

All My Friends (The Florida Chapters)

Written by Logan Henry

Taylor
‘A Wolf at the Door’
XI.IV.MMXV

Taylor stands outside the doorway of his apartment staring down every finite detail of the door. He notices the pale eggshell paint has begun to fade into a gentle yellow and chip at the edges. The once shiny and gold doorknob has since turned into a smudgy color with almost no chromatin over time, looking more like an old penny than something that ever resembled gold or fortune, now what once resembled fortune is nothing short of a symbol for ruin, pale and worn.

Taylor takes a deep sigh and attempts to ignore the door, simply entering the apartment. Instead, he finds himself in a state of paralysis. His right hand is stuck in his denim pocket trapped in between his wallet and his thigh. He smooths over the lone key in his palm, cold metal under his fingertips. His legs refused to move forward, his arms fighting against the urge to reach for the door. His body and soul became intent on the void that the door brought. After only about thirty seconds in front of the door, it opens from the inside, “Jesus, Taylor. I thought I heard your car pull in. You all good?” the woman from behind the door speaks.

“Yeah, I’m fine Jo. Just kinda blanked out for a minute there” Taylor confirms.

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately. What’s your head doing up there in the clouds? Is it flying with the birds? Is it cold - like does it need a beanie? Because I hear it’s cold up there.”

“It’s not all that, can I come in?”

Jo gestures for Taylor to enter the apartment. It’s a quaint place with a single bedroom, living room, and kitchen. The living room is well furnished, of course. An ancient white couch doodled with frayed embroidered roses fit perfectly along the wall. Just like the door, the previous white color has since become a pale yellow. The couch is paired with an incredibly

worn leather recliner that has begun to peel and show its puffy brown interior. Taylor makes his way into the room and plants himself on the recliner, tilting the chair back as he sits.

He fails to notice that Jo has not moved an inch since the door closed behind him. Instead, she stands to the side of him and stares daggers through the poorly maintained furniture. She waits patiently for a single word, an indication that conversation is forthcoming, but the longer she waits the more she accepts that she will have to be the one to engage.

“Taylor.” the silence stood for another moment, the words seemingly floating into the ether unbothered and unheard.

“Taylor!” Jo is slightly more direct on her second attempt.

“What’s up?” Taylor responds casually, his head still looking in front of him at a vacant wall.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you drive home from work, get out of your car and just stare at the door? After that, you just come inside and turn it off! What the fuck is that?”

“I’m sorry. I’m tired.”

“From work?!”

“Yeah, I know it’s not rocket science or anything working at a Home Depot but 12 hour days make it honest work. And honestly it is.” Taylor keeps his voice calm. His words never seem to get louder than a talk you would have with a doctor.

“Sure, honest work seems to be the only honesty you have any more”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean something is wrong here and you aren’t willing to tell me what it is. You come home and you’re afraid to face me, Taylor. You can barely look me in the eye when we’re having a conversation and I don’t know what I can do. I know it’s been hard since graduation and I know I’ve been staying home and working here at the apartment, but that gives you no excuse to treat me the way you do!”

The calm in his presence immediately turned to pain. How quickly he forgets when you’re young and defensive it comes off offensive.

“How do *I* treat you? The hell do you mean? I just got done working a double-digit hour shift while you stay home and pursue your painting career - which I have told you I love but I’m an asshole because I’m drained?”

“No, you’re an asshole because you use those hours as an excuse to leave me alone! Do you think I love being isolated in the house all-day-every-day and the only person I can depend on seeing won’t look me in the fucking eye? You’re killing me! What did I do to you? What is it that makes you hate me? Is it the color of my eyes that you can’t stand to look at anymore? Is it a freckle out of place? What is the thing that made it so that you can’t even look at me? I want to know why you make me feel so fucking alone!”

“Jo, you know I think you are the most beautiful woman in the world...” He takes a minute, to consider the follow-up. A better man may consider a follow-up to be unnecessary, yet Taylor moves forward with a triumphant “But if you feel alone you need to take a good second to read the room. I don’t even know who I am beyond you. All I know at work is that if I can’t push forward with the job and work every hour, what happens to this place? To us? To you? That’s beyond my control! And that is fucking terrifying, every day the walls cave in a little closer around me and it’s getting hard to breathe.”

She gives some time to let Taylor's thoughts linger in the air. A moment of much-needed contemplation in a situation that was quickly becoming more hostile.

"That's some bullshit."

Taylor's body at that moment decides that sitting down was no longer a requirement. His arms slowly lifted him off the old Lazy Boy and turned to look Jo directly in the face. It was the first time he allowed himself to realize that she had been crying. Her normally porcelain face has been painted a cherry red, the tears scattered down her cheek like a leaky faucet. The pain was one neither could comprehend. No matter what he says there will be no winning in this argument. For her to be this distraught means that they had been fighting a losing battle since he decided to sit down. Finally, his voice broke the silence and tears, "I know it is".

"Taylor, why don't you love me anymore? What changed?"

"Jo, all I know is that I love you."

"If you love me, why is this the first time I've been able to see your face since you made a b-line towards the chair?"

"Because our love has changed"

"What the fuck does that mean? Love is love. It doesn't wear a hat or grow a fucking mustache. Love is love!"

"No, love is not a single thing. Like I don't love you the way I would a dog or like I would my favorite TV show. I love you in the you complete me kinda way, not in a what's gonna happen in the next season of Game of Thrones kinda way."

"So what, like you quantify it? Like my fucking love score went down?"

"No! It's just that I don't know what's what anymore. I'm walking in a haze and I can't see right, ya know?"

“Taylor, you’re talking like the fucking zodiac killer. I shouldn’t need to decipher every word that comes out of your mouth. I get it, analogies and metaphors make you fucking deep but right now all I need is some clarity. Some truth. Stop talking to me like a fucking genie, and tell me what the fuck is wrong.”

Taylor began to retort with an “I don’t-” but was then quickly shut out with a furious “No. None of that shit, tell me!”

“I can’t-”

“NO, TAYLOR! PAY ME THE PEACE OF MIND TO GIVE ME AN HONEST FUCKING ANSWER!”

“It- it’s hard.”

“IT’S NOT! TELL THE TRUTH! WHY CAN’T YOU LOOK ME IN THE FUCKING EYE?!”

“It’s hard.”

“TO WHAT?”

“TO FUCKING LOVE YOU, ALRIGHT? Since we graduated all I wanted to do is go back and get my master’s in botany but then you had your mental health fall in the gutter. AND I DON’T FAULT YOU FOR THAT! I never did! I stood by you and got a job at a fucking Home Depot to make sure you could get the help you needed. What sucks about it isn’t when you’re spinning out or breaking down. I’m ready for that every day at work. I know when I get home I might have to be here as a rock and I’m always ready for it. But you know what sucks the life out of me every time? Those days when you’re alright, some days you’re better than alright. Hell, you’re a straight-up fucking goddess. I hold on to every second of that, it reminds me that we’ve been attached at the hip since we were in the fifth grade; you are and always will be my best

friend. I think of when we first started making a garden in your mom's backyard and how you thought it would be funny to plant eggplants cause they looked like Barney's penis. How you had the idea to grow figs to throw your mom off the scene and how those figs are still the most delicious thing I've ever had the privilege of tasting. I'm caught up in those beautiful fucking memories and then it all fucking snaps, you start seeing things around the house and you break down, taking everything down with you. All I can do is just sit there in the wreckage waiting for things to get better, praying that you'll just take your medication again. I'm just tired of being constantly betrayed by my hope, cause I know I'll always love you."

As the final syllables left the lips of Taylor's mouth the tears began to drop from his eyelids to the raggedy carpet floor. He looks for some shred of hope from Jo. She is gone again. Her demeanor has transitioned from anger to fear. Her skin has turned from beet red to ghost white, her thousand-meter stare glanced far behind Taylor. Slowly, her trembling hand points behind Taylor towards the bathroom door.

"He's back".

Jo
‘Breakdown’
XI.IV.MMXV

Truthfully, beyond the dramatics of the whole ordeal, Jo never really considered her life as rough or unfair. Her time with Taylor has been rose-like; she has even to this point seen it as something beautiful in its nature, dagger thorns and all. They faced every demon together, yet the one standing behind Taylor was entirely unfamiliar. The figure had all the similar traits of the monsters she had seen before, but the face of this shadow wasn't demented or broken like any of the others. Instead, it shares a face with Taylor. Disappointment, exhaustion, rage like she's never endured before. The presence of this figure consumes Jo. It has an undefined body, only a shadow with a face. The face was, to her misery, not a matching shadow. The pain in the shadow's eyes mirrors those of her best friend. Jo finds the courage to let her voice speak small - "He's back".

Taylor's voice enters the room "No, Jo. There's no one there".

The shadow begins to crawl across the bathroom door, spewing the darkness with its grotesque body. As the figure's head ever so slightly began to tilt counterclockwise, it began spinning in a frenzy, all while the face maintained its somber composure. Jo speaks again "He- he looks different this time, I think he's upset. I don't know what he wants".

Taylor turns around looked at the bathroom door and blurted out "Holy shit, that things fucking massive!". Jo falls to her knees and looks to the carpet for comfort, familiarity, yet finds it to be stained in blackness. She begins to notice that everything around her is covered in the same blackness. All that was left in the room is Taylor and the spinning head. She watches in silent anguish as Taylor begins to move towards the head. He studies it and proclaims "Damn I've never seen one that big". He begins to raise his right arm and lift it back, then cocks his arm all the way back and he strikes the face of the figure.

Blood pours from its eyes, nose, and mouth as it cries out in mercy. “JO PLEASE DON’T DO THIS TO ME! STOP IT! PLEASE SAVE ME!”.

Taylor spoke up ““Damn, it’s still moving. Fucking thing won’t die!”, striking upon the face again with a fury. The face begged Jo for its life throughout the menacing fight until it’s left as nothing more than a crimson pulp. As the head falls to the floor in defeat, the darkness evaporates into nothingness.

“That’s over with”, Taylor exclaims as he reaches to the floor and grabs the bloody head by the hair, tossing it into the kitchen trash can. Taylor stands beside the trash and calls to Jo. Slowly, in a Pavlovian response, Jo finds herself walking. She cannot remember standing up, all she knows is she began to walk and that she has taken the journey to the bin for a lifetime.

“Look inside,” Taylor instructs.

“N- no.”

“Jo I know you’re scared, but I need you to look inside the trash can.”

“How? How could you, it did nothing wrong.”

“Jo, look.”

“Please, no.”, tears start to pour down her cheeks and her throat seals up, her breaths become a struggle.

“Jo, please. I need you to look for me”

Hesitantly, her hand reaches down to the bin, her fingers shaking at double time. She cautiously then grips the handle on the lid. “Please don’t make me”.

“Jo!”

She is too far to turn back. She inchingly starts to see the white of the trash bag and her mind is at a loss - there was no blood. How is there no blood? Not a drop? She throws the lid to

the side and begins to examine the content of the bag and finds the pizza box from the previous night, along with a crumbled-up cockroach bug corpse with the head missing.

4 Indy Kids and a Poser
‘Weddings & Funerals’
XII.XXIII.MMXII

Is it easier to catch flowers in the breeze or plastered in the wall? Well, it depends who you’re asking, and what your definition of a catch is. For Taylor, the answer would most likely be in the breeze, simply for the fact that a flower is physical and can be retrieved rather than the wallflower that exists solely as an optic distraction. Jo, on the other hand, may decide that the outside gives her crippling anxiety so to catch a daisy is to quest into a realm that she simply has no interest in going. That being said, the walls painted with flowers are constantly marching forward in an alarmingly quick, yet subtle way. The thorns in the bushes sharpen like daggers while the faceless clock acts as the metronome for the attack, in which case she would decide that flower picking is not in her best interest. The walls are caving in and her tenure in this world is coming to an emanate conclusion.

While things between the couple hadn’t always been perfect, these episodes haven’t always been an inclusion...

