything so much that I'm no longer rational or I have to have a time-out so I don't say anything I'd regret. I left the room.

I tried to talk to her but she went to her place.

A couple of days later I asked her to move in with me. I sort of screwed it up but she said yes.

— I was supposed to get the key cut, so I'll have to do that tomorrow.

— You're ridiculous.

I loved having her around all the time. I thought that we might get annoyed at each other because we were always together but we ended up getting closer. I think some part of me just wanted her to not be able to get angry and go back to her place.

\*

## I just threw up.

Then I walked outside Stacy's room and sat down against the wall.

Stacy the guy.

And now I'm thinking. Or trying to think but nothing much is coming out. I try and think of anything Jen has said about someone named Stacy at work. I think of him smirking at her across the office after he sent her that phone message about a meeting. I'm pretty sure that when I walk back through the easement the frozen vomit in the bedroom will fall to the carpet. It froze as it left my mouth. They'll finish and find some phantom vomit by the door. Maybe he has a cat or something.

\*

## I'm yelling at Jen.

Or at her frozen body. Her eyes are half open and I am finally yelling, nothing intelligible, nothing that I would yell if she were really present. I don't know how long it's been but as long as I stare at her face, I can block out the twisted statue.

I stop yelling and hear the noise again and leave.

\*

## It's like I'm walking through a photo.

There are two people on the beach so I'm nearly alone with the ocean. The waves are frozen. I don't know how long I've been standing here in the stillness. It could have been years. I've been suspecting that my body freezes and I don't have to eat or drink in this state.

There is something about the beach that calms me. Maybe it's the frozen randomness of the waves in the stillness. Two streets

from the beach and I don't remember the last time I went for a swim.

I walk out to the water and test it with a foot. It's like ice but not as slippery. When I'm standing on it completely I can't feel any sinking.

The water feels like candle wax as I run my palm along it. There is a small school of fish trapped inside a wave and I walk up to it.

I lie down on the frozen wave and look at the shore and I just watch nothing for a while. I should be crying but I can't even manage that. I try and feel if I'm sinking or not.

\*

## I unfreeze time and call Brandon.

He's the kind of person who's good in a crisis. I tell him to meet me at the end of the easement. I buy a six-pack of beer, an IPA with an elephant on the side. And I tell him about Jen cheating on me.

Brandon looks around and sits down on a green electrical box.  
— Jesus Christ. That's crazy. Crazy shitty. I'm sorry man, whoa.

I sit down on the grass and cross my legs. I pull out a drink and pass it to Brandon, twisting another open for myself.

— It's alright. I mean, it's not. But, I feel like I just took a breath above the surface. Like I've been sinking or something. It's hard to explain, but I'm trying to grab onto something. I might be able to pull myself up.

I finish the beer and stare at the empty bottle. At some point I think I forgot what it's like to be really happy or angry or anything. I just looked at what was going on from beneath this blurry water and just kept moving.

— I'm just sorry I didn't realise you were so out of it.

— I didn't either. It's like a crazy person doesn't know he's crazy. That's why when this happened it hit me like a lightning bolt.

— I guess it's hard to notice. You can obviously still be funny, and stupid while you're like this.

I take a long drink from a fresh one and examine the label. What really changes in your life if you're only half living it? What are the warning signs?

— Have you ever felt like that?

— I don't think so. When Sarah left I was pretty upset. But I think I just try and do as many things as I can, to distract myself. Hey, I wrote a joke the other day.

Brandon is always writing jokes for his Twitter account. He's actually got a fair few followers.

— I think I really need one.

— I hate movies where the main character dies in the end. It's also why I hate my life.

I laugh. I wasn't drinking, luckily

— Jesus Christ, that's a joke to cheer me up.

— Yeah, I thought it was fitting. I don't have many sad jokes. Hey, at least when it all blows over we can go out together and find new girls. I hate trying to meet women by myself and, ever since Sarah, it's been a nightmare.

— I don't know if I want to break up.

— You found Jen fucking someone else. What are you talking about?

I look from my beer to Brandon.

— I've done shitty things as well.

— C'mon, I'd know if you'd cheated.

— Not anything like that. Why did you and Sarah split up?

— We didn't split up, she broke up with me. Divorced me, whatever. I feel like relationships are like people. They get older, break down and get worse over time. You can get better at ignoring the wrinkles, which is why some people stay together. I think she just didn't like our wrinkles. She would always bring up how it used to be. Sometimes I think she was jealous of our earlier relationship or something.

— Maybe she was jealous of her whole life back then and you were just a reminder.

I stand up and drop the beer.

— Hey, I've got something to show you.

Brandon stands up from the green box.

- It better not be your dick or something weird.
- Stand back a few metres. Keep your eyes on me.
- What the fuck are you talking about? Is this your second six-pack or something?
- Just trust me.

I walk back through most of the easement. I'm still not sure how much of it I have to walk through for it to work. Brandon is watching me, shaking his head. I walk towards him and as I leave the easement I can see him freeze. It's only noticeable after a second or two. I smile as I walk up to him. I take a deep breath and relax. I walk back through the easement. Past the chair with the ladybug still on it. It may have been dead this whole time. How sad it must be to be so insignificant that no one knows if you're dead or alive.

