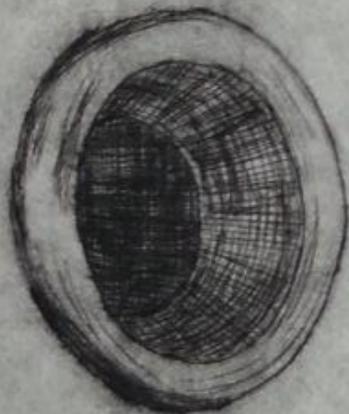


*j o s e p h   q u i n l a n ' s*

# THE KIN





*– the kin –*

*written by joseph quinlan*



*Dedicated to all the young men  
who have seen what they cannot un-see...  
To the Lost Boys.*



PART ONE

# PETE & LEO



*CHAPTER I***DANNY****1**

“Do you think they’ll find anything?”

Pete whispered back, his head was slightly stuck between the wood balusters, “Shh! Wait, what?”

“I said, do you think they’ll find anything?”

“Like what?”

Leo gave a muted huff, “You know . . . Like, aliens or something.” Leo’s legs were small enough to fit between the balusters. His feet hung out over the doorway to the basement. A rather small child, his blue, footed pajamas still fit him despite their immaturity for an eight year old. The blue spanned an ocean in which all varieties of colorful and mismatched fish species swam together freely. Leo, however, was too young to notice the depiction of such an unusual ecosystem. Pete still struggled to get his head unstuck.

“Aliens? Hell if I know. Now keep it down, dummy.” Pete, a masterful sneak, made sure to keep his whispers below the volume of television.

*“Yes, it’s true! They’ve landed successfully. I say it again: Chung and his crew are the first of mankind to walk this terrain . . .”* exclaimed the newscasters at low-volume from the television. Pete’s blonde hair finally shifted and his head was free.

“Maybe all the dinosaurs moved there. Their job is probably really dangerous.” As he said this, Leo stared worriedly at the screen down in the living room. Half of its picture was obscured by dad’s chair, and when he leaned forward the whole screen was blocked, resulting in a shimmering halo around his half-naked head.

*“They will spend the next few days collecting rock samples and exploring the shaded surface of this fourth heavenly body from the Sun. The flag is planted; Mars is hereby claimed by this incredible team of Chinese astronauts.”* As the newscasters announced this, a foreign national anthem began to play.

“Screw China,” Pete murmured too loudly. And in one quick jump, dad leapt out of his chair and spotted the two down the hall.

## 2

“Do you think aliens know we’re here?” clucked Leo’s voice through the moonlit bedroom.

“Go to sleep, Leo. Or dad’s gonna get mad again.” Pete’s moan rose somewhere from the shadowed corner of his bed. Leo’s eyes gaped wide trying to make out his face in the dark.

“That stuff makes me really think, ya know?” Leo said, hoping for a responsive moan from the darkened corner, but he wasn’t surprised when it never came. “Surely, you gotta be just a little curious, Pete...”

“No. I’m not. I’m tired and my ass hurts from gettin’ spanked. Oh, but *you* wouldn’t understand!” Leo watched as Pete’s arm swung, cutting frustrated through the moonlight. “Apparently, *you* are too young to share in the guilt. Pisses me off.” A deep breath let out from the corner, “Who cares. Goodnight.” Leo spent the following silence in deep thought. He first wondered if Pete was really mad at him. Who knows, but with a night of sleep, Pete could get over pretty much anything. He recalled one time when he mistakenly left Pete’s baseball card binder out on their trash can on an unfortunate Thursday, and it was gone forever. That was probably the maddest Pete had ever gotten at Leo. Nearly a year ago, he remembered how Pete had a tremendous temper compared to other kids his age (perhaps Leo hadn’t the vocabulary to call it ‘tremendous’). Leo remembered the terror he felt with Pete swinging his fists at him on the driveway. Anyway, Mom pulled up before any real damage could be done. Just a bruise on Leo’s cheek from Pete’s punches and a skinned elbow from being pushed. But Leo remembered how Pete wasn’t too sore at him the next day and even walked him to his friend Samuel’s house without causing trouble.