3 YEARS EARLIER (Before things went to shit)

Underneath a cement overpass, five twenty-year-olds sit in a circle, high off their asses:

- Taylor: The Philosophical Botanist (Favorite Band - Neutral Milk Hotel)
- Ethan: The dude who brought the bowl (Favorite Band - Weezer - Pinkerton Exclusively)
- Jo: Taylor’s long time girlfriend (Listens to whatever Taylor listens to)
- Jenny: Jo’s best friend and brought the weed (Doesn’t matter she’s a poser)
- Lizzy: Pick up truck DJ (Only playing The Cure tonight).

“Dude, I’m telling you it’s not too late” Ethan murmurs before taking a hit from the bowl, the rest of the circle stares at him with a troubled gaze. Jo speaks up “What the fuck are you talking about?”, Ethan turns his attention to Jo while steadily nudging the bowl toward Taylor, “The Smiths and The Cure should trade names.”

“How the fuck did you get there?” Lizzy interjects.

“Well, dude think about it, lead singer of The Cure is Curt Smith, the lead singer of The Smiths is fucking Morrissey why can’t they just trade?”

“No, that’s the Tears For Fears dude-” Jenny corrects.

“You fucking poser, Morrissey is definitely in the Smiths” Ethan interrupts.

Taylor picking at his pastel-colored lighter with his nail intervenes, “While she is, in fact, a poser” the lighter clicks and the flame ignites, “You, my friend, are an idiot. You said Kurt Smith of The Cure when you meant Robert Smith. Also, your argument is fucking stupid” Taylor reaches down and hits the bowl, he inhales the smoke slowly letting the milky clouds properly fill his lungs and holds for a moment. At this moment Jo interjects, “Robert Smith did not work as long and as hard as he did to create ‘Disintegration’ just for Morrissey to swoop in on a fucking trade to take credit for it. Morrissey is a gaslighting asshole who would only cause trouble for Robert Smith and he doesn’t deserve it. So fuck Morrissey, fuck The Smiths and Taylor hand me that fucking bowl, you’re fucking holding it.”

Taylor lets out a deep exhale and sputters out a few chuckles and coughs “Ye- ess Ma’am” as he hands her the bowl. Before Jo can take a hit from the bowl she takes a look at the people around her, she then proceeds to look down at the bowl and says “I love you guys a lot since high school got out I know we’ve kinda gone our separate ways and that sucks.”

“Well we’re all different people with different goals, You and Taylor went to college, Lizzy’s working with the radio station, and Ethans doing... Whatever Ethan does” Jenny interrupts.

“Hey the bands coming together, you’ll see” Ethan interjects,

“Dude you’re in a ska band with no drummer” Lizzy reminds,

“Oh, dude I used to play drums in the school jazz band!” Jenny retorts,

“Guys!” Jo attempts to bring the conversation back into focus,

“Dude no way, you want to join my ska band?”

“Guys!” Jo brings the group back in again, “I want you all to promise that if you hit this bowl tonight that we will all keep in touch, none of that weddings and funerals bull shit. Even though we will be there for that. But we will be there for each other, whenever we need a friend we will always have each other. Deal?”

“I mean it’s a little fair for the two who already hit the fucked up weed” Ethan states.

“We agree, both of us.” Taylor clarifies for Ethan.

“Also y’all don’t gotta worry about my funeral, cause I’m out living all you motherfuckers!”

“Dude” Lizzy remarks.

“Yeah and I’m playing El Scorcho at all of y’all’s ceremonies.” Ethan declares.

“You son of a bitch, if the last thing my loved ones think of Pinkerton when they look back on my funeral service I will fucking haunt you!” Lizzy fires back.

“Yo, Ethan!” Jo calls out

“What?” Ethan replies

“Did you say this weed was fucked up?” Jo asks

“Yeah, it hit fucking weird, might just be me though”

“No man, I’m fucking tweaking” Taylor replies.

Jo takes a second to examine the bowl, more closely the pot inside. Nothing looks out of place just the sharded remains of a greenish bud covered in ash. Nothing seems anything different than the other weed she's smoked in her past. Taylor looks over at Jo and notices the concentration she's giving the bowl, "Hey, you don't have to smoke tonight if you don't want to, we can just say we all agree to the deal". Jo looks over at Taylor and tells him to "Hand me the lighter."

Taylor puts the pastel ignites the lighter and hovers it over the bud, Jo leans her head forward and places her thumb over the hole of the bowl, she takes a deep inhale from the bowl as her thumb gently releases the hole. As she slowly inhales her breath is interrupted by a flurry of harsh coughs. In this same moment, she motions the bowl to Jenny who quickly follows suit.

"Who bought the shit this time" Lizzy pondered to the group

"Think it was Jenny this time" Taylor answered

"Ye, I got it from Nathan that one weird dude who had a super big crush on me sophomore year"

Jenny responded.

Lizzy went stiff, "EDM Nathan?"

"Yeah, that dude is a creep, but he gave me all this bud for free. Think he's still obsessed with me." Jenny retorted.

"Give me that bowl now!" Lizzy screamed at Jenny, quickly Jenny handed the bowl to her, while the other three looked on in confusion. Lizzy turned and looked at them all, "Now I need to know, who took a hit of the EDM kid's weed"

In terror, Jo looked over and confirmed to Jo, "We all did, why do you ask?", Lizzy took a deep breath and looked at the ground, "I heard from a friend Nathan has been starting to get into dealing bad shit. So what he's been doing is buying the cheapest weed around, and lacing it

with his shit. Then he gives the shit out for free, so when people get addicted to it he can sell PCP and shit for higher prices”.

“You know what, I’m willing to say it, mistakes were made,” Jenny responded.

“MISTAKES?” Jo replied.

“Dude we’re in a PCP circle.” Ethan declared.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!” Jo looked far in the distance pointing past the group into the darkness, Lizzy looked towards the direction and under her breath muttered “Shit”.

Lizzy
‘The Plastic Dos Band’
IV.XX.MMXIII

The idea that time is relative sounds a bit convoluted in theory, a great complexity spoken out into the aether by a man partially responsible for the atomic bomb. Still, there is more merit in the theory than I think mankind gives credit to, it’s just that it’s impossible to take track of, an hour seems like an hour, water is wet. Seemingly basic common knowledge, the foundations of there being any more to it is trivial. Yet there are moments throughout our short existence that we realize the truth and weight of relativity. In Lizzy’s case there would be six moments in her life when time froze for a single second, the moment lingered and stuck for so long that time simply halted in its track. The first instant you have already seen, it was the “oh shit” in the previous page; however, now we will be looking at the second instant that time halted for Lizzy.

A little less than a year removed from the night of the PCP circle, Lizzy waits backstage at a local bar to attend her first ska show since high school...

Lizzy stands patiently beginning to question the motives of her decision to spend \$10 to be heard at Rusty’s Blues House see *‘The Aluminum Dos Band!’* a John Lennon cover ska band. Audibly in her head, those sound like nonsense words derived from a bad mad lib take. Who decided mixing Beatles covers and what No Doubt did was a good idea. It sounds like either an objectively terrible idea or possibly something so crazy it could work. There’s no way in hell Ethan nor Jenny would want to see her again right? She botched the DD mission and now Taylor a slave to the grind and Jo hasn’t been out in public since MCR was still together. There’s still a chance to leave, she hasn’t recognized anybody that’s seen her, no shame in bailing before the show starts.

“Oh my god, Lizzy” a voice shouts from the corner of the room.

Lizzy lets a slight whimper “shit”, as Lizzy turns her body to acknowledge the voice she is greeted to the cartoonish smile of Jenny.

“How did you fuck up bad enough to find yourself at the local Rusty’s on this fine Saturday?”

“I was asking myself that same question if I’m going, to be honest.”

Jenny motions in and forces Lizzy into submission via a hug, this is the point of no return. At this moment Lizzy takes a moment to take an ocular scan of the room in an attempt to find words for conversation, instead, Jenny speaks up “Sorry if I look a bit stressed I’ve been trying to get a hold of Ethan he hasn’t been picking up”

“So not much has changed for Ethan since I last saw him?”

“Ethan has been really good. I mean not with technology, he was trying to convince me last week that we should get pagers”

“I want to say I’m shocked but...” Lizzy and Jenny both chuckle.

“I moved in with him, after...” Jenny buffers for a moment trying to find the correct phrase for the PCP incident of 2012.

“Nobody blames you for that night” Lizzy gently responds,

“Jo does, Taylor does, I do. That’s sixty percent, a passing grade.”

“Nobody should be judged for their worst mistake”

“I mean my parents kicked me out of their home, the only chance I had left after was living out of my car or joining Ethan in the band.”

“Do you guys cover only songs written by John or like-”, a bald man comes through the curtain and looks directly at Jenny “You have five minutes, to get your asses on that stage.”

“The singer is running late we can’t start yet,” Jenny tells the Paul Giamatti looking, man

“He’s 30 minutes late, people are starting to ask for refunds. They’re fucking ska fans, they have no better place to be! I am not losing money to fucking ska fans! Five minutes, figure it out!”

As he walks out Jenny looks back to Lizzy, “You know any Beatles songs?”

“I’m not performing Jenny”

“We need this gig, money isn’t exactly flowing in”

“I can ask around” Lizzy suggests

“Alright, I’ll talk to the band. Can you go outside and find a douchebag with a guitar?”

“Can’t I just ask somebody in the audience?”

“No, there is this dude who plays guitar on the street sometimes, his name is Indie. He plays mainly Cornell and Vedder, I’ve heard him do some Harrison songs though and he’s good.”

“What does he look like?”

Jenny frantically responds with “He’s got super nappy long brown hair, he’s usually holding a super beat-up guitar, and he looks like a dude named Indie”

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“Fucking go!” Jenny demands.

On command, Lizzy books it out of the venue and begins to run at full speed down the wet, cat pissed-covered streets of downtown. Upon every street corner, she encounters a different guitar-wielded man. The first man she approached asked “Indie?”, the performer simply nodded no. In front of her on the cross-section between Main Street and First Avenue South, there was an army of cars stopped and honking all over the intersection. On the other side of the street she noticed another man playing guitar, she yelled out to him “ARE YOU INDIE?!” the man looked back at her “BABY I CAN BE WHOEVER YOU WANT ME TO BE!”, she then decided that he

was not the guy. As she began to turn to sprint and find Indie, the man called out to her again

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING? I WAS JUST ABOUT TO PLAY CREEP?!”

Lizzy turns back at the man and realizes that he is sprinting across the stand-still traffic and running at her. It was at this moment Lizzy realized finding Indie was no longer her top priority. She stood planted as the man arrived at her, “Where you going, my set was just about to get good.”

“You were about to play fucking Pablo Honey dude, stopping you should be considered a heroic act”

“Shit, you got a smart mouth don’t ya? I can fix that”

Lizzy looks back at one of the cars behind the man “Oh, dude is that a Mozuradi?”, as he begins to peer over his shoulder, Lizzy takes a swift punt in her Chuck Taylors and places the kick directly in between the man's legs. While turning to walk back to the venue, Lizzy exclaims over her shoulder “Either learn some manner or some better fucking music”

Walking back to the venue Lizzy begins to ponder her decisions, from the choice to ignore her quest and kick that dude in the balls, why wouldn’t she just try to call Ethan first. Would he answer? Should he answer? Suddenly she felt a buzz coming from her pocket, the name on the screen was ‘Taylor’. She stood and pondered at the screen for a moment before sliding the green button.

“Taylor?”

“Hey, Liz.”

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to let you know that I’m sorry.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I realize that I haven’t been there for the past few months, I have been here with Jo and neither of us has been there. But I want to change that.”

“Dude, beat around the bush a little bit. I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“I just wanted to reach out to you because I know Jo has been dealing with her mental issues and it’s been a lot on me-”

“Are you going to blame your choice to abandon your friends on your girlfriend's mental illness?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that I-”

“You need to be better, Taylor. Everything is always someone else's fault. You know that Jenny still feels guilty because you made her feel like shit, you blamed her to her fucking face for her best friend being schizophrenic?”

“I know, I know. I just wanted to try to start fixing the problems I made”

“It’s not just fixing problems Taylor, you hurt people, you left.”

“So did you!”

“Excuse me?”

“God damn it, I told Ethan this wouldn’t work” Taylor muttered under his breath.

“You talked to Ethan?” Lizzy exclaimed

The other end cut out and the phone beeped twice to indicate the call was over.