I get to the other side and turn and watch Brandon as I back out. He steps back suddenly. I wave to him from where I am and he realizes that I'm across the other side. I walk towards him and he doesn't move. I stop before I exit the other side, where everything would freeze. He walks over.

- What the fuck was that? You just disappeared.
- I know.
- What do you mean you know? You were here and then you were waving from like a hundred metres away.
- I don't know what it is. When I leave this easement, I freeze time. I walk through the other side and it starts again.
- I thought I must have blacked out for a second. Prove it. I'll hold up some fingers behind my back. Do it again and yell out how many.

I tell him to step back a few steps and to watch closely. I step forward and time stops. Walking behind Brandon, I see he has both hands clenched. He probably didn't want me to randomly guess the correct answer and so didn't put up any. I stroll back over the seed husks and out the other side.

- No fingers!

He hears me yell from the other side and he runs through the easement to me.

- That is awesome. This is like a super power. We're gonna be famous.
- I'm not telling anyone about this.
- What? Does Jen know?
- No. I saw her. With someone else. I actually saw her in the stillness. That's what I call it. She didn't know I was there.
- Wow. Well what are you going to do? Stop crimes or something?
- I think I'm going to try and use it to win her back.
- That's not as awesome. Hey, what would happen if you walked through the easement in the one direction like a hundred times? Maybe the world would explode. That would be awesome.
- Sure.

\*

## I need to make dinner.

I look up vegetarian recipes on the net and find a mousaka that looks really hard to make. I also bake some vegan cupcakes. There's nothing that Jen likes more in the world than cupcakes. It's the one time where she'll never think about the fat content. She calls it her cheat food.

It's been two days. I haven't been to the easement since I was with Brandon.

I'm making sure to listen as closely as I can to everything Jen's saying as we eat. She's taken off her heels and she's in a high waisted black skirt and a white business shirt.

— I think Mum has been struggling since she retired.

— We should get your parents over for dinner.

She touches her hand on mine.

— Thanks so much for this, it's great.

— So what's going on at work?

— Nothing much. Caroline's having a birthday tomorrow. We're trying to figure out what cake to get.

— That's a high pressure decision.

— Tell me about it. What about your day? Anything crazy at your work?

I haven't been in since what happened with the easement. I let Claire know I've got stomach flu and I don't want to spread it around the office. She probably thinks it's because of the written warning. It's Friday anyway so there's no point in going in for one day this week.

— I don't think anything crazy is going on.

She stands up and reaches for my plate.

— There's actually something else you'll need to clean up.

I get up and pull the cupcakes out on a baking tray. They're red velvet with a vegan cream cheese frosting. Vegan cream cheese is basically blended up cashew bullshit.

— Oh my god. What have I done to deserve this?

I put the open tin in front of her and steal one for myself. She takes a bite and some frosting sticks to the end of her nose as she smiles.

— You? Nothing. I just felt like trying. I feel like we've been drifting a bit.

I lean over and bite the frosting off Jen's nose, and start chewing on it as she laughs. She's always hated her nose because she thinks it's too big. It became a joke at some point that I would eat it off for her because I love her so much. I think with her nose smaller her face would be too plain but there's no way to change what someone sees as a flaw.

— Well, thanks for all this. It's really nice.

We finish up our cupcakes and throw the dishes in the machine. Jen turns me around and pushes me towards our room.

— You know, I think red velvet is my new favourite.

— Better than those butterfly ones?

— Don't make me choose. Maybe I should get Caroline a red velvet birthday cake.

I take off my shoes. Jen unzips her skirt.

— Stacy said it should be a carrot cake.

I nearly kick my shoe into the wall instead of the closet.

— Stacy from work?

— But when the name starts with a vegetable, it doesn't count as cake.

Jen's hands grab me from behind and run down my chest. I turn around and kiss her forehead. She holds my head and kisses my lips. She pulls me towards the bed. I drop on top of her.

I smile as I kiss her and roll onto my elbow.

— I'm tired.

— Too tired for sex? Are you high?

She points to her breasts. I give a smile.

— I didn't really sleep last night.

— Something at work?

— Yeah, work stuff.

— Do you want to talk about it?

— Not right now.

We take off our work clothes and get into bed. Jen puts her leg over me and lies close. She closes my eyes with her finger and slowly traces patterns across my face.

— Love you.

I sigh.

— Love you more.

— You always have to win, don't you?

I fall asleep with the feeling of Jen's finger softly moving over my face.

\*

## I've got an idea.

I go to the supermarket and buy three bags of sprinkles. Rainbow coloured Hundreds and Thousands. I go home to our living room and close all the windows and put towels under the doorways to block any wind.

I bake two large sponge cakes and cover them with chocolate icing. I lay down two trays and empty the sprinkles into them. And I walk through the easement.

I think I spend a couple of days doing it. Putting the sprinkles one by one on the cakes to create an image. It reminds me of when

I first started programming games in primary school. QBasic, the programming language I was using, couldn't handle images. All the art for the game would be created by typing out grids of numbers. The numbers would each represent the colour value of that dot so you would have a matrix of pixel colours. I got pretty good at drawing art that way.