Leo sat up in the bottom bunk as he thought of these things, staring out the window at the moonlit grass. He noticed the subtle sound of the July breeze breaking against the roof tiles. The gusts of wind

pushed intermittently against the house siding, yielding creaks and shallow booms. Feeling chilly, he remembered leaving his blanket in the “Hovel,” a fort he and Pete had built by the creek.

“Pete, I’m really cold,” he finally bleated.

“Shit, Leo. Will you shut your mouth!” Pete’s exclamation was dampened due to his face being buried in his pillow.

“Mom said don’t say that word!” Leo was shocked as his voice rose above a whisper.

“No shit, Carmen Sandiego,” Pete’s muffled retort stabbed Leo’s innocent ears.

“I’m serious! I’m going to tell on you!”

“What the hell are you crying about, Leo?”

“I’m cold, I said. Can I take some of Danny’s blankets?” Leo looked up to the top bunk.

“Uh, NO! Absolutely not, Leo. That’s Danny’s stuff, you dummy!”

“But he’s not here—” Leo began reaching up to the top bunk, but Pete suddenly jumped up from his bed and pinned Leo’s arm to the bunks wooden beam.

“Don’t you dare touch Danny’s shit, Leo, or I’ll beat the filling out of you right here!” Pete’s syllables were so sharp and strong that spit flew from the tips of his teeth. Scared now and probably tired, Leo began to cry, and Pete released his hold on him. “Oh, shuddup already!” Pete hushed Leo. “You’re going to wake them up!” For a few moments, Leo just sat and cried as Pete stood at the room’s center. Then Leo admitted the true source of his tears.

“Pete, I miss Danny!” Leo blurted out in frightened tears, but Pete quickly pressed his palm over Leo’s mouth.

“I said shut up, Leo! You’re crying like a big baby!” Pete whispered sharply. Releasing him, Leo collapsed back on his bed and brought his knees up by his chin. Pete walked to the window. “Besides, how could you miss him? You were too little. You hardly even knew him, you dummy!”

“I was six! I can remember him! He was so nice to me.” As soon as Leo finished this sentence he returned to an even more fetal pose with his knees pressed against his ears. Nevertheless, Pete persisted.

“Well he wasn’t such a big baby like you, Leo. He was a much better little brother than you. You’re such a puss sometimes.” Before he could respond, Leo’s head popped up, poised like a cautious meerkat’s.

“SHHH!” Leo and Pete remained silent, waiting for a confirming noise. But Pete’s patience was short-lived.

“Oh, that’s how you change the subject? Pretend there’s a no—“

“I hear something!” Leo hushed. Again they sat in silence.

“It’s mom or dad, Leo. Or it could be Natalie. She always comes home late.” After a pause of silence, a soft, grinding sound began its crescendo. Something was at the door. The grinding became so loud that Leo and even Pete retreated underneath their sheets, keeping their wide eyes locked on the door. Leo imagined a candy cane scraping the wood grain slowly.

“It’s the Grinch, Pete!”

“What? The Grinch? You’re afraid of the Grinch?” Pete’s question rang with anger.

“He has long, green, splindly-fingers, Pete! He’s clawing at the door!” In a flash, the door swung open, and the darkly figure of a teenage girl leapt into the middle of the room.

“BOOO!!” The boys let out a brief, muffled scream into their bedsheets, and the girl began laughing as quietly as possible. “Ha! I got you guys! That’s what you get for staying up talkin’, you scaredy cats!”

Pete jumped up from his bed in a fury, “Natalie, get yer ass out of our room!”

*CHAPTER II***SILVERFISH****1**

“What?”

“Lookie here! What a beauty”

“What Pete?” yelled Leo from the bedroom. “Is my stool in there? I need to brush my teeth.”

Pete looked back into the bathroom mirror. “I’m not talking to you. And no, I don’t see it.” Pete tugged on the skin under his eye in admiration. It shone a brilliant purple with a limerick perimeter.