Lizzy texted Taylor: “When did you talk to Ethan?” and then “DO you know where he is we can’t get ahold of him!”, he read both messages as soon as they were sent and replied to neither.

“Fucking Taylor” Lizzy yelled out in the alleyway behind Rusty’s. As she opened the door she was welcomed in by a ska rendition of *I Me Mine*. Lizzy was jamming hard on the drums, the trumpet was blaring, the bass was booming along with Lizzy, and the guitar speaker was too

muffled to tell if it was decent. On vocals was a tall nappy haired hick looking dude, with the voice of an angel, that was Indie.

After the set, Lizzy walked backstage and introduced herself to Indie who was sitting on a stool next to Jenny.

“You will never believe this, he was actually in the audience” Jenny called out to the approaching Lizzy.

“You don’t say,” Lizzy responded.

“I heard you were sent on a little bit of a scavenger hunt to find me” Indie told Lizzy.

“That I was” Lizzy replied

“I mean usually you miss most of our shows I thought this was one of your street rat days” Jenny interjects

“I mean typically, but y’all are such good people, I thought fuck it why not take a night off” Indie replies. Suddenly Jenny’s phone started ringing “You’re too kind, oh shit it’s Ethan’s mom I gotta take this. Probably went to her house for something stupid like a Weezer album, he’s got some explaining to do.”

As Jenny walks away, Lizzy turns back to Indie. “Do you know what the deal with them is, I haven’t seen them for a few months and all of a sudden they’re attached at the hip. Like they went from mutual friends to each other's emergency contacts”

“I haven’t known them very long, but I know she has her demons. A little while back something turned wack, and everyone turned on Jenny. She had no one, except for him. He was the only one kind enough to help her out. Probably thought nothing of it either, he just saw someone who needed help and put his hand out. While he doesn’t see it as a big deal, she sees that man as a

personal savior. Never will I see a truer love than the one she has for him. I don't know if he feels the same, but I do know that he likes having her around." Indie says.

"Indie, that was widely insightful for me, you're like the first person I've talked to in months to just hit me with truth like that" Lizzy responds.

"I think there is truth all around us, you just gotta know where to find it"

"Thank you for hitting me with some vague bullshit, to even the universe out" Lizzy chuckles.

Jenny then walks back into the room with her face engulfed in tears, through her tears, Jenny gives herself the momentary release to say "Ethan's dead."

Lizzy looked around the bar for a moment and realized that everything around her was frozen still. She gathered the strength to take a walk in this silent eternity, looked at the wall, studied the neon patterns in the blue open sign on the window by the glass door. Parts of it were turned off, especially near the bottom right corner of the O. But still, the sign flickered as if it was flawless. The sign wouldn't let its small imperfections ruin its integrity. Lizzy then moved from standing in front of the entrance to an open booth by the back corner near the bathroom away from Indie or Jenny. She took in a deep breath and held the air in her lungs.

"You know frozen time doesn't work like the hiccups right?"

Lizzy released her breath and looked across the table to an amused Ethan flashing a shit grin at her.

"You know you ruined my night right?" Lizzy informed Ethan.

"Dude I'm a ghost and that's how you want to open it up, I've been dead for like two hours give me a break!"

"Why did you have to die tonight? You couldn't have waited a little bit longer, I was trying to see you tonight!"

“I didn’t mean to, and I still got to see you anyways so suck it!”

“This doesn’t count, first off I’m not even sure this is happening right now, this whole night kinda feels like a fever dream if I’m being honest. I think I might’ve slipped something in a drink tonight, I sorta feel high, I could be high. No, maybe this is all just a really weird specific dream that I gotta analyze the shit out of tomorrow morning. This is like the trippiest lucid dream ever. It- it’s, just you can’t be gone.” Tears begin to swell along the inside of Lizzy’s bottom eyelids, like liquid weights being pulled at full strength.

“I’m sorry dude.” Ethan offers in retort.

“No, no it’s my fault”, the tears finally break through Lizzy’s cheeks in full stride, “I should’ve come to see y’all way sooner than today, I waited around and missed you, God I’ve missed you so much, man.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Ethan looks around the bar to check to see if anyone has moved, once he notices it hasn’t he asks, “What you want to talk about?”

Lizzy inhales “What was it like living with Jenny?”

“Fucking wild! She was a neat freak like OCD through the roof. She got rid of the paper plates in the place because she hated how they stacked in the trash can, we didn’t fight a lot, but when she decided we were using glass plates, we almost threw hands. I threw plates.”

The two friends chuckled for a moment.

“Did Jenny make you happy, like I know y’all didn’t date or anything but like did you enjoy your time with her?”

“Yeah man, she was awesome man. Love her, she is way more than I think we used to give her credit for. There wasn’t one day she didn’t surprise me with something ridiculous, like one day

she turned off all my alarms so she could come in and blow a kazoo in my face to wake me up, she's fucking nuts dude!"

"I knew I saw a little crazy in those eyes," Lizzy confesses.

"A little, she's one nut away from being a snickers bar!" the two giggle.

"Hey, Ethan?"

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"Did it hurt, you know dying?"

"Oh fuck yeah, I got hit by one of those trucks with like a SUPER or MAX on the front, surely every bone in my body was broken. I mean when I finally gave up the ghost I didn't feel anything anymore, it was kinda dope."

"Damn, I'm sorry." She hangs her head and the feeling of guilt begins to wash through her.

"Ahh don't sweat it, I'm cool now! Talking to one of my best friends in between seconds, pulling a Swayze, it's all good."

"I know, you like being weird and shit so this ghost stuff is right up your alley but I still miss you. I wanted to see you in person again."

"Well, there's always the funeral!" As the words reach the ears of Lizzy she closes her eyes attempting to hold back the tears, and fight the image of seeing Ethan's dead body in a casket, but it's all she can see. Quickly she opens her eyes and notices that she's back in front of Jenny, the time has resumed and Jenny's waiting for a response. Lizzy looks down and lets out a wounded "Shit."

Ethan
‘A Day in the Life’
IV.XX.MMXIII

April 20th seemed to start not too dissimilar than any other day for Ethan, he woke up on his couch four different times in his typical morning battle with the snooze button, until inevitably he was woken up by Jenny. This morning there was an unusual urgency to his wake-up call, as his head raises from an unwashed multi-stained pillow Jenny looks down on him from the bedside and exclaims, “Ethan, you need to wake the fuck up. We have a gig today!” “Tonight” Ethan muttered as he plops his head back into the pillow.

“I’m sorry?”

“We have a gig *tonight*.” Ethan clarifies.

Jenny moves herself directly adjacent to Ethan's ear, she takes a deep inhale, “ERRANDS!” she blurts into Ethan's ear, springing him to jump like a cat in water. Ethan takes a moment to collect his breath before asking “What ErRaNdS?!”.

“You’ve been talking all week about doing two things, what were they?”

“It’s clearly too early for me to remember that Jen, you’re pretty much my secretary. So please, tell me what are they”

“Finding someone for the band's PR manager and getting a new bike”

Ethan strokes his chin, “I remember the manager, but I never had a bike.”

“I will grant you the bike one is new, last night you got drunk and threw your scooter off the bayside bridge.”

“And you let me?! ”

“I was too astonished to do anything about it”

“Why? Why did I yonk the Razor?”

“You hit your ankle on the side of it, on like the metal bar part, then you cried, cursed all scooters, referred to yourself as the ‘scooter God’, decided you weren’t a benevolent God, chucked it into the bay, claimed that you were no longer a ‘scooter boy’, cursed Avril Lavigne’s name, and then claimed you were a ‘Bike man’” Jenny reports as she walks from the bedside through the door and into the living room.

“Yeah that tracks, there was nothing you could do.”

“So what are you gonna do?”

“I’ll walk to the bike shop downtown, get a cheap ass bike, then probably hit the Home Depot and get a bike chain.” Ethan explains as he moves from his comfortable position onto the bed and takes his first steps of the day into the bathroom, in the living room he can hear Jenny singing to herself “Rivers and roads, rivers and roads..” she stops for a moment to ask,

“Why don’t you just get a bike chain at the bike store?”

“I don’t want them to think I’m a bike guy! Also what song are you singing?” Ethan exclaims.

“Rivers and Roads, ‘Bike Man’” Jenny responds.

Ethan chuckles “Fair, but seriously they’re gonna start trying to upsell me and add bells and shit and I can’t say no to bells and that also seems pretty on the nose!”

“There was one too many and’s in that sentence. Just don’t get the bells, why add an extra stop?”

“No, out of principle I can’t.”

Jenny stands up and begins to walk out of the room while walking towards the front door she tells Ethan “Alright just don’t be late for the show, I’ll drive the van and get set up early, also Rivers and Roads might be on the nose but give it a shot!”

“Ehhh, I don’t really buy in for those sappy indie songs.”

“I wish you did.” Jenny whispers to herself as she opens the door.

“Our last show as a cover band!” Ethan yells from his room.

“We’ll see about that, love you!” Jenny walks out the front door but stops for a moment to wait for a response.

“See you at the show, Jenny!” Ethan yells out from his room, shortly thereafter the front door closes.

After the coast is clear Ethan puts his head back down to rest a little longer, not but two seconds pass between his head hitting the pillow before his phone begins to ring. Ethan reaches to the corner of his nightstand to see the phone screen lit up reading ‘Incoming Call: Jenny’, he swipes the green answer button and Jenny immediately yells “Don’t go back to sleep!”

“I didn’t, I’m just getting ready to go in the shower”

“Alright just checking, text me when you’re heading to the bike shop”

Ethan takes a glance down at his wall outlet and realizes that his charging port was never actually plugged in, “Hear me out here I think we should get pagers” Ethan suggests.

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing to talk to you in a little.”

“See ya later”

“Yo wait, Jenny!”

“Yeah?”

“Love you too” Ethan hangs up the phone and checks its battery life, ‘0%’.

“Well that can’t be good”, he plugs his phone back into the charger and walks to go take a shower.

About thirty minutes passed for him to take a shower and get dressed to go out and buy a bike, he even made enough time to have himself a toaster strudel. On his way out the door, he

grabbed his phone and made his way toward the bike store. The sun was shining, the people who passed him by would give him a head nod, even the squirrels seemed to be in a good mood today. As he approached his first crosswalk he found himself delighted at the fact that the green man was giving him the signal to walk, there was no time today for the angry palm of stationary arbitration. He peered down the street and noticed that the next three crosswalks were all green and at this moment he thought to himself, “God, I know I’ve been smoking cigarettes since junior high because a Weezer album made me sad. I see that and I acknowledge it, I also know since childhood I’ve been cursed with asthma and a general lack of enthusiasm for athletics. But God, Alanis, Lemmy, Zeus, Jupiter even, whichever title you see fit to carry on this day. Give me- nay! Give my lungs the strength to run through all of these signals. I am sure my legs will prevail but my lungs are infinitely more questionable. Thank you and possibly Hail Satan, amen” on that mark Ethan breaks into a full sprint each step feeling lighter with every stride, his vessel carried by the Chuck Taylors of Apollo. A woman from across the street was so amazed she yelled out to him “Run boy! Run for the children! Run for the outcasts! Run for us all!”

As he breaks through the street he begins to hear car horns honking at him, not in anger or inconvenience but rather as a salute to his efforts, he then narrows his focus from the green sign to the bike shop it is within his grasp, he begins to soften his stride as he nears the steel door. Reaching his arms out he pushes forward only to be halted by the door itself, hitting the door like a fly on the windshield of a car. As his body hits the cement his elbow is scraped by the unforgiving pavement. He begins panting heavily slowly picking himself up, the door is pushed open as a man baring an orange collared shirt and a nametag with the name Greg stares back at him.

“It’s a pull” Greg says pointing at the ‘PULL’ engraved in the aluminum door handle.

Ethan moves into the shop and explains to Greg, “Look I was just checking your door was firm and stable so when the inspectors come you know you’ll be ready”

“What inspectors?”

“The door inspectors, keep up Greg”

Greg is not entertained by the notion, “What can I do for you”

“ I need a bike, like literally the cheapest bike you have Greg”

“My name is Craig, do you want to look-”

“What do you mean your name is Craig?” Ethan interrupts.

“My name tag says, Craig.”