I end up with an image of a cartoon version of Jen and me looking at each other, surrounded by things that we love. Heizenburg from Breaking Bad, snow, cupcakes. All made out of tiny balls in the icing. Everything looks like an old Super Nintendo game's graphics. The first one is just a practice test. I take extra time on the next one because I can't make a mistake.

I don't know what made me think of doing something so childish and crazy but there's something about the effort and scale that should say something. Maybe elevate the finished product to something meaningful. I walk back through the easement and have a slice of the cake I'm throwing out. The other one I put in the centre of the room. I have a beer and put my feet up, it's only midday.

I try and create a new engine for my game in the afternoon so I can work on it in the stillness. I make it so I can write completely new sections of code on my phone and update the game in real time.

I hear Jen come home and I come out to see her. She's laughing when I get there.

— What the hell? How long did this take?

— I'm not going to lie. It was a while.

She runs up and hugs me.

— I love it.

She's still examining it while hanging off me.

— Is that Kim Jong-un?

— It certainly is.

At one point in our relationship we would send messages to each other with things that we thought Kim Jong-Un would be doing at that exact time.

-I'M JUST INVENTING THE HIGH FIVE. K-J-U.

-I'VE ONLY GONE AND CREATED COLD FUSION. GIVE ME SOME OF THOSE HIGH FIVES. K-J-U.

I remember when we first moved in together we would hide these loving post-it notes around the apartment. I think I still have some in my bedroom draw.

— I'm going to make you such a dinner.

— Actually, I was thinking of going out. I made reservations at that Tapas place at the Oasis.

— Jesus, what happened? Have you got Aids or something?

She turns and smiles.

— Have you finally killed a bunch of kids?

— Yes and yes.

— Was it the Aids?

I smile at her.

\*

## I google a therapist.

I book in a time with a therapist close by. It's a lot easier to do things without work in the way. I've just started ignoring my boss rather than having to go through the pain of quitting. There's just too much going on with the easement right now.

She's smiling in a practiced way. Her outfit is a pale yellow dress shirt and grey pants. She's very cute with glasses and wavy hair tied up in a bun.

The office is painted a cream colour and there are canvas prints on the wall of out of focus people having fun. Maybe so you can imagine yourself in the photos. A tiny water fountain device on the glass table in front of me gurgles. She speaks softly but her voice carries.

— Well, what do you think you're afraid of if it's not that?

— I don't know. The other day I was thinking about how if I were to put out a game, it's not going to be 'Young game developer puts out great game.' It'll just be 'Great game.' I'm starting to realise that I thought of myself as some sort of boy genius. But I haven't

actually done anything. And the scariest thing is that maybe I'm not even that good at what I love.

— So you haven't put out a game because you're afraid of failure?

— Obviously. I mean, what I really need is some sort of thought technique or something.

She nods and makes a note in her pad. I'd love to see what they write down in those things. I think I would be writing colour commentary behind the patient's back. She looks up with a knowing smile as if she can read my mind. I wonder if that was her intention.

— You know those times when it almost feels like the world stops? Maybe that's what you want. Are you afraid of getting older?

— Of course. I've been watching my hairline for the last two years.

— Are you afraid of dying?

For a moment I think she's talking about dyeing my hair. I've been getting gradually obsessed with my hair as I noticed it thinning out slightly. I don't think people give enough weight to people going bald. I'd rather lose my sense of smell than lose my hair.

— No. I don't think so. Maybe dying without doing anything worthwhile in my life. If that counts. That's about the scariest thing I can think of. Do you know what hurts the most though?

— What's that?

— I'm getting a cramp in my leg.

I rub at my calf. She actually smiles.

\*

## I spend all day in the stillness.

I'm writing love notes into my phone. I'm going to get the best ones and fill out a whole stack of post-it notes. Every day I'm going to put a few around the house.

At the moment I'm in Pacific Fair Shopping Centre. All the buildings are a pale peach colour and look blocky with lots of flourishes. It's a tacky eighties monstrosity. Little street signs are

on all the walkways between shops with made up names to make it look more like a city.

I like to walk between the frozen people and wonder what their life is like. It's starting to connect me with other people in a strange way. There's something about looking into someone's eyes when they don't know they're being watched.

I'd love to freeze time and go to a café filled with people and go up to each one and study them. That's how I could do my coffee table book idea. I'd spend all day writing about them, about what dreams they have and what their relationships are like, everything in their lives. And then I would unfreeze time and go back and interview them properly. That would make the book even better.

\*

There's a place on the roof of my apartment where I can sit.

Brandon and I are drinking beers with our legs over the edge. It's just past midnight on Friday. Our arms are hanging over the metal railing and we're bringing the beers back through the bars to drink. Brandon shoots out a finger.

— Oh, do you know that one?

— No, Brandon.

— Really? That's O'Brian.

— You mean Orion?

— No, that's over there. This one's O'Brian. It looks like a big Irish guy holding a tommy gun. Those guns gangsters shot people with in old movies.

— That's strange, because to me, it looks like more stars.

— You know, you've got super powers but you don't have much of an imagination.