“She’s a beauty.” Every once in a while, Pete would taunt one of his older, eighth-grade friends to punch him in the eye. While Pete claimed it never hurt and that he could take any of these older kids on in a proper fight, his desire to be bruised and battered made these friends uncomfortable. Scanning down from the bruise, Pete’s eyes met his nemesis. Freckles. “Dammit. They’re spreading.”

“What’s that??” hollered Leo.

“Freckles aren’t a disease, Pete” a voice came from the outer hallway.

“Shut up, Natalie! Nobody asked you... or likes you.” He mumbled that last part. Then something crept in the corner of Pete’s swollen vision, and he thought to himself. *What do you think it is? What is it? What is it? ...Don’t look... Guess.* The game began, and Pete tried his best to close his eyes all the way. *A bug? 10 points if you swat it with your bare hand. But what kind of bug? A spider.* His eyes reopened and

glanced over to the wall. *Ab. A silverfish. Little bastard.* Now, the insect was not actually a silverfish, or a *lepisma saccharina*... it was actually a *scutigera coleoptrata*: a house centipede. But who cares. According to Pete's experience, this was called a silverfish. Go find a picture online... you just might squirm. And silverfish especially troubled Pete. Pete was tough. Pete was independent. This was who he had built himself to be, but he had to go to extra lengths to overcome certain dispositions and circumstances that, though he held much hurt and hatred for them, were now part of him... they were inherently Pete. But here, something quite challenging faced him: his fear of everything that crept, crawled, or slithered. According to Pete, the silverfish was the king of all creepy crawlers. You see, this insect has distressing features. Particularly distressing are its legs and antennae which radiate from every end of its abdomen and thorax and stretch out in all directions. Its two compound eyes aren't enough. It needs its wiry legs and absurdly long antennae to see more... It must know more... It must stretch in every direction to be sure of its environment. To see all it can... It is the most curious insect; it knows no fear... it knows no boundary. It even prefers the dark moist crevices of our world over the wide open. Like its name, it wriggles quickly like a fish from one cranny to the next. Unable to accept the known in absolute contentment. It seeks more... It seeks more.

SMACK! In a flash, Pete's palm smacked the wall. He shuddered at the crunch, but his hand remained pressed against the wallpaper. Gritting his teeth hard, he had to keep his hand there. Otherwise what's the point? *Leave your hand there. Or else what's the point? Why are you so afraid Pete?* He looked away. *It's dead now. What? Are you going to cry?* He resisted and finally withdrew his hand, causing a slimy peeling sound. Sure, these sounds were actually extremely faint... but not to Pete. Pawing at the toilet paper roll, he ripped off a few pieces. But he refused to examine the remains. He knew the legs would be twitching, with half of them stuck on the wall and the other half tickling his palm. A reflex twitch. A short fleeting breath of life after flash death. That shouldn't happen. It should be over, dead. Then Leo surprised Pete from the doorway, waking him from his trance.

"I can't find my stool anywhere!" Leo looked distressed. He was well aware that his world was too big for him. As an eight and a half year old, Leo was about the same size as the average five or six year old. To a child, a two year difference is equivalent to a ten year difference for adults. Additionally, these extra two years for Leo meant he was 'Grade A' chum for bullies and felt hopelessly diminutive. He pulled at his light brown hair. Luckily, Leo's uncanny intuition allowed him to somehow manage through his oversized environment. But when something was misplaced—one of his few personal belongings—his hopeless diminutiveness became unmanageable.

“I need help, Pete. Will you help me?” Despite the constant upkeep of his tough exterior, Pete understood when Leo was unusually distressed and accordingly gave him an easier time. But as much as he knew he should help Leo, he was disinterested at the moment. In fact, he was distracted from everything except the fate of that silverfish. *Where is its den, Pete? Did it lay any eggs? There are always others. Go back... Go back to the source.*

“Do you think they’ll find anything, Pete?”

“What?” Pete was actually frightened at this echoed question.