Ethan focuses his sight on the name tag, but the letters are shifting around the only thing he can make out is a C/G - r - * - * - g. He looks back at the man, “I’m going to level with you, I’m dyslexic and don’t trust you because you’re a salesman. I have \$50 and an Arby’s coupon in my pocket, if the bike has Spider-Man on it you can have the coupon.”

“Let me see the coupon”

“Bring the bike outside in three minutes and it’s yours.”

“Fine” Greg begrudgingly accepts.

As Ethan walks out the door he waves, “See you in two minutes, Greg!”

“Fuck you, Percy Jackson!” Greg yells back.

Stepping outside Ethan reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, upon inspection the screen was shattered upon his impact attempting to enter the bike shop.

“Told her we should’ve done pagers, never seen a pager this broke” Ethan mutters to himself

“Are you mentally stable?” Greg asks.

Ethan jumps up and lets out an emphatic gasp of horror, turning around he notices Greg standing there with a spiderman bike.

“Where the fuck did you come from?”

“The spiderman bike was five feet away from you,” Greg answers

“Oh, well that was quicker than I expected” Ethan hands the coupon and cash to Greg, and jumps on the bike.

“You’re an interesting dude.” Greg replies,

“Yeah, you’re not so bad for a salesman. Do you know how to get to the Home Depot from here?”

“It’s just down the street man, looks like it was originally a Lowe’s.”

“Well that’s unfortunate see you around Greg” Ethan begins to peddle down the street toward the Home Depot, as he moves past the first crosswalk he hears Greg yell at him from the store “Hey you only gave me 15 and this coupon is expired!”

As he peddles away the chuckles to himself, “Big bills in the front”.

Soon thereafter Ethan pulls into the Home Depot parking lot, he rides over to the bike rack and hops off the spiderman bike then chucks it into the rack. A woman walking by notices this and asks Ethan, “Why?”. He turns to her and stares her down intensely, “That spiderman is a menace!”, he then struts into the Home Depot, slowly raising his hands to his face, and bellows out, “TAAYYYLOOOORRRRR”.

A cashier turns to Ethan and informs him that “He works in the back with the plants”.

Ethan gestures to the employee with a nod for recognition as he begins to head towards the back section. Walking around Ethan notices the jungle of steel and work supplies around him, he finds

it ironic that most of them are green. Why did Taylor put himself in this place? He hates the machines, pretty sure he would be a mountain man if he had the opportunity.

“I heard you called for me?” a voice speaks up from behind Ethan, as he turns around he is surprised to find Jo staring right back at him.

“Holy shit, Jo?” Ethan smiles and turns to Jo embracing her for the first time in months.

“Alive and in the flesh.”

“I didn’t think you left the house anymore, I thought you were in permanent self-appointed exile!”

Jo laughs, “I mean only kind of sorta, I gotta get out every once in a while.”

“How are you? I’m gonna level, Jenny and I have been super worried.”

“You still talk to Jenny?” Jo asks astonishedly.

“Ethan! The fuck are you doing here?” Taylor shouts out from a distance.

“I need a new bike lock!” Ethan yells back

“Since when do you ride a bike?” Jo softly asks Ethan.

“Since I ascended skateboard Godship,” Ethan replies.

“Big g or little g?”

“What is Austin to Texas again?” fires back at Jo.

“The capital?”

“Well there you go”, Jo snickers to herself as Taylor finally arrives at the pair and embraces Ethan.

“I love you man but I really don’t think we have bike chains here,” Taylor confesses.

“Oh, that’s not really why I’m here, I actually wanted to talk to you about her.” Ethan directs his finger at the center of Jo’s head.

“Well if you want to talk to me-” Jo begins.

“You see I didn’t know Jo was going to be here and was going to ask her if she could do a favor for me. You see the band has been playing solid for a while now and we’re looking to move onto purely original music and we need help. Specifically, we need help with our image of someone who understands social media and networking and all the bullshit that comes along with it.”

“Sounds like you got yourself in a doozy” Taylor replies.

“A stone-cold bummer if you will.” Ethan offers back.

“The only problem is I don’t know if we’re ready to start seeing the gang again,” says Taylor.

“Why not?” Jo interrupts.

“We burned some bridges when we last saw Jenny and Liz”

“Yeah but so what, everyone made mistakes. Especially on that night.” Jo says.

“Yeah, but Jenny was cut off from her family and Liz was well Liz” Taylor replies.

“Alright, alright how about this: Taylor you call Liz and makeup with her. I can talk to Jenny about it and we can make it work.”

“Dude, it's not that easy.”

“Well, why not? You, Liz, and I go back to fucking preschool. We’ve literally known each other for a decade and a half. One day does not matter more than thousands, we can figure this out. I swear one day we’ll look back and laugh at how insignificant that day was.”

“Alright fine, I’ll call her later tonight. But y’all gotta go, my manager has been giving me the dirty eye since I walked over here.” Taylor nods his head towards an old buff man wearing an orange apron staring daggers through the three.

“Alright, I love you man. Reach out to me after you talk to her.” Ethan dabs up Taylor and begins to walk away, just as he begins to make his way outside he notices a tap on his shoulder.

“Where are you off to now?” Jo asks.

“I gotta gig I need to be going to, do you wanna come?”

“I think I’m gonna raincheck this time, I need to take my meds tonight and don’t have them on me.”

“I gotcha, you really should try to come out sometime. I know Jenny misses you and it would be great to see everybody together again.”

“How often do you see Lizzy, not often but still she’s around you know?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for doing the things I did. It wasn’t Em’s fault she got the bad weed, I’m really sorry for what Taylor and I did telling her parents about everything. She’s a good person, I just can’t help it when I get the way I do. Taylor kept telling me it was a bad idea, and I just kept telling him if we didn’t I’d well ya know.”

“You’d what?” Ethan asks intently.

“Kill myself” Jo sighs.

“I didn’t know, are you-”

“I’m getting better, I’m taking my pills and the visions have been going away. I just needed space so I could get it figured out and its getting better. I think that doing your bands' promotional stuff will help, I didn’t get a Communications degree for nothing.”

“I mean the paper had to say that you did something in college.” Ethan chuckles as he picks up his spider-man bike.

“Ethan-” Jo starts.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For what? Talking to me like a friend, I don’t have many of those anymore. Since the incident,

it's only been Taylor and me. I usually just stay in the house or work from my computer. It's just nice to know that I'm not alone you know?"

"As long as I'm around you'll always have a friend, call anytime Jo" Ethan waves as he rides his bike away from the Home Depot.

He makes his way back past the bike shop and notices all three signals are green again, he mutters to himself once more "Give me strength." He wizzes past the first street no problem, as he goes to hit the second street he rings his bell three times and is then greeted by the front of an F-150 turning right into traffic. His body soars through the air for a moment like a kernel out of a popcorn kettle until his flight is ended by the cold pavement below him. He dies on impact.

Jenny
'From This Life'
V.I.MMXII

Jenny sits in her Ford Focus staring vacantly at the driveway in front of her, hopelessly empty, she begins to feel herself slipping back into the days that used to be. When she could still walk into the house in front of her without a second thought, how despite the memories that time is over. Even after all that pain left her she still managed to find a hand that was able to guide her back to shore, he welcomed her into his life, made her feel welcome and now she's alone again. A solitary tear in the eye of the ultimate outsider is released and crashes onto the floor mat below her. Jenny opens the door and marches toward the front door for Ethan, it's what he would've done. As she arrives at the varnished brown door she knocks shave and a haircut and waits in her own ambiguity.

The door is answered by an older man, "Jenny what are you doing here?"

Jenny pushes the man out of her way and heads toward a hall in the home "Hey dad, I need to just grab some blank discs from my room. I'll be gone in a flash I swear."

"Chris, who is it?", a voice calls from up the stairwell adjacent to the hall.

"Uhhh, no one honey!" Chris yells up the staircase, he then turns to Jenny and tells Jenny, "Don't waste your time checking your room, your mother burned all of your things"

“Fucking, what?!” Jenny replies.

Suddenly, a rumbling of feet from above storm toward the staircase, and a middle-aged woman reveals herself from the top of the staircase, “Get the fuck out of my home!”

“Hi mom”, Jenny replies.

“You are no daughter of mine.” Jenny’s mom bellows back out.

“I miss our talks mom, you really were the best conversationalist” Jenny quips back.

“You think being cynical makes you smart, don’t you? Here’s a newsflash for you, everything you touch burns eventually.” Jenny’s mom says as she makes her way down the stairs.

“Seems like you took the Ray Bradbury school of reading to figure that one out” Jenny fires back.

“You damned your friend Jo-” Jenny’s mom begins.

“Jo has her own set of problems mom, I can’t blame myself for that.” Jenny interrupts.

“What about your friend Ethan? How’s he doing now that you’ve spent some time with him?”

Jenny’s mom begins to smirk.

Jenny takes a deep breath, “How dare you.”

Her mother’s smirk slowly transitions into a grin, “He’s dead and you have to live with that, I would’ve hoped your lesson by now-”

“HE WAS HIT BY A TRUCK I WASN’T EVEN THERE!” Jenny cries out.

“Maybe you should’ve been”, her mother suggests.

“Jennifer, go to your car. I will speak to you there.” Chris whispers down to his daughter.

“Fine! I’ll leave, you aged terribly by the way you fucking hag!”

Jenny runs towards the door and pushes it open falling onto the yard outside where she is once again met by Chris. He looks down upon her, the tears now filling her cheeks. She breaks down and cries.

“All of your discs are in your passenger seat, I wouldn’t dare let her find those. I’m so sorry for your loss. Ethan seemed to be a really good kid whenever you would bring him by, my heart shattered when I thought of what his passing must mean to you. Your mother has only gotten worse since we kicked you out. I hope one day you’ll be able to forgive me for what I’ve done, I love you always”, Chris inhales wounded at the man he has to become again as his voice raises “That means never come back! I never want to see you anywhere near this home again.” Chris turns to the door and hugs Jenny’s mom inside.

Jenny takes a moment on the lawn to attempt to process whatever the fuck that was, her dad is still stuck and she is the easy target. She picks herself up and sits in her car for a moment, she then looks to her passenger seat and notices six or eight CD cases thrown in. She picks up one of the cases and inspects it, ‘500 MB’. Jenny smiles, “Perfect.”

She sets the disc back on the seat and puts the the key into the ignition and pulls out of the driveway, as she puts the car from reverse into drive she takes a moment to roll her window down and stick her head out, “It was a Fahrenheit 451 reference you illiterate bitch!”

Jenny then slams her left foot on to the brake and right to the gas and performs a burn out whilst maintaining perfect eye contact with her mother watching from the downstairs window, Jenny holds on to the brake for as long as she can until finally, the sight of her mother disgusts her enough to release.

As she flies through the neighborhood she grew up in, all she can think to do is scream, from the excitement of pissing off her mom, to the resentment she has for her cowardly father,

and then Ethan. All she can think about now is him, her scream fades into a deafening silence that she finds inescapable. Ethan would've been proud of the burnout, he should be proud of it, he should be here with her. She should be there with him now, but she's just her father's daughter too cowardly to actually do the right thing. Everything has to be so fucking secretive, nothing is service level, it's all just buried down deep. She doesn't even know how to find it anymore, why is it that everything turns green, why can't everything stay gold? Ethan's not even green anymore, Jenny saw him after the accident, he was red and blue, broken. It's not fair, she should be there, she needs to be with him for this. Jenny takes a breath, and pulls into a drive-in theater, hands the usher a \$10 and tells him to "Keep the change."

She moves the Focus into one of the front lot spots, puts the car into park, rolls the windows down, and takes her laptop out of the bag on the floor next to the blank discs. Jenny reaches down to pick up one of the blank discs and puts it on her laptop. As the laptop boots up she takes a minute to stare at the screen in front of her, on it is an older man with salt and pepper hair sitting in a chair from the fourth or fifth story of a hotel looking down at the city below him. The shot then changes to the city street below across the street from a hotel is a drag bar. The camera focuses on one of the dancers walking into the bar wearing a goodwill outfit and a cheap fake wool jacket. The dancer is unphased by anything in her path she doesn't walk into the bar, she struts. Yet despite all of this glamor and enigma not a soul around her pays her a single thought, no one even pays her a glance. Except of course for the man in the hotel room looks down upon her, from the solitude of his hotel room and he scoffs at her, "Tacky!" he mutters under his breath.