I stretch my feet out over the nothingness. I reach for another beer from an ice bucket beside us.

— I don't think it's a super power.

— It sounds like it to me.

— And how do I stop a bank heist?

— You just hang out by the easement with a police scanner. When you hear about one, you walk through and go and take their guns. Or put them into the cops' free hands, so they have double the guns. It would be sweet.

— There's no way I'd be able to break the grip on the gun. I could probably spend like hours pushing a chair in their way or something. Or put a pile of paper all around them.

— Holy shit you are even bad at being a super hero. I was so jealous of you for about a second. What's Jen up to tonight?

— She's with Suzie and...someone.

— She's not Voldemort, she's my ex-wife. Are you sure Jen's not out with her boyfriend?

— Jesus Christ, Brandon.

— You're my best friend, I'm just being outraged for you. I mean, we should be out on the town going crazy.

— Have you ever known me to go crazy? On the town? Especially when I was single?

— No, but I just haven't forced you hard enough. Your girlfriend is hanging out with my ex wife. We should go get crazy.

— Drop it or I'm gonna push you slightly.

Brandon looks down off the roof. It's only two stories but it would hurt if you fell on the driveway.

— I'm not gonna drop it. She's a crazy liar and you haven't even confronted her yet. How can you ignore what's going on? Now you're lying to her.

— What is going on with you? I told you that it's a lot to deal with and I'm trying to figure it all out.

— I know. I think I just thought, if you were done with Jen, things would...I don't know if I'm jealous of you and trying to break you up, or if I'm trying to get more time to hang out with you. Which one's less fucked up?

I put my hand on Brandon's shoulder.

— If you try and hug me, I will jump.

I laugh and lean towards him.

— Head first.

\*

## Roast chicken with a spinach and feta salad.

I made dinner for Jen's parents.

We are a little cramped on our small dinner table with the four of us and it makes me even more uncomfortable. I thought it would be nice for Jen to get them around.

Jen's dad is talking about an election that's on next week. The only thing I know is that someone that I went to school with is running for some position so I mention it. Her dad nods to Jen.

— You know, I always thought that Jenny might go into politics.

— Yeah Dad, I wonder why that didn't happen. I mean, I couldn't think of anything more boring, except for maybe counting the amount of times you've said that, but you're right, I should do it. And then I'll probably break my jaw from yawning so hard.

Jen's mum shakes her head.

— Always with you two.

Jen puts her hand on my arm.

— Hey, I'm not the only one, look who I'm married to.

I pause with some salad near my mouth.

— I don't know what you're talking about. Political issues are exciting. I think she's a bit simple.

Jen's dad laughs.

— She's your problem now.

Jen throws a napkin at her dad and turns to her mum.

— How's the job search going, Mum?

Jen looks over at me.

— Mum's going back to work.

— I know, you told me.

Jen's mum was a nurse before she got pregnant. I'm not sure what's making her want to go back to work, but I'm assuming it's the same thing that's driving me to work on my game.

I can't imagine a time where I'd be fine not creating. When I'd be fine doing nothing with my life. That's how I know that I'm doing the right thing. If I won the lottery or found millions of dollars I'd put that money into my game. I'd also quit my job if I hadn't pretty much done that already.

— Carol, what made you want to be a nurse?

She looks at her husband and he smiles.

— Bruce is from here, but I was born in Edmonton, Alberta.

I remember she's Canadian from Jen's stories. They've actually all gone back for a holiday since we've been going out. Carol still has a bit of an accent even after twenty something years.

— Yep. When I was, I think ten -what grade would that be?

Jen's dad swallows some salad first.

— Fifth.

— I must have been eleven. I fell through some ice.

Bruce raises his eyebrows.

— Here we go.

Carol playfully pushes Bruce on the arm.

— It was a bit late in the season for us to be out there, my sister and I. It was just a lake so I wasn't taken by the current or anything, but I was in shock and I couldn't make out the hole in the darkness. I remember pressing on the ice. At some point, I felt air, and then I felt my sister pulling me up.

She was massaging her hands.

— When I got out, I didn't really feel anything, I was numb. But we were rushing to get back home. And we got to our parents but I don't really remember anything after that. I had hyperthermia and so I became unconscious. I was dead by the time the ambulance came and they had to revive me. Later when they were telling me what happened, I didn't even know what that meant. I'd never heard of people coming back to life. Except for Jesus maybe. We used to go to church. As I went on I guess I just saw it happening in movies. With the 'Clear!' and the paddles. That's all wrong by the way. You find that out as a nurse. No one uses paddles to bring people back when they flatline. That's just a made up movie thing. Anyway, I guess I became a nurse because I wanted to be around people that could basically resurrect people. The people that saved me.

I scratched my neck. I could tell that Jen and her dad had heard this story a lot. Throughout the story Carol's body had got tighter, like she could feel the cold still.

— Wow. You passed out first so you never found out what it's like to die. You didn't get to have your life flash before your eyes. You could have found out if that's a movie thing too.

— You know, when I was under the ice, I had a point where I thought I wasn't going to get back. And I didn't think about my life but I felt like everything around me was going really slow. I don't know if it was adrenalin or something, but that felt like what got me through it. Everything slowed down and that's when I saw the hole in the ice.