“I said, ‘Do you think someone stole it?’” Leo left the doorway and began making his bed.

“Stole it?” Pete corrected, “No, Leo. I accidentally busted it. I’m sorry, I was using it.” Pete’s tone with Leo was abnormally sincere. He was fixated on something else.

“You’re not supposed to use it, Pete! You broke my stool!” Leo exclaimed from the bedroom.

“So sue me, dummy!”

## 2

Leo shifted uncomfortably in the large bean bag chair. He was wholly uncomfortable by both the elusive chair and by Samuel’s newest video game. Samuel was Leo’s most consistent friend from school. You see, Leo’s size marked him the shrimpy kid too small to be picked for kickball at recess. In fact, he didn’t even bother standing amongst the rest because he knew nobody would pick him, not even his brother, Pete... not even last. He was merely an obstacle for any team bent on winning. Why waste a spot in the lineup for a kid that cannot swing his foot far enough to cover the strike-zone? Instead of playing, Leo would sit on the wooden bench nearby and watch, trying to ignore all the curse words the older kids frequently used. Words from R-rated movies.

Leo had greater trouble, however, ignoring Samuel’s newest video game. The latest in the Mortal Kombat series, “Bloodsplash” took virtual gore to a new level. Nonetheless, virtual gore is never like the real thing.

“How did you get this game?” Leo piped up, averting his eyes from an on-screen execution.

“Christmas. I asked for it. Wanna play?” asked Samuel without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Santa shouldn’t get kids games that are rated ‘M!’” Leo put his hands in front of his face, but he couldn’t resist peeking through his fingers. *Maybe Santa didn’t know.*

“I got it from my parents. Leo... do you still think Santa brings you Christmas presents?”

“Yes...” he retorted defensively, “he sits down at the mall and listens to what all the kids want. But he won’t get you anything if you were bad all year.”

“That’s my dad in a costume, Leo. He says he makes, like, fifty bucks an hour just sitting around in a fake beard.” Samuel’s eyes remained fixated on the screen. “You didn’t know that?”

“That’s not true. My mom told me it was Santa!” Leo cowered more at each splash of gore on the screen. Samuel remained entirely unaffected by it all.

“I swear, Leo. I even went down to the mall last Christmas and saw him.” As Samuel said this, he mashed frantically at the controller buttons and bit his lower lip. Onscreen, his muscled ninja fought a nearly naked female opponent with unreal cleavage. With the chatter of the controller buttons, Samuel’s character leapt onto the shoulders of his opponent. “Oh, HO! EXECUTION!!” Samuel yelled as his ninja grabbed the female’s face and, with a sudden twist and unrealistic splash of blood, broke her neck to end the game.

“You’re a liar! That’s the real Santa! I sent him my list in the mail and I got some of the stuff on it!” Leo gave Samuel a kick with his socked foot. At this Samuel jumped up from his chair with a new idea.

“Let’s fight!” Samuel then brought his voice to a deep growl, “MORTAL KOMBAT STYLE!!” Then he began slicing his arms gently into Leo’s torso while making obscene sound effects with his mouth.

### 3

Pete looked around the quiet bedroom and slowly sat up in his bed.

“Leo?” he whispered. The back of Leo’s head remained still from the bottom bunk. Pete spun on his buttocks and lowered his bare feet lightly onto the carpet floor. He heard the symphony of crickets outside the window and hoped it would mask the sound of his footsteps creeping towards the bunk bed. Staring up at the top bunk, he saw the lump of blankets rise and fall with Danny’s breaths. Pete put his hand up on top and felt his breathing. The oscillating sighs of the brother he had missed for so long.

“Danny?” he whispered. “Are you awake?” Pete’s hand remained on what he felt was Danny’s shoulder.

“Yes, Pete. Why are you awake?” The whispers rushed into Pete’s longing ears and brought peace to his heart.

“I’m gonna go watch T.V. in the basement, Danny. Do you want to come?”

“No. You’re not supposed to,” Danny said, but Leo could only hear Pete’s whispers as he lay awake on the bottom bunk. Pete then snuck out of the room, and Leo peered up on the top bunk at a vacant bed.