Jenny shifts her attention back down to the laptop screen and notices that it is on the desktop. She opens the disc file and notices that it already has 100 songs on it, mainly Weezer and Neutral Milk Hotel. She chuckles to herself, “Fucking Ethan!”

Continuing to scroll through the music she notices that there is a lot of Weezer like an alarming amount, “He put Pinkerton in this twice? What the fuck, you’ve been dead for two weeks and you’re still trying to force Pinkerton on me.”

Jenny moves her mouse to an icon of a microphone on her desktop and clicks it from there she begins to speak, “Hey, I know you can’t hear this and you never will but I still need to do this. I wanted to make you a mixtape, or you know burn a disc, there pretty much the same concept right? Well I wanted to burn you a disc, even had to go back to my parents house to make that happen and it was about as much of a shit show as you would expect, no it was worse than a shit show, how the fuck am I even kind of normal? Shit sorry not about me, anyway I got this disc and I was going to put a bunch of your favorite songs on it and here I am looking at it already filled to the brim with male manipulator bullshit. Pinkerton is a manifesto Rivers made about hating women dude, it’s so unhinged. Anyway, I just wanted to thank you. I never had anyone who had my back before I met you. I had friends like Jo, but they kind of feel fair weather to me now. Remember back when I started hanging out with you Liz, Jo and Taylor? Sure you do, you guys called me a poser, which was super fucking tacky but I get it. You were a group of outsiders, and I was just a different kind of outsider. But the difference between you and the rest of them is you did something about it, even though you would give me a hard time or call me a name you were really lending a hand for me to join the group. You saw another loner and you empathized with me, you chose me. I will never forget that, til the day I die, my biggest

fuck up will be not telling you that you are all that I ever needed. I'm so sorry I couldn't be there with you. I love you forever, from this life til the next, Jenny."

After the message Jenny hit the end recording button and placed the recording in the disc file. A numbness rushes over, the thoughts of disappointment and regret fill the air like a heat from the vents of her AC. The heat had a notable lack of subtlety when it began, and Jenny felt the sweat beam off her face onto her lap. She looks up onto the screen and the film has changed three times over, the man from the hotel room is seen laying down on the streets while fleet street constables rain down clubbing blows upon him. The next shot is of the woman in drag on a spaceship with John Lennon, the woman looks scared and suddenly Lennon aborts from the ship as the woman stands in front of a computer screen with tears in her eyes she says, "They can never know".

"You know what, this seems like a good stopping point", Jenny puts the key in the ignition and drives once more. She takes one left turn from the drive in theater and then a right soon after into a cemetery. As she pulls into a parking spot she notices Indie sitting on the hood of his truck looking over at her. He jumps off the trunk and walks toward her passenger door, Jenny remains silent and unlocks her door for Indie to get in. Indie steps in the car, he is wearing a black suit and has his hair tied back tight in a ponytail.

"Missed you today." Indie says looking forward at the graveyard in front of the car.

"I tried, I just-" Jenny attempts to speak looking down at the driving wheel but is quickly interrupted by Indie.

"I know. You loved him, he loved you to. More than you know."

"Do you think I'm a bad person for not showing?"

“No, it was a shit show. Liz and Jo had a screaming match, Taylor got drunk and threw up in the hole-”

“Before or after they dropped the coffin?”

“Luckily before, that dude is a mess.” Indie chuckles.

“I’m really sorry, I couldn’t go.”

“Ethan wouldn’t have wanted you to be there with everyone acting like that, it’s no way to grieve”

“Oh my first apology was to Ethan, that last one was to you. He was your friend to, I’m sorry I made you go through that alone.”

“Jenny, please take this in the best way possible-”

Jenny interrupts “Oh boy...”

Indie chuckles for a minute, takes a breath and then finally turns his head to Jenny, “I’m glad you didn’t come.”

“You know my day still wasn’t any kind of cake walk either-”

“Why, are you ok?”

“No, but I made a mixtape” Jenny holds up the CD disc to Indie, he takes the disc and puts it into the car radio. As the Disc begins to play El Scorcho by Weezer, Indie laughs, “So it’s an Ethan mixtape.”

“Yeah, there are like 200 tracks on here and there all terrible.” Jenny laughs.

“He blurred the lines between ironic and unironic too hard, there is no way to no if he ever actually liked this”

“Indie, it’s Weezer. It was ironic.”

Ethan
'Til the Next'
?.?.????

Ethan makes his way back past the bike shop and notices all three signals are green again, he mutters to himself once more "Give me strength." He wizzes past the first street no problem, as he goes to hit the second street he rings his bell three times and is then greeted by the front of an F-150 turning right into traffic. His body soars through the air for a moment like a kernel out of a popcorn kettle until his flight is ended by the cold pavement below him. Then suddenly he opens his eyes, and he is no longer in the street huddling at the ground, instead he is sat down in a small white room in an office chair facing a plastic folding table with a typewriter on it. "What the fuck is going on?" Ethan asks himself. Suddenly a door slams open from behind Ethan, a seven foot tall man with long black hair wearing a black t-shirt and denim jeans walks in from the utter darkness on the other side of the door. The man takes a seat across from Ethan, and stares from across the table.

“So, I may be taking a shot in the dark here, but I’m dead right?” Ethan asks the man.

“Correct” the man answers in a deep malotic voice.

“May I say sir, you are a gorgeous man.” The man sits still unamused by Ethans comments.

“So you’re God?”

“No.” the man answers.

Ethan gasps, “*Lucifer?*”

“No, it doesn’t matter who-”

“Zeus?”

The man sighs, “No”

“Judas?”

“No”

“Joseph?”

“No”

“The levites?”

“No”

“A giant spaghetti mon-”

The man interrupts, “My name is Peter”

“Like the angel?”

“No.”

“Like from Type-O negative?”

“I’m the person who decides if you go to heaven or hell.” Peter responds, Ethan takes a moment to ponder the ramifications of his actions up to this point.

“Ahhh so this is Limbo!” Ethan exclaims.

“Not exactly..”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Honestly?” Peter answers.

“Uhhh, yeah?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Yessir.”

Peter sits back in his chair and begins to inspect Ethan, muttering to himself, “there ain’t no way this is gonna fly.”

Ethan speaks up “Like with wings? Could I get wings?”

“No, I can’t even get wings. What makes *you* think you’re worthy of flying” Peter scoffs.

“If I’m gonna be honest with you I really don’t know what the deal is I was just curious.”

“Well you’ve been goofing around since the second I walked in the room, I’m trying to give you time to compose yourself before I begin the test.”

Ethan shrugs, “Ehhh, I’m good, don’t wait on my accord.”

“You should take another moment before we begin, you have just been through an incredibly traumatic event.”

“What, dying?”

Peter looks at Ethan in disbelief and slowly retorts, “Yeah.”

“Nah that wasn’t very hard, I’m cooler than being cool”

Peter lets out a deep sigh “Are you trying to tell me that you’re-”

Ethan interrupts “ICECOLD!”

“Alright, fuck it you’re going to hell.”

“Oh shit, really?” Ethan calmly asks.

“No, just try to take this seriously” Peter responds.

“How can I take this seriously when you have already compromised the sanctity of your position? Personally I-”

“Ethan, shut the fuck up!” Peter interrupts.

“Alright, fine” Ethan concedes.

Peter takes one more great sigh, “Your task is simple, on the typewriter in front of you I need you to write your defense for getting into Heaven.”

“That’s it?” Ethan asks in disbelief.

“Yeah”

“How much do you know about my life going into the paper?”

“Unfortunately for me I have had to watch every single second of your life.”

“No! That can’t be true..”

“Scary Spice.” Peter responds.

Ethan gasps in horror, “So it is.”

“I’m giving you the opportunity now to adjust my perception on the life you have led, the paper can be as long as you want it to be. I will sit here and wait until you are done.”

Ethan leans forward in his chair, and clicked and clacked sixteen characters. “Alright Peter, I’m done.”

Peter leans forward with a worried expression, “Are you sure?”

Ethan cracks a smug grin and confidently affirms, “Yessir, I do believe I am.”

Peter leans across the table and rips the paper from the type writer, the sixteen characters reads as follows ‘**I tried my best.**’ Peter smiles and glares across the table at Ethan, “For a jackass who talks to much, you sure do know how to keep it short and sweet.”

“So am I free to go to heaven?” Ethan asks.

“Well yes, but actually no.”

“The hell does that mean?” Ethan’s voice cracks a tad.

“It means you don’t go to hell.”

“OK...”

“Alright follow me, everything will make sense to you in a short bit.” Peter stands up from his chair and motions for Ethan to follow him through the door that Peter initially entered in. Ethan hesitantly follows suite, towards the door. Arriving to the front of the door Peter looks to Ethan,

“Are you ready?”

“I guess man.”

“God you’re a prick, can you just try to get on the same level as me?” Peter asks.

“Dude this is kind of a lot.”

“I’m trying to make this fun for you” Peter scowls.

“You look like you’re going to eat me, is this your first day on the job?”

“Yeah..” Peters mutters back.

“You know what it makes sense that my tour guide through the afterlife would be an emotionally unavailable goth giant.” Ethan retorts.

“How about this, I cut the bullshit with all the ceremony and shit.”

“You know what, typically I would want bells and whistles but you don’t seem like a bells and whistles kinda guy.”

“I’m not”

“And you know what that’s ok!”

“Really?” Peter quietly asks.

“Dude, you have watched my entire life. If there is one take away from anything it’s always be willing to do the bare minimum” Ethan exclaims.

“So you want me to just rush through this?” Peter asks.

“As quickly as possible.”

“As soon as I open the door, stay right behind me and I will only run through the important bits of the afterlife for you. Do you want me to catch you up on what hell is?”

“Nah, there is plenty of time after the initial tour to catch up on that” Ethan politely declines.

Peter stops for a moment, he adjusts his sleeves so they reach back to three quarters instead of arm's length, and he takes a breath, “Alright so here’s the deal, the afterlife is a noun here.”

Ethan moves forward and squints, “Pardon?”

“In life you refer to the place that you go to as the afterlife.”

“Well, yeah. Because it happens after life.”

“Correct!” Peter exclaims.

“So what?”

“So now that you’re here when you refer to this place you will be doing so as a noun, because it is a physical place.”

“Peter, why are you getting caught up in the semantics of the terminology for where we are?”

“Because I need you to know that you can’t use the word afterlife here as a pronoun”

“Sorry?” Ethan asks quickly.

“Alright so when you are alive-” Peter begins,

“Were” interrupts Ethan.

Peter looks at Ethan dumbfounded for a moment, then realizes and corrects his mistake, “So when you were alive you would refer to the place that you would go when you died as the afterlife, so you would use the word afterlife to describe what you thought the afterlife would be.”

“Yeah?” Ethan answers.

“Yeah, so I just wanted to let you know to avoid using the word afterlife as if it were a pronoun because, you are in the person/place/thing/noun that is actually the afterlife.”

“Oh my god this is hell.” Ethan whimpers.

“No no no, that’s another place.”

Ethan reaches down to a black knob on the wall and twists, the walls begin to shake, as the lights begin to turn brighter and brighter.

“Come on!” Peter exclaims.

The room's opacity rises until Ethan can no longer make out shapes in the room all he can see is the brightest white. “Is this not supposed to happen?” Ethan yells.

The lights around dim, and Ethan begins to violently blink his eyes, as he comes to he notices that the room around him has changed into a quaint looking New England town. The sky appears to be a bright gray hugh, the air around feels crisp and cool.

Peter drops his voice an octave and belows a “Welcome to-”

“Jurassic Park?” Ethan interrupts.

“No-”

“The Black Parade?”

“No.”

“The first day of the-”

“Didn’t you already do this bit?”

“Yeah, but it’s helping me cope so, can you just let me have it?”

“I mean you are the one who wanted me to rush.”

Ethan sighs, “You’re right.”

“Hey I know you’ve been through a lot, but I have something that will make you feel better.”

“What’s that Peter?”

Peter giggles “Check your pocket.”

Ethan reaches down into his left pocket and grabs a rectangular device and pulls it out.