— Did you think that moment that saved you was from god or something? You said you were religious.

— I think that was actually something that's inside of us. So I guess it depends on how you look at it. If god created us then you could say that but I really think that we as humans are capable of things that we'll never fully understand. That's probably one of the reasons that people believe in god. Sometimes it feels scary when you feel that sort of untapped potential, even if it's for a second.

We eat the salad and eventually we talk about TV shows. After Jen's parents leave I make her leave the dishes so I can deal with them later. We have sex and I tell Jen I love her. We fall asleep making fun of each other.

\*

I tap out a quick drum fill on the chair.

Chloe looks at me without emotion. As a therapist she's probably used to dealing with children.

— I just wanted to make sure that you're not avoiding anything.

— Things have been good. I think my girlfriend and I are actually getting closer. I am feeling more like a real person.

— How present are you in your life, do you think?

— Like a one to ten scale, or something qualitative?

— Both.

— I'd say that I am spending more of my time outside my head and things are starting to feel within my grasp. And about a six.

She pushes a curl of hair out of her eyes with her pen. It's either one of those space pens that can write upside down or it's an expensive brand name one.

— How long do you think you've been feeling like this?

— You mean not feeling? I think a couple of years maybe. It's hard to tell. It was gradual.

— Before that, do you think you were actually present, or has it just gotten worse?

— I haven't really thought about it.

— Have you been to work?

— Nah. I've still got some money left. What about you? This place makes a bit of money right?

— Have you told your girlfriend?

— About us? I didn't know there was much to tell.

She hangs her hand holding her pen at her side. She is good at giving me a stern look without it being angry.

— I haven't told her about quitting work. I don't think she'd understand.

— Does that happen a lot? Complicated things that you can't tell her?

— Recently I guess.

I haven't told Jen about the easement because I'm trying to use it to help our relationship. I don't know how she'd react to hearing that. Or the fact that I know she's been cheating on me.

I don't know what I'm expecting once our relationship is good again. Am I going to never tell her about what happened? Maybe I'll be using the easement to try and fix up every mistake I make for the rest of our lives.

— Do you think of yourself as a good person?

— What sort of pen is that?

— Mont Blanc. Do you think you're a good person?

— I have no idea. What's a good person?

\*

## I go see my mother.

First I walk through the easement so I can go to the hospital in the stillness. The hospital entrance I usually use is closed so I try the emergency side.

There are some nurses wheeling a man through the automatic doors. He looks like he's been in a car accident. I slide past them. Blood is everywhere and two of the nurses are trying to wrap him up. The nurses have matching looks of concentration and are clearly making all sorts of instant decisions. I nod somberly to the man and continue walking.

I'm used to hospitals at this point. This one especially as I've been coming here for years. Something is out of place though. I pause in the hallway and I look around. There are a couple of nurses in various stages of concern. It's like a photo of what I see when I'm here normally. It suddenly hits me - the smell. The faint smell of antiseptic, that I'm used to, isn't in the air. I try and think of anything I've smelt within the stillness and I come up blank. Is it possible that I haven't noticed completely losing a sense in this state?

Someone I work with was born without a sense of smell. George didn't realise it for some time. He would just agree when someone talked about a smell. It wasn't discovered until he was in grade seven and a dead animal was found in the classroom. Everyone else ran out of the room coughing. It was a Monday so it must have been lying there all weekend, a possum or something. When I asked him what it was like, he said the only time he was reminded about it was when someone complained about a smell. If someone told him he could have his sense of smell he wouldn't take it. I always wondered how it affected the taste of food but he was born without it so there's no way to know.

The long-term care ward is on the other side of the hospital but it only takes a few minutes. In one of the rooms on the way I see a cathode TV with the frozen lines of an image on the screen. I knock on mum's open door as a joke. I'm not sure if jokes count when you're the only living person on the planet. Then I walk in and I see him. He's standing by her bed and staring at her.

I haven't seen dad in three years. He checks in with her each afternoon after work, which is why I only come in the morning. His hand is running through his silver hair. I don't know if there are subtle clues giving away the anger behind his blank face or if I'm just projecting it.

He never retired. I always think of him at his desk at home, hovering over a bunch of highlighted legal documents, telling me to go talk to mum. I think he was always hoping to become a judge but it never happened and he never had a backup plan.

— Hey dad.

I walk over to him and sit down on the corner of mum's bed. There is no sound. No ambient noise. No wind through the open window. My voice has no echo or reverb from the room so it sounds hollow to my ears.

— Remember that time in fourth grade when I was in trouble with Ms. McDonald and you saved me? She gave me a letter to take home because I didn't follow her directions for that stupid space project and I made a science fiction model instead of the solar system.

I wonder if I could chew gum in the stillness. It could be normal like my phone or it might turn instantly into a brick. Similar to if I chewed it for too long. Dad used nicotine gum when I was little. He gave up smoking when I was born. He started smoking again later.

— You came in and asked for some other kids' projects and said they were all the same boring crap. I was the only one actually saying something with the project. You made sure I was with you when you were going off at the teacher, too. When I saw you in court that first time and saw your opening statement, I couldn't believe that you were in the middle of that room with everyone watching so closely. I didn't even hear what you were saying.