Pete's feet crept down the wooden stairs to the basement. Squatting on the golden shag carpet before the television, Pete wrapped a blanket around himself. With one finger on the volume button and the other on the power button, Pete turned on the television and quickly brought the volume to zero. The subtle, high pitch tone of the television screen filled the basement, and he leaned his ear close to the speaker, gradually increasing the volume.

Pete repeated these motions every Thursday night at two in the morning so that he could watch the program *Dirk Kallibough Finds a Date*. In every episode, the title host gave advice to young men on how to land a date with a pretty girl. In the end, they would show the audience footage of a young man's blind date to see if he used the advice. One thing Pete failed to understand was the significance of sleeping with a woman. "*Did you sleep with her after the date, Paul?*" "*Why, yes. Yes I did.*" Then the audience would cheer and whistle. This made no sense to Pete. His parents slept in the same bed every night and there was nothing special about that. Pete did enjoy the part of the show about pickup lines. A strong believer in the power of a first impression, Pete always sought the right combination of words to impress a pretty girl. Repeating after the show's host, he mumbled back the pickup line of the day: "Good thing I brought my library card, because I'm checkin' you out." However, at the end of each weekly installment, Pete felt very sad and alone. He was astonished as to how some of the nerds landed the pretty girls. This aspect of the program both frustrated him and reassured Pete that all those tricks could work for even the 'nerdiest' specimens. But it all only gave him new strategies, never new confidence. Pete had grown frustrated with his boyish body's refusal to build muscle. And even worse, he marked his freckles as a plague that could possibly damn him to a single, lonely life. After turning off the television and returning to bed, he would often claw and squeeze the skin on his face in hopes of making them disappear for good. When this tactic failed, his hopes were focused on black eyes and bruises as miracle cures. But these were just temporary masks. Little did he know that his freckles were the feature that most attracted the girls in his grade. Nevertheless, it was incredibly rare for a child of Pete's age to be so critical of his appearance. This stress and feeling of inadequacy wore on him, and perhaps might seal his fate.



*CHAPTER III***SANDBOX****1**

“Why won’t your mom let you play in the sandbox, Leo?”

“Forget about it, Samuel. The swings are better anyway.” Leo said, waving his hand. Samuel knew Leo was dodging. Leo hated the swings. They reminded him of his short legs which would dangle hopelessly about one foot above the ground. There was another playground downtown that had lower swings, low enough for Leo to push himself, but that playground is where the sissy kids played. This playground was much closer to his house anyway. The downside was that there were more people Leo knew here, particularly a girl named Joanne who now approached the boys.

“Hey there, Leo. Hey, Samuel.” Joanne’s words struggled past her huge, horse-sized teeth that weren’t just disproportionate to her mouth, they were obscenely disproportionate to her entire face. Her mother must have fancied braids because every day Joanne’s auburn hair was braided differently. Today it was in neat pig tails.

“Hey ya, Joanne” mumbled Samuel. Leo didn’t respond. He was always annoyed by her frequent “hellos” followed by uninteresting things to say.

“Leo, I’m not doing anything this Saturday.” She continued to pivot playfully on her heels, awaiting Leo’s response. *Hub? Why, Joanne?? WHYYYYYYY???*

“So??” Leo tried to say this as kindly as possible, staring between his shoes at the dirt. Leo never wanted to be mean, like Pete, but he also understood the efficiency of being blunt and honest.

“I dunno” smiled Joanne. She then ran off to the slide. Leo was the kind of boy who didn’t understand girls. Had Pete been there, he would have snapped at Leo and told him to go run after her. The “koodie” rule rang true amongst his friends, and there were no girls allowed. However, this didn’t make him paranoid of girls. He was just uninterested, cautious, and completely oblivious all at the same time. Like many of the other mysteries of life that intrigued Leo, Pete’s seemingly mature fascination with winning girls left Leo perplexed and even grossed out. Pete even saved up his allowance so that he could sit on the curb by the frozen custard stand and buy ice cream for any cute girl that walked by. Often they would get creeped-out and laugh with their friends. The girls were never ready for Pete.