The device itself has a blank screen and three buttons. A red one with an ‘N’, a gray button with a ‘-’, and a green button with a ‘Y’. Ethan chuckles, “A beeper?”

“Yeah, pretty sick right?”

“I mean, yeah but like what’s the point of it? None of my friends are dead.” Ethan pouts.

“Which is good right?”

“Yeah, I mean obviously.”

“Ok, what I just handed you is going to be your best friend while you wait for your buddies to kick the bucket.”

“Why can I talk to dead celebrities with it?”

“No Ethan, what I just handed you Paranormal Pager.”

Ethan begins to grin, “Are you telling me what I think you’re telling me?”

“Absolutely, but I need to take you through the ground rules before you get your first call.”

“Ok, so first things first: To many people who loved you, your death was a tragedy. You need to speak in ownly dramatic irony.”

“Meaning?” Ethan asks.

“Like you need to reference your death in a way that is cheeky.”

“Oh I can do that.”

“If you mention the afterlife the person you are paging will not be allowed to page you for the rest of their duration in their mortal coil.”

Ethan scoffs, “Well, obviously”

“Most important, we allow this level of haunting for divine reasoning so be fully aware that you are only getting a beep because the foundations that control this plane of existence saw it necessary. Understand?”

“So this is mainly for character development?”

“Yeah, essentially.” Peter confesses.

Suddenly the beeper starts to chime, the screen reads ‘Lizzy’.

Ethan smiles and starts pacing in place, “Alright I’m ready.”

Ethan begins to move his thumb to the green button, he looks up at Peter. Peter nods and declares, “For what?”

As Ethan presses the button he lets out “Character development!”

Jenny
‘Everything Will Be Alright’
IX.II.MMXV

Here it goes scrolling through these endless worlds and nothing fits. The promise of adventure seems great yet the divine interest of Poptropica has failed once again in holding Jenny’s attention. Despondently clicking through mindless missions she has already completed looking to find something new. Nothing seems to heal her vacant stare, not even a cartoon Zeus can clear her foggy eyes. He strikes down a yellow bolt at the head of her character again and again, relentless in his pursuit to convince her to follow the story still, she pushes against the narrative.

Suddenly the bolt strikes are muted by an incoming video call, ‘Incoming Call from Voldemort of Bitches’. Quickly Jenny moves the cursor to decline and shifts her attention back to mythological punishment. The mighty Zeus strikes her character once more before being halted once again by ‘Voldemort of Bitches’. Jenny lets out a deep sigh and relents, moving her cursor to the green accept button and sealing her fate.

The screen is consumed by the feed of Jo Roday, sitting in a wooden chair in a living room furnished by the Baba Yaga. She’s wearing a navy blue beanie, it covers her hair and matches the color of the bags under her eyes.

Jo opens the discourse quickly, “Hey Jenny, how’s it going?”

“No” Jenny chuckles.

Jo’s eyebrows scrunch down as she mutters, “I- I’m sorry?”

“We don’t get to have lettuce conversations anymore, there was a time when that was totally ok.

Actually, they were expected, but now..” Jenny sighs.

“What is a lettuce conversation?” Jo softly asks.

“Have you ever had a sandwich?”

“Yeah?” Jo answers.

“Well then you should know that lettuce isn’t an integral part of a sandwich, it’s a- a filler so the sandwich seems like more than it is.” Jenny catches her breath after, her face shifting to a tint of red.

“Oh” Jo responds.

“What do you want Jo?”

Jo sighs, “Ever since, that night I have felt this feeling. It’s hard to explain. I- I don’t know what to do and I sort of just take a back seat while my body sort of just does its own thing. Which is not an excuse for my actions, what I did telling your parents that was me. I just didn’t know what else to do at the moment, I felt this vacancy fill my head. I was floating with my head faced down in the water, and ever since I just keep spinning. I’m looking at the clouds in the sky and then the next I’m looking face down into darkness. When I see the darkness, it’s all I can see, all that I want. I need it, I need it to be over. The people I love most are all torn to shreds, and I’m just spinning like a hotdog on a grill at a gas station. I need you like I haven’t needed anybody else. Since I pushed you away nothing has been okay.” tears begin trickling down Jo’s cheek. Jenny sits in the silence of the plea for a moment before asking, “Jo, do you remember the day we met?”

Jo smiles, “Yeah, on the bus. You were sitting at the back on top of where one of the tires was. I walked up to you and asked-”

Jenny laughs, “Hold on there, you didn’t ask me anything.”

Jo giggles to herself, “Ok, I told you to ‘get the fuck off my seat’”

“And do you remember why that was the goofy?”

“It was the first day of middle school”

“Yeah and my stop came first, yet you had the gull to come and say it was your spot” Jenny chuckles.

“It didn’t take a genius to realize that the best spot on the bus was the seat that had a built-in leg rest, you steadily refused. I sat next to you anyway so I could convince you that the spot should be mine.”

“Just when I thought I couldn’t hear enough of your voice, I got off the bus simply to realize that we had five classes together.” Jenny sighs

“After a long day of perfectly articulating-”

“Whining” Jenny interrupts.

“We came to an agreement that every day we could switch seats and you were stuck with me” Jo smiles.

“Until I wasn’t” Jenny reminds Jo.

“Why did you have to go do that? We were good for a minute there.”

“Oh, I’m cool with little you, hell little you were there for me. Even after middle school into high school. I was even fine being thrown into the group, especially in those early years. You know when you guys would call me the poser? I was cool with you even when all of our friends were disappointed in me. My parents were always a given. My friends all getting together and calling me names is something I had to learn to deal with. I know the whole it was just a joke thing but you know what that shit hurt. I still don’t know why I was the big poser, the black sheep. Was it because I wore Vans instead of Chuck’s? Sorry, y’all, Hot Fuss is a good album, and Radiohead fucks. I was an outcast in a group of outsiders, so you know the ultimate fucking pariah. Even then I was cool with you. You know, turning on me because you had a bad trip and found out that there were a few more ghosts in the attic than you thought were shitty. You know what’s shittier,

turning Taylor's back on me. Never reaching out to Ethan, leaving Liz to whatever Lonewolf shit she's doing now. You burned everything and then you left. The person who put out my fires, he's-" Jenny chokes on the word, "He's gone."

"I wanted to talk to you at the funeral, try to put all of this behind us. I wanted a fresh start, I still do.."

Jenny scoffs, "That would be nice."

"Can't we just try again?"

Jenny sighs, "No, I don't think we can. Ethan's gone and everything that we were is gone with him."

Jo snickers, "Gone with a spider-man bike."

"Yeah, I can't be there for you Jo. But I need you to know that everything will be alright."

Jo shifts her focus from the camera to some buttons on her screen, as she clicks away the tears resume.

"Alright Jenny, I've muted your audio and subtracted the tab. I can see you or hear you anymore, it'll make it easier for me if I don't have to see your face" Jo says calmly.

Jenny leans forward in her chair, she inspects the uneasy casualty in Jo's declaration. Jo is sitting straight up in her chair staring a thousand yards into the camera. Patiently she reaches into a cabinet below the cherrytop desk in which the laptop lays, she pulls out a revolver and immediately resumes her focus towards the camera. With little haste, Jenny grabs her phone and begins dialing Taylors number. As she does Jo begins to speak:

"I-" Jo chuckles, "I haven't been a hundred percent honest with you since we started this call, I think I started this call in a naive attempt to salvage a part of my life that I knew was all but a distant memory.."

Jenny's phone dials once before immediately sending her to Taylor's voicemail. "Taylor you need to answer it's Jo she has a gun!" Jenny quickly moves to dial again.

"You see, since we last talked, I've torn everything to shreds. I don't want to think, but I can't help it. At first I thought they were just the little thoughts you get sometimes when you're in bed and remember how you fucked up when you were a kid and you're embarrassed for a little bit. Just those little thoughts you get to keep you humble you know? But they kept coming up, whenever I would get dressed, whenever I would go to work, whenever I was at home alone. They just kept coming up, and when they left I just got really worried about everyone hating me. Sooner than later I became obsessed, and I realized whenever I look around it becomes more obvious to me that everyone is suffering. It's my fault, I was the split, you were right. I had four people that I really cared about and look at them now. You're all alone, Liz is a social albatross, Taylor-" Jo begins to stumble on her words, "he can't even look me in the eye anymore. Everyday he comes home from work and I've become a chore for him, he is so exhausted and I ruined him. I made him bitter." Jo begins to sob hysterically as she raises the revolver to her brow.

Taylor's phone sends Jenny's call directly to voicemail again, "Taylor please pick up!"

"He doesn't love me anymore, and honestly I don't blame him because I hate myself. If it wasn't for me-" Jo's voice drops as her head falls into her lap. Jenny looks up from her phone to notice this calm moment of sorrow, the audio is silent. Gradually the aching wails are picked up, until Jo resumes thunderously, "If it wasn't for me Ethan would still be here, I killed him!"

Jenny freezes, her eyelids become warm as tears begin to run down her face. Suddenly, a light hits the face of Jo as she turns her focus to the right of her desktop, "Taylor's home, goodbye old friend"

Jenny screams at her laptop, “JO! NO! PLEASE!”

Jenny then changes her focus back to her phone as she dials ‘9-1-1’.

“JO WHAT THE HELL” Taylor yells from the computer screen.

Jenny clicks the green call button.

“911 what is your emergency”

“I’M WORTH IT!” Jo yells from the screen.

“My friend has a gun and I think she is going to hurt herself or her partner” Jenny urgently informs.

“everything will be alright,” Jo calmly says.

****BANG****

“Oh my god, she shot herself!” Jenny cries out.

“What is the address?” the despondent calmly asks.

Jo sobbingly, “2112 Barchetta Ave.”

Taylor moves toward the visibility of the camera and carefully picks up Jo’s body, he looks down upon her and begins to quietly weep. The tears begin to drip down from his chin and fall down into the pool of blood on the tile flooring below.

“oh Taylor” Jenny gently utters.

His right hand moves to push the hair stuck to the front of her face behind her left ear, gently grazing the bullet wound in the center of her forehead. Calmly he reaches to the floor and picks up the revolver.

“TAYLOR NO! HE’S GRABBING THE GUN!” Jenny yells.

“Ma’am please try to stay calm, we’re sending a patrol car your way right now!”

Taylor raises the gun to his temple and lets out a deep sigh.

“HE’S GONNA KILL HIMSELF”

Taylor squeezes down on the trigger.

CLICK

Jenny lets out a screech.

Taylor lets out another sigh.

CLICK

“TAYLOR PLEASE STOP!!” Jenny begs.

CLICK

CLICK

CLICK

CLICK

Ethan
'Rivers & Roads'
 ?.?.????

Shortly after his paranormal experience with Liz, Ethan finds himself sitting on a pier back in the afterlife. He looks out ahead of him and notices a crystal blue lake, that appears to be glimmering despite the darkness around over top. Ethan looks over his right shoulder and notices Peter sitting next to him gazing at the lake.

Ethan jumps back, "Peter what the hell?!"

"Hello, Ethan."

"How long have you been here?"

"Since you left the physical world and were placed on the pier." Peter calmly replies.

"That was like ten seconds ago!"

"I know."

Ethan begins kicking his legs over the pier Ethan asks, "Real talk, this place isn't heaven?"

"Ethan, we live not in heaven or hell, sort of a place in between."

"You mean like limbo?" Ethan asked.

"In sorts, but with limbo there is an inherent punishment that comes with it. This place is no punishment this is just a place to wait."

"So how do I know that you're not trying to pull one over on me" Ethan gasps, "this IS hell!"

Peter sighs, "Trust me there is a hell, I've seen it, this, this, isn't it."

"That's the closest I ever think I will get to a trust me bro from a divine figure." Ethan chuckles".

"It's just that sometimes when people pass they do so before anyone else that matters to them.

Nothing that they can control it's just how it is. When that happens there's not always an opportunity to say goodbye before walking off into what comes next" Peter explains.

"So this isn't what happens next?"

"It is" Peter confirms.

"But what's after this?"

"I guess that's up to you. Right now you and I reside in the waiting room for all life..." Peter pauses, "All decent life at least. For instance, we have dogs and select cats. On the other hand we do not allow mosquitoes or Nazis, they go straight to hell."