Sometimes when I was on break at University I'd stop in and see a case Dad was working on and go out to lunch with him.

I rest one of my legs on the other. He stares past me at the bed.

— You...I don't know why. I stopped bringing friends over. If you did talk to me, you never looked at me. It took me a long time to realise that you were angry with yourself. Every tiny thing that you said to me was burnt into my memory. And I had to get out.

When he was in the courtroom, it was like there was a light inside him. I don't know if that burnt something out of him or if he loved it so much he wished he were there all the time.

Mum would try and gloss over what he said. She would try and love me twice as much to make up for it. That's just how he is, she would say. He's always been like that. Sometimes I think it hurt her more than me.

— Why couldn't you just pretend to love me like you were supposed to?

He spent his life lying in a courtroom, but he could never manage that.

\*

## It's our anniversary.

Three years. I'm playing Jen's favourite song on the piano - Sinnerman by Nina Simone. It took a few easement weeks to get it right. It's hard to learn a song when you can't make the keys actually move. My voice isn't good enough to carry it but I sing softly around the bouncing keys. As I play, I think of the hammers and dampers shooting up and striking the correct strings every time I hit a key.

I got Brandon to help get the rented piano up to our second storey apartment. We had to go over the balcony so we ended up hiring some mover guys as well for a couple of hours. I kept their number because I'm going to have to get it out in two fucking days.

I have a keyboard that I usually play with headphones but I thought this would be more impressive. I also wore all white to go with the stark white piano. I had to spray some old leather shoes with some spray paint. It could be the dumbest thing I've ever done.

She cries and we talk and we make dinner together.

This morning she gave me a Wacom tablet so I could draw art for my game more easily. I plug it in and try and paint her to limited success. I remember telling her about using one at my old job.

I sit down on the piano and teach Jen how to play the Still D.R.E. intro. We lie in bed and we talk about everything we want to do in our lives. I talk about my game ideas and she describes her clothing line that she's been sketching. I make fun of her and she pushes my head away as I try and kiss her. She turns away as she smiles.

— I'm so happy right now. I feel like we are closer than we have been in ages.

— I know.

I nudge my body closer to her until I'm lying flat against her body.

— Idiot. How's work going?

— Hey, I wanted to tell you, I just started seeing a therapist.

— What?

She pushes me.

— Since when? Why didn't you tell me?

— I've only been twice and I didn't want to get your hopes up about me being a great guy now.

— You should have told me, you ass. That's good. Maybe I should go. What's he like?

— She's good, sexist. I think it's good. I don't know. I'm mainly just trying to figure out things myself outside of therapy.

She touches my nose and makes a popping sound.

— I'm proud of you. And thanks for my present. I really loved it.

She moves her head onto my arm and falls asleep in seconds with her mouth open. I can never believe the way that Jen falls asleep so easily. I stare at her face and think about the hammers and dampers shooting around behind her eyes, making sense of the world. I'd love to hear the last thing other people think about before they fall asleep.

\*

I'm walking to the easement again.

I've set up my game engine to work directly in my phone. I don't know how long I'll be frozen but I'm going to finish my

game. I'll be like a sci-fi astronaut entering hyper sleep to get to Mars. The only difference is, I'll be awake the whole time.

There is an old woman sitting on the chair. I hadn't noticed her there until I entered the easement. I smile and approach her.

— Hi there. I only ever see a lady bug on that chair.

— Really? You have a good memory.

— Not for important things, unfortunately.

— Importance. If ever there was a thing more relative-

I wait but that's the end of the sentence. She starts a new one after a pause.

— You know, people are over seventy percent water. Right now though, all of your water looks like it's tears. What's behind those eyes that are making them so sad? Why I don't-

But nothing else came. Asking questions appears to focus her. Some old people drift occasionally. Something inside me floats up and I speak without meaning to.

— I guess there's not really anything I've done in my life that I'm that proud of. That I've created.

— And how are you at reflecting on your work?

— I generally hate it.

I open my mouth and then close it. The woman studies me intently as I smile.

— Well, it sounds foolproof to me. Always remember-

She pauses and sits back further on the chair.

— Don't let me keep you. I know what it's like to let time slip through your fingers.

I don't know what to say. I stand still for a moment to think.

— Thanks for the words.

— It's all I have to give, I'm afraid. And any more will unravel me completely.

I leave her. She must be going senile or something. I think about what I told her. I guess I'd always known that the most important thing in my life was creating. Unfortunately I love Jen as well. How can she compete with the fear of irrelevance, or death?

\*

## I'm having a break.

I need a lot of time-outs to get my head straight. The stillness can feel strange for long periods of time. I imagine it's like a person in prison that gets put in solitary confinement. Only I've got constant reminders of what the outside world is around me.

I'm walking along the highway. When I froze time these cars were going over a hundred kilometres an hour. I come here pretty often. There's something about their faces. Everyone thinks that when you're moving that fast inside a car no one can see you.

I'm listening to the Pixies on my phone. I put on all old songs, so there would be less chance I'd get sick of them. It didn't work. At least I picked a good time to freeze everything; it isn't too hot in my eternity.