"What about Nazi mosquitos?" Ethan asks.

"Super hell." the pair chuckle.

Ethan looks over off the side of the pier and notices a pile of rocks. He moves over and picks up a smooth gray rock and puts it in the palm of his hand. He grips it by its corners with his middle finger and thumb. Slowly he leans his arm back, then quickly launches the stone across the lake. The stone skips across the lake,

PLOP

PLOP

PLOP

PLOP

The stone continues to skip down the lake at a steady pace, never losing steam, skipping over the horizon.

Ethan jumps into the air "Little League finally paying off! Peter, did you see that?"

"Ethan."

"Do y'all have rec leagues here?" Ethan gleefully asks.

"Those are infinite skipping stones," Peter replies

"Couldn't have let me just have that tiny win?" Ethan gathers a small pile of the bones and readjusts to the pier.

Peter scoffs, "Anyway, what I'm trying to tell you is that this place was created to offer the recently deceased whatever they're looking for before the end."

Ethan looks down and begins to breathe heavily "What do you mean the end?"

"Well Ethan, you died at a very young age but so it's probably a little hard for you to grasp but there are some people who have been alive a very long time and for some people, existence isn't necessarily all it is to you. Some people I have lived a life that they're comfortable with them if their story has been told and when it comes to that point it's for them to conclude."

"The hell do you mean 'conclude'?!" Ethan exclaims.

"I mean cease to exist, finally get some rest. It's a harsh cruel thing, to exist. It's exhausting for some people, it becomes very cumbersome to deal with some of the realities that you're forced to experience. So what we offer here is a few alternatives; three, three to be specific."

"What are they?" Ethan asks.

"Well the first is reincarnation, you get another go-round. Maybe this life was wanted it to be but still feel as if there's something that your soul and your spirit can do. So we offered the chance to go again different bodies different experiences you know randomize everything, nationality, class, gender. It's actually really interesting to see what certain souls do when everything's different for them at the beginning of the story. Even though they're different people they still find this funny way of being who they truly are, it's special that way."

"Ok, what's the second option?"

"So you may have noticed that this place is Billy catered to any of the specific religions nor beliefs that you may have encountered when you're on Earth."

"You know that has popped up a couple of times going, to be honest with you" Ethan retorts.

"Well yeah, it's kind of because everybody's got at least a little bit of it right, and the person who I work for realized that unless everybody was 100% right, nobody would like it. He also decided nobody should go to hell for not knowing what comes after. So initially, we tried gaslighting everyone who came up that their religion was correct. What they did is they used, that room that the recently deceased must go. You know, the one where I had you type out your justification for not going to hell, the one that gets you into the afterlife. Well, for a period of time that was actually the waiting room for the waiting room! We would just keep people locked in their rooms and then we had to do giant orientations with different subsets of religions at different times. But we could only do that for so long because we had different parties of very similar religions and we got a couple mixed up on a few different occasions. We're not perfect you know."

"I- what happened when you mixed up the religions?"

Peter sighs "We have had thirty-six different holy wars."

"Thirty-six?!" Ethan asked astonished.

"Yeah, so we just decided to keep it a complete secret from everybody. Just refer to it as the waiting room and you know what people, people seem pretty content with it."

"I haven't been here very long but I can tell you people are definitely very upset with it" Ethan mutters.

Peter deepens his voice "What was that?"

"Nothing, nothing, continue"

"Anyways, the second option is can we call the Sea of Dreams, the Lazarus Pit, the final baptism." Peter Bellows dramatically.

"Sad to see no marketers made it to the afterlife"

"I'm just going to keep being a dick about this I'm just trying to give you the lowdown."

"Lowdown?" Ethan asks sarcastically.

"You know I can stop?"

"No, no, no, no, I'm sorry! I'm sorry! My bad, my bad."

"Why do you repeat yourself so much?" Peter asks.

"Why do you try to use slang?" Ethan fires back.

"You know I've only ever existed in the afterlife. The complexities of your rhetoric are lost on me, I've met many people from different eras of time and history. Every 100 years or so the dialect changes so insanely, it's hard to keep up. The further we keep going down I'm in space, the quicker rhetoric seems to change. I'm just trying to get on your level."

Ethan cringes, "So the afterlife puddle?"

"Let's just call it the Sea of Dreams" Peter suggests.

"Ok by me, how does it work?"

"After you've taken your time here in the waiting room. You can walk into the sea-"

"Gross" Ethan interrupts.

"What do you mean gross?"

"Are you watching me going to this sea naked?"

"No, what implied that?" Peter asks disgustedly.

"So then I'm going to have to wear socks, I don't want wet socks."

"You don't you don't have to wear socks"

"So then I will be naked." Ethan declares.

"I'm confused, do you want to be naked?"

"Not necessarily."

"Anyway, once you walk in the sea you're into the next plain."

"...and what is that?" Ethan asks.

"Whatever you wanted to be, received dreams is something you can get lost and you can live in the what could have been though it can be anything is a possibility. You can live out of life then wanted to live, be with the people who you wanted to be with."

"But will they be real?"

"Sure."

"I don't like that."

"Well if you want, a lot of people don't don't go in until they're done. And what they choose to see, is nothing at all. They choose, conclusion."

"That sounds lonely, you're either stuck in a dream or gone forever." Ethan sighs.

"Not necessarily, you can choose to enter the Sea of Dreams with others. However, you only have one opportunity to do that. If you are touching someone as you enter, will share a reality into the forever."

"So when my friends get here, I can take one in and then come out when the next one gets here, rinse, and repeat?"

"No, it doesn't work like that. You only got one shot to go in the lake, after that, you're in the lake."

"So I just have to wait?"

"Yeah, but you have me here with ya."

"Love you Peter but I'm just gonna need some time to myself for a while," Ethan says somberly.

"I understand, if you need me I'm going to be helping some other new residents"

??? Years Later

Ever since from the Paranormal Ethan remained on the dock. There were some instances where he would leave and meet Peter at a bar, but largely I'm in the waiting room, what stationed on that pier. Sometimes to skip stones across the Sea of Dreams, but this time in the afterlife was spent in solace. You considered if did you jump into the sea of Dreams into it alone, remember him. Did Jenny move on? He realized that most of his life spent committing chicanery, it was all jokes nothing was ever serious and you let life pass and by. He didn't feel great about she felt of his departure. If he'd only had more time been with Jenny. But he didn't take it seriously he was music or scooters off of bridges he was too busy making it a good time, ignoring that it couldn't last. Jenny had been robbed, of decency her entire life. Regardless she was still there with him, even universes a part. One thing he couldn't find was how to find all the music that he wanted to listen to, it's annoying that you would think something so simple would be so readily available. Instead we had live music in the waiting place, which fit and it does have its perks, but you really only wanted to hear one song. Every hour he repeated the parts that he knew, "Rivers and roads, rivers and roads, rivers till I reach you."

Today he felt more defeated than ever, something in the air something, something in the lake. As long as he'd been coming to this pier the water never moved, not a ripple. The only times you notice even a hint of movement is when he the stones across the lake into the horizon. Today the water was alive, this was no longer a lake. The sea has come alive, waves crash across the shoreline the foam marching towards the pier. Ethan knew that today, was the day. The one thing you haven't yet discovered is, what for? He reached into his pocket and pulled a pager, quickly he moved to Peter and clicked typed 'Yo something's happening what's the word? -xoxo Ethan.' Immediately he gets a reply, 'One of your friends kicked the bucket, don't know which one yet.'

Ethan cheers, then takes a moment, "Oh yeah one of my friends died. Shit."

He looks down and begins typing again,

'Can you find out who it is?' and then sends the message. Then quickly again Peter response

'Upper management is telling me it's someone else's case, gonna see what I can find out. Meet at the entrance.'

Ethan looks down and exclaims, "Dope time for a quest!"

He begins to journey away from the pier, passing the brick walkway looking around the town. As he walks off the beach into the walkway he notices that streets are brighter than usual lights are on and seem to have a certain glimmer, any that he had seen before. In the distance he began to hear a great roar. Almost as if a hundred people were cheering, it was a celebration, he began think to himself, "Damn they really do pull out all the stops."

In the distance he saw rate of people all dressed in the most elegant of attire. Designer suits and exquisite dresses, throwing beads, singing and, dancing in the streets. He looked up in admiration for a moment, he smiled and thought it might finally be time. Closed his eyes, and clear as day he saw her. Of the two sitting down together, she was directly at him, and he was lost. There were no words that he could think to say, he couldn't say anything. All he can do with admire her, he opened his eyes in the crowd is marching closer. The halt was unrelenting, unmovable, and it was in his way. The only to the entrance. Like a deer he froze, the crowd continued their march. Inching forward with no hesitation. The mass finally had faces, but they cannot see. They were too focused on marching, Ethan still frozen watch is a move forward as a stampede. Now only inches away, even closes his eyes, braces for impact, whispering to himself "Rivers and roads."

This time as he closes his eyes he doesn't see Jenny the way he did before, this time she's crying. It's the night her mother told her she can never return home, banished, exiled from her family. Because of something she hadn't even done, she was alone. Helpless, just like Ethan now. Ethan opens his eyes again and the crowd is only a few feet away. He lets out a deep sigh, and prepares for impact. Suddenly it feels a push from the side, Ethan hits the ground shoulder first. He lets out a grunt, and then feels something grab him by the arm and drag him into the alley way. A voice speaks up "Dude are you alright?"

Ethan looks up and notices man about his age, no more than you're too younger. He's breathing heavily and waiting for a response. "Yeah, thank you. Sorry I'm just a little disoriented today. I'm supposed to be seeing one of my friends today and I got caught off guard by the parade."

The stranger chuckles, "First parade?"

Ethan sighs "Yeah, what is it for?"

"I don't know, I don't keep up with these things. Probably one of the Supreme Court Justices overturned Roe v Wade died."

"Roe v. Wade was overturned?" Ethan gasps

"Where have you been?"

"Over at the pier, lamenting my early demise, you know, dead people things. My name is Ethan, by the way." he puts his hand out.

The stranger shakes his hand, "You can call me Frankie."

"So Frankie, why aren't you celebrating with the masses? Seems like the day for partying."

Frankie chuckles, "Well, I've never been one for politics, celebrating a stranger's death seems kind of douchey, and I don't want to be responsible for stampeding random dead people"

Ethan smiles, " I guess that's fair."

"I can lead you to the entrance, if you need help getting there" Frankie offers.

"I know the way, but the company never hurts. Plus, I haven't made a single friend here besides my guide Peter."

The two begin to walk through the alley way side by side. Ethan looks around and noticed the buildings around him, they are all made of either brick or tin. Colored I'm bright white with either a dark blue or red trim.

"Peter still won't tell me why they decided on a harbor style town"

"My guide, Shannon told me it was because it put people in a good mood for soup"

Ethan stops walking and gasps.

"Yeah, I was also surprised at the explanation being soup."

"No man, I mean the soup thing is wild but, your guide is a lady!?" Ethan exclaims.

"No it's a dude named Shannon."

"Oh." Ethan sighs.

"Come on dude, don't want to be late."

"Oh shit, did somebody get here for you too?" Ethan asks.

"Yeah, man I don't wanna miss it either." Frankie begins walking forward.

Ethan chases up behind, "Is it like your first person?"

"No it's not"

"Well where are the others" Ethan asks still catching up.

"Either in the lake or going around again" Frankie grunts.

"Why didn't you go with them?"

Frankie halts and sighs "Because, none of them were her."

Ethan stops next to him, "Oh."

The pair move over to a bench and sit down, Frankie moves his head down into his palms, "I've been here so long man, too long. I've actually gotten to see a lot of my friends and a lot of my family, each time I saw him another one, it was a happy time. I died young, and just never expected to see me again. It was great to see them and the time with him was precious, but still I loved full lives after. They moved on, which is good which is what I wanted you don't want them to hold on and think feel shitty because of you. But you know, they knew it wasn't them I was coming to see. I was still alive I was bit of an eccentric man..."

"You were an asshole?" Ethan asks.

"Harsh"

"No, no, no, I mean same" Ethan exclaims.

"To be fair I did meant more of a jackass. Anyway, towards the end I got sick, pushed away everybody I loved and started living just from me. At the very end, I saw her one last time. Despite, everything that I had done she still loved me. I died knowing that I had wasted all that time thinking only of myself and for what I got to play a little bit more music, create a legacy?"

Frankie scoffs, "No I just wasted time."

Ethan looks at Frankie for a moment, he can feel the same pain. The vacancy, tiredness, the weight of nothing. That's all he's been able to feel since he got here. "Frankie, can I level with you?"

Frankie looks up at Ethan, his eyes are red, swollen, his eyelids holding back tears like dams to the soul.

Ethan whimpers, "I'm scared."

Finally the tears begin to flow, both Frankie and Ethan cry together as the parade marches by.

Ethan speaks up again, "I'm scared that one of my friends are going to get here and I won't be happy to see them, I'll leave them to be alone like I was alone. I'm afraid that as soon as they get here they'll go in the lake and I'll be alone again. I'm worried that I was too late, that Jenny never found what she deserved, someone that loved her and supported her. Who she can be with, that she never got her happy ending."

Frankie coughed, he rubs his nose with his forearm and wipes away his tears.

"I believed every word you said, until you said those last few words. You don't wish that you had a happy ending without you, that's bullshit, you just want her here to be with you now. You want, no, you need this to be your happy ending."

Ethan shakes his head, "No, no, no"

"You don't give a shit about her happy ending." Frankie mutters.

"Shut up."

"No, all you want is for her to need you. You could give two shits about the rest of her life. You just want this to be about you, a girl you say you love destined to live only for you. What a waste."

"That's not true!" Ethan yells.

"I think you're just scared about the reality, when she gets here. You'll be lucky if she remembers your name. You were a fling when she was 20-years-old, she remembered you for a few years but now you're nothing to her, just a ghost of a ghost."

Ethan stands, and breaths out through his nose. He fills a pressure through his stomach, moving through his arms into his hand. As he closes his hand into fist he looks towards Frankie.

Frankie smirks, "Face it you're just like me, an asshole who died too soon"

Ethan swings his fist into the cheek of Frankie, "No!" Ethan shouts.

Frankie plummets on to the ground from the punch and he yells out, "I think you are, and I think you'll resent her for her happiness" he kicks out his right leg and hits Ethan in the shin. Ethan's knees give way as he falls to the ground by Frankie's side. Quickly Frankie moves on top of Ethan pinning his arms down and begins clubbing blows upon the defenseless Ethan.

Frankie shouts, "She'll be just like Suzy! Sure, she loved you while you were alive! But now that you're dead she'll move on. Have kids, a family-"

Ethan coughs and weakly speaks, "A life without you."

Frankie's arms turn heavy, as he timbers to the floor. Slowly he grabs his knees, as he begins to weep.

Ethan feels a buzzing in his pocket and pulls out his pager, he receives a message from Peter.

'The only info I got is a woman whose name starts with a J'.

Ethan exhales and presses a button on the pager, after clicking the button the bruises from his knuckle, shin, and face are instantly healed. He picks himself off the ground, looks up to the sky and sighs, "Alright it's either Jenny or Jo".

From the ground, Frankie speaks up, "It won't be Jenny, you'll have to wait just like me. You'll grow bitter, resentful, just like me. Face it, there is no hope for guys like us."

Ethan walks over and kneels down by Frankie, "I'm sorry, you lost yourself. Just know that it wasn't your fault. She moved on, it was probably the hardest thing she ever had to do. But do you want to know the biggest difference between you and I? You got your goodbye. Sure you're pissed about the outcome, but the facts remain, you knew you were going to die and you said

goodbye. I never got that, I went quickly, without warning. I'm not looking for a happy ending, I don't deserve it. No one deserves a happy ending, all I want is to say goodbye."

Frankie looks up and scowls at Ethan, "You fucking child."

Ethan moves his head so his eyes parallel Frankie's, "Goodbye, Frankie." Ethan chuckles, "You see, I feel better already!"

As Ethan walks away, it has a gentle smile struck across his face. While typically in other parts of his story a smile is to be expected from a delinquent such as Ethan his afterlife has not produced the level of brightness that creates such an emotion. Yet as he walks through this small New England town that Peter calls the afterlife, he feels hopeful. Not that he's felt hopeless, defeated more like. Closure is something that he had never fathomed, the idea of it comforted him. To begin to notice some of the imperfections as he walked through the alleyways, some of the bricks paved improperly sticking out of the ground, it's funny he thought that after he died he'd go to someplace that was lawful and some kind of way, either for punishment or for pleasure and yet around him is chaos. Not a dream nor a nightmare, a fever dream, women dancing on ceiling tops it's been a weird sort of chim chimney kind of way about them. Men on the same ceiling tops jump off just to experience the rush not having a fear of death. It listens to the music feels the streets, horns blaring, drums tapping away. He's never noticed all his life, it seems extraordinary, had he wasted a second lifetime? The thought of that didn't upset him, it made him chuckle, I'm goofy is it to waste your first life acting a fool taking nothing seriously, only to miss the second life over-analyzing the first? He laughs for a moment to himself, "Almost forgot what that sounded like" Looking up Ethan notices Peter standing right in front of him. Ethan's eyes widen as yells "PETER!" Ethan runs to Peter arms spread out to embrace him.

Peter opens his arms to hold Ethan, awkwardly on the back. "Hey, buddy you okay?"

"Long day"

"Ethan, we don't have da-"

"Shut up, Peter" Ethan gently exhales.

Peter slowly releases his arms, "Ethan, we gotta go if you want to meet up with your friend. She's almost out of the decision room"

Ethan looks up at Peter, "Then why are we standing around hugging, my God if you love me why haven't you just kissed me already?"

Peter looks at Ethan dumbfounded.

"I'm kidding let's go!" Ethan exclaims.

The two start to walk to the entranceway, it's only a little bit further, and Ethan begins to kick his feet on the ground closer they get.

"What is it, Ethan?"

"There's I gotta ask you, but before I ask I just need to let you know, I don't care who comes first. Jo or Jenny, I love them both. I know that they love me, even if they've lived full lives it's just going to be nice to see my friend again. I'm excited for them to meet you too! I realize that I've been down since I've been here, which is unfair to you and unfair to me. It's also unfair to them, they expect that there could be some kind of growth or at least I would have, and wanted to apologize to you for being a bit of a piss baby"

Peter sighs, "You have nothing to be sorry for, you died young that's traumatic. While I think you're a spaz, I think you're a good man as well. A good friend at that, so Ethan, what is your question?"

Ethan takes a deep breath, "Who died first?"

"It was Jo"

Ethan smiles "Are adventures will be legendary."

As the two arrive at the entrance, Ethan notices a guitar the song sounds familiar, but like nothing he had ever heard. He turns from the entrance door to a woman strumming and she begins to sing:

"A year from now, we'll all be gone

All our friends will move away

And they're goin' to better places

But our friends will be gone away"

Peter looks at Ethan, "Hey Ethan, what are you doing, we're going to miss her." The words fly by Ethan's head, entranced by the song in front of him. The woman continues to the next verse:

"Nothin' is as it has been

And I miss your face like hell

And I guess it's just as well

But I miss your face like hell

Been talkin' 'bout the way things change

And my family lives in a different state

If you don't know what to make of this

Then we will not relate

So if you don't know what to make of this

Then we will not relate"

"I LOVE THAT SONG" a familiar voice shouts from behind.

Ethan slowly moves his head back, for his brain to verify that the voice did indeed belong to Jenny.

Ethan opens his mouth, and the words fall out "Rivers and Roads, Rivers and Roads, Rivers till I reach you"

Jenny runs and grabs onto Ethan with both arms squeezing as tight as she can.

"I thought about you, every day since you've been away," Jenny says.

"I know I never said it, Jenny, I love you. If you found someone else and lived a very happy life without me I'm so happy for you. You deserve so much better than the world ever gave you, but since I've been here I didn't have any real regrets. Well except for letting you know, that my life is in service to you, you for my inspiration, you are my hope and you are my dreams. Jenny I love you, for every breath, every blink, anything I'd do it all for you. I'm sorry I never told you any of that when it matters, but it matters to me that you know that I love you so completely"

Jenny's eyes begin to pour oceans, and her mouth smiles from ear to ear, "Ditto" she laughs and he joins in, then quickly she moves her face into his, and the two kiss for the first time in either life.

Peter speaks up from a couple of feet away "Soooo this is Jenny, I'll presume"

Ethan and Jenny giggle, "This is she" Jenny answers.

"Can I ask you a question?" Peter says sternly.

"Like more than one question? Cuz that was a question."

"Dear God, you are the same person. What was it like, life after Ethan? I've talked with your boy here for well since he's been here. I know who you were, when he was there, it's from his perspective but who are you now?"

Jenny's smile turns to a look of concentration, she ponders for a moment until her face reverts to a smile, "A lot changed, but a lot didn't change as well. I was so focused on what it was like without him, not by the time I started trying to live life without him I found that it was what I made of it. Sometimes good sometimes bad, I met other people I always thought of him. He was there for me, and even though he was gone I felt obligated to be there for him too. The thing is to learn to leave someone's memory because it's owed to them, it's just the way life feels good. Smiling Weezer album covers or I'm getting pissed off at really stupid things like the importance of Keytar in the 20th century, they're little things that can make me happy. It wasn't about refusing to live because he was gone we're never codependent or anything like that, far from it. But when he first went away I was so convinced that I should have done more I should have been there with him. Time passes on and you learn to become less resentful, feeling it becomes weaker, it subsides. Then one day you just start doing the things that you love to do, and you still listen to music all the time, I stopped listening to the sad stuff that made me sad just to be sad and I started listening to the things that we would listen to to be happy and it took me a while to realize I could be happy. It's funny, I would say I'd lived a depressing life. But because of the time that I spent with him, I learned ways to it will let go release, and feel some Joy. Because I always watched TV and movies, and when a character would die, the counterpart would say 'The time with you was the best time of my life'. For so long I thought that just meant the rest was shit, that the best time in their life meant that a clean house was worth living. So I was ready to sulk, for years. Then all the Jo stuff happened and I realize that when you get stuck it's really hard to get unstuck. So I just learned to keep moving, and when I was moving I started to find my groove again, started doing the things that I like to do with Ethan, and surely enough life figured away. I didn't necessarily look for love, but that wasn't my goal. I didn't feel that weight

anymore, and just now when I saw him again I realized that the weight was still there it wasn't heavy, it wasn't what it was before. It became subtle, which is weird. I thought it was gone, but it wasn't it just changed. I think I learned that there isn't ever an end there's just a difference, now my life is over it didn't end just changed to this. I don't think that it started when Ethan left, it was just a different weight changing into sadness. There's a heavy feeling and we've all felt it, but we've love strongly very alien I think it's the same feeling just from a different place. I don't think it's the emotion that's strong, I think that's just you. I think it's your soul, and when you're soul feels strongly you feel the weight."

Peter steps backward and inhales for a moment laughing he exhales "Well that was, profound"

Jenny smiles, "I don't think so, it's just my take on all this chaos"

"So how did a smart girl like you fall for a schmuck like that" Ethan laughs gesturing his index finger at Ethan.

Ethan performs a little curtsy and joyously declares, "Well my Charisma and two-time Oscar-nominated smile"

"He's funny, sweet, a little dumb, and very honest. The kind of person who would stick with you one else would, also he said I could be in a Ska band" Jenny giggles.

Ethan takes a step back, grows heavy for a moment he reaches down to grab his knees. Jenny and Peters's voices become dull.

"Ethan?" Jenny faintly asks.

"Ethan?" her voice growing a little more concerned.

Ethan looks up, and directs his attention to Peter, "I thought you said Jo died first."

Peter talking exhausted exhale, "I did"

Jenny turns to Ethan, "What is it?"

Ethan still focused on Peter, "Why haven't I seen her?"

"Ethan this is a happy occasion we should be celebrating" Peter quickly retorts

"Peter, where is Jo?"

"I'm so sorry" Peter sighs.

Ethan falls to the ground his legs giving away, Jenny turns to Peter defiantly asking, "Well where is she?!"

Peter looks down and sighs, "She's in hell, Jo, went to hell"