There's a guy on his phone. He looks really frustrated and he has the phone pressed up hard against his ear. Sometimes I think that angry people are talking to their partners, other times I think it's their work. I feel like I can tell which one is right, but I can only check if I can make out the name on the display. From the ones that I've checked, it doesn't seem like I'm a psychic. I think I just guess based on my mood.

I added a button in my game engine that I could tap when I thought a day had passed. I don't always remember to do it but I'm up to a hundred. Sometimes I think I've been in here six months, sometimes only a couple. There's no way to know. I don't need to sleep in here. I don't need anything in here.

\*

## I've finished the game.

At least I've done what I can on the phone. I just need to test it out on different devices to check how it all runs. I set up all the different sized menu screens and icons before I froze time, so it should be pretty easy when I get to my computer.

I can't wait to see Jen. It's been so long. I didn't realise how much I was going to miss her. I'm going to cook dinner to celebrate and tell her the good news. Hopefully the money I get from the

game will be enough to not work for a while. I'm down to my last few hundred dollars after these few weeks off work.

As I get to the easement, I walk slowly back through in the stillness. I've been in it for so long I don't know what to expect on the other side. Maybe I've gone too far and time won't go back. Every time I walk through I think that it could be the last time that I talk to anyone. Cursed to wandering a wax museum of what my life was for eternity, as I'm pretty sure I don't age in the stillness. I don't even know if I could kill myself. I tried to cut myself with a knife some lady was holding in her kitchen one day, just as a test, but couldn't break through my skin.

I get to the other side of the easement and I pause for a few moments to brace myself. I step through and it's like jumping into a pool of water. My skin feels prickly and over sensitive. The air feels different in my lungs. A car goes past and I fall backwards onto the grass. I run my hands through the soft grass and it feels alien. When I first got my braces off as a kid, I remember my teeth feeling slimy and different to my tongue. This is how my body feels with stimuli after so long without.

The ambient sounds of life hum through me and I stand and slowly walk home, thawing my frozen mind.

\*

## I'm eating a lot.

I can't eat in the stillness, so I ordered takeaway from a bunch of places for lunch, pizza and falafel and a Pad Thai. I go and pee for the first time in what feels like months and I'm light headed.

I download my game off my phone and run it through XCode to test it on my computer. I use some tricks I left in the code to skip through quickly. Some things don't fit well on such a large screen so I make some adjustments to the last scene's camera.

It was hard to figure out the ending for the game. If I made it so he collected the last moment and was finally happy, it was too cheesy. And if he got the last moment and the camera started pulling further and further away, with no more moments left to

pull him back, it was too sad. Finally I made it so when you find the last moment, the detached main character finally accepts that it's OK to feel this way. You just need something or someone to help keep you in the moment. His girlfriend lies next to him and he goes to sleep finally. I'm not sure if not sleeping for so long made me romanticize it. There are hardly any games where you see the main character sleeping. You usually press resume and start running around. It feels peaceful somehow. The credits roll as he sleeps and music that I got from a friend plays as a dedication to Jen appears on screen. I can't wait for her to play it.

Two years of my life have gone into this game and I need to send it out to the Internet. I go and I get a whiskey from the kitchen. It doesn't help. I know nothing will. What if I put it out and no one likes it? What if I'm not good enough at the thing I love? If I keep going over it, I'll never do it.

I upload the game and I send out the mass email that I wrote a year ago, addressed to a database of reviewers and game websites. I put it on my site and I submit it to the App store and I stare at my computer for a while. Rain starts to fall outside and I hear it through the window.

The door opens and I hear Jen's laugh. I haven't heard it in six months and I smile and turn off my computer monitor and walk down the hallway.

I get to the living room and Jen has her shirt unbuttoned and Stacy is kissing her. She laughs at him and he sees me and steps back. The two of them stop and stare at me and I freeze. I don't understand until I realise that it's daytime and I'm not at work.

A few seconds pass and Jen is saying something and buttoning her shirt. Stacy is backing away and shaking his head and saying things at me. I'm still not used to the sound and the movement outside the stillness and I shake my head to clear it. I step backwards and hit the wall and slide my back down the striped wallpaper to the floor. I picked out that wallpaper.

## PART 3

I asked Jen to marry me two years ago.

Brandon was getting married and I was to be the best man. For the bachelor party I had decided to fly the four guys in the ceremony to Melbourne and stay at a hotel for a few days. Brandon was his usual childlike self, sending me messages during the week leading up to it.

Three days before we were supposed to leave Jen told me she was pregnant.

— What do you think?

— I don't know what to think. Wow.

She was scratching her arm and kept looking at my face and to the side.

— I don't think I'll keep it.

I put my hands on her shoulders.

— Whatever you want to do, I'm going to support you.

She shrugged off my hands and sat on the bed.

— Yeah, I just know it's not possible. Look at me. I'm twenty-three years old and I barely have enough money to buy new boots.

— I think baby clothes are cheaper.

Tears wet her eyes but her expression was blank.

— I'm sorry. I don't know what to say.

I sat on the bed beside her and she put her head on my chest. I put an arm around her and seemed to hold her together.

— Have you told anyone?

— No. I think I'm going to tell Row.

— What are we going to do?

— We are going to do nothing. I'm going to take care of it. This weekend.

— So soon?

— I've done the math. There's a window for... getting it done.

I stand up.

— What are you doing?

— I've got to tell Brandon that I can't come.

- How could you do that? It's your bachelor party you're throwing.
- I don't know. I'll make up some excuse about my family.
- He knows your family. That would never work.
- What are you saying?
- I'll go with Rowena.
- I'm not letting you do this alone. I'm-There's no way.

She lay down on the bed.

- You'll be back on Tuesday. I won't be at work until Thursday. You can have some extra days off and stay with me.

I argued more, but she didn't budge. During the bachelor party, all I could think about was Jen. Brandon asked what was up with me a bunch of times. On Sunday night I got a call from her. The guys called me whipped when I told them I had to take a call outside.

- Hey.

She was crying.

- Hi.
- It's all done.
- Honey, I'm so sorry.
- It was worse than I thought. It wasn't-

I listened to her breath into the phone. I could tell she'd been crying for a while.

- I don't know if I did the right thing. I just, you never even mentioned keeping it really. I know that we couldn't really do it, but-
- Jen, I'm coming back. I don't know what I'm doing here. I'm just going to make up some excuse and get the next flight.
- Please don't. Don't come back here. Can you please stay there, for me? I just wanted to hear your voice.

I don't think we really ever got over that. She didn't like to talk about it and I felt too shitty to bring it up much.

A couple of weeks after it happened, I asked her to marry me. I put the ring in the frosting of a cupcake, amongst those sprinkles that look like tiny metal balls. I hate those things but she loves them.

I don't look up at her.

— ...we were doing better.

— We were. We are.

— I knew.

— What?

— I knew about Stacy. I just, you know, thought we were doing better now.

She sits on the ground against the couch a couple of metres away, holding her arms over herself.

— I know you won't understand.

She looks around.

— It's like we're a storm. And we keep trying. So hard. And it keeps raining.

She waves at the window.

— I'm not blaming it on you. It's just a thing that's happened. So sometimes, I just need a break. I need to duck out of the rain for a second. I really do love you but it feels like you have been taking yourself away from me piece by piece since I met you. And I'm just left with a husk of you, like a frozen memory of what you were. And that's not enough.

A thousand barbed replies shoot through my head, each one worse than the last. I know her better than anyone and can tear her apart. Time seems to stop and I go through each of them, but it always ends the same way, and no one wins. There's no winner and nothing is that simple.

— You're right. I have just been sort of floating by. I've been trying to get better.

Tears are falling down Jen's face. I am frozen.

— I know. I know you have. I don't know if anything could have been enough. Maybe we've just been through too much.

I nod and I stand up and I nod a few more times.

— You know, I finished my game.

— Did you release it?

I nod. She tries to smile, but she starts to cry.

I leave.

I walk away.

And I start to move faster until I'm running. All I can think of is Jen, but I know I'm going to the easement. Where else can I run to, now that I can't go home?

The raindrops are hitting me and running down my body. Down my face. I'm wet and a chill goes through my body. I go around the block and I get to the easement. As I walk through the passageway I jump between leafy covers, water dripping onto my shoulders. The sound of the rain sounds muted inside the easement and I hop through to the other side.

As I walk through the exit, I watch the rain slow down and stop in mid air. The air looks like it's filled with misshapen crystal balls. I stare into one that's floating just off my nose and a distorted image of myself stares back. When they're moving, they look like streaks of water, but frozen they look like imperfect glass orbs.

I put out an arm and run my hand through some hanging droplets. They move aside easily with a texture like soft plastic. I walk through them and I finally don't think of Jen.

And then I do. And it comes crashing into me and the strength leaves my knees.

I'm on the ground and tears are falling between my fingers. I don't remember the last time I cried. It takes me a while to feel that I'm wet. I drop my hands and see the rain falling. It flows over me and mixes with my tears. I lie down and look at the rain rushing towards me.

The easement is broken. Or the glitch has been fixed. I can feel it or I trick myself into feeling it. Either way, I am once again living without an escape. And if there is anything that I need right now, it's a break from this pain. The feelings cut through me making my insides raw. My entire being is an exposed nerve. The pain flushes me out and I feel whole again. The tears stop and I'm left in the rain. The drops splash against my glasses and roll onto my face. I

stare into the storm, calm in the knowledge that the clouds will pass eventually. The only thing that can change is you.

\*

I still walk through the easement sometimes.

But there's never a ladybug, and I barely hear the sound of the husks breaking under my feet. It never stops time or does much of anything really. It is a nice place to think though.

I'm making dinner for myself now. I cut up the sausage pieces and put it in the spaghetti sauce like I used to. It's not as good as I remember.

My game did pretty well and everyone was excited. I quit my job properly when money started coming in.

I like coffee again ever since I met this girl at a Starbucks. Last night we had dinner at a burger place that does craft beer, which pretty much describes every restaurant at the moment. Now when I smell coffee I think of her.

Soon I'll go to sleep. And then I'll wake up and work on my new game. It's a good feeling.

THE END