“Haven’t you ever played in the sandbox Leo? It’s way better than the swings.” Samuel persisted.

“No, Samuel! My mom says it’s *forbidden!*” Leo’s size left him no choice but to utilize as many long and laborious words as possible.

“But doesn’t she love you?”

“What? Of course. She just said no to the sandbox. Why do you keep asking about it?” Leo was quickly becoming frustrated on the swing.

“Well why? What’s wrong with the sandbox?”

“WORMS.” Said a gravelly voice. Leo and Samuel were silenced by an elderly man who rose from a nearby bench. He slowly approached on his crippled legs. He had no cane, no walker, no walking stick. Instead, he used the nearby playground equipment to carry him. Each leg weakly shook under the old man’s weight with every step. “Cutaneous larva migrans. Eggs scattered throughout the sand, ya see? And when they get close enough, they burrow into your skin, or your eyes...or your ears.”

“Let’s go Leo.”

“How do you know? None of the other kids get that. And they’re in the sandbox every day.” Leo was curious. Why had he never heard of this? Whenever he asked his parents “why,” they would never tell him. Surely such a gross reason would be fodder for worried parents. In fact, their first choice is usually to scare kids into obedience, if they can. But Leo soon became more concerned with their rule never to talk to strangers and began leaving with Samuel.

“Well, young child... Remember Danny?”

“And he asked about Danny?” Pete questioned, not looking up from his table carving. The picnic table had been adorned with many other engravings over the course of many years. He tried some detail work, but the black pocket knife was too large and clumsy, even when Pete’s fingers choked up on the blade itself. Any mark apart from a straight line was challenging as he finished his skull and crossbones. Leo hung face down from the tire swing balancing on his stomach.

“He asked if I remembered him. Maybe he’s a friend of Uncle Hank’s.” Leo dragged his fingers in the dirt below. As the rusty chain suspending him squeaked, Leo recounted the rest of the story:

“What did you say?” Leo stepped away from the man, dragging Samuel by the shirt. He felt familiar with this old man. He wasn’t afraid to answer. “Danny was the name of my older brother. He’d turn ten this Thursday.” Pete then interrupted Leo’s story:

“Jeez, Leo! Don’t you know not to talk to creeps?” Pete paused his carving work. “I mean, what if he knows where we live now?”

“How would he know that?” Leo looked up from the swing.

“I dunno, dummy! You seemed awful chatty with that weirdo old gimp...”

“What’s a gimp?” Leo asked.

“You aren’t supposed to talk to strangers!”

“I didn’t say anything else!!” Leo stood up with his legs, yelling at Pete.

“Yeah. Whatever,” scoffed Pete. His carving continued in silence for a few moments, and Leo dipped his index finger back into the dirt below him. In the corner of his eye, Leo spotted a rock with a ribbed side to it. He quickly snatched it, dismounted the tire swing, and stood up. He skipped to the other side of the tree and found his lunchbox. A fixed accessory of his, Leo didn’t understand the uses intended for a lunchbox and used his own, an official Peter Pan novelty, for just about everything... except lunch. Pictured on its front were Peter Pan and the kids flying in front of a big clock tower (Big Ben, but Leo didn’t know this). The back side featured Captain Hook and Mr. Smee in a rowboat with the treacherous crocodile lurking in the water. He found himself staring at this panel the most as he had never seen this part of the movie. He had seen the movie dozens of times, but the VHS they owned would always malfunction during that scene. Leo’s imagining of how this scene had turned out appealed both to his fascination with questions and his need for resolution. Pete, on the other hand, just thought Leo was a wasting a lunchbox, and he wished he had been the one to find it at the junk-yard. He always wondered what was inside, and Leo was always adding to his collection of seemingly random junk. However, Pete’s curiosity was short-lived when he

eventually realized he didn't concern himself with the petty, aimless activities of children. He remembered only two other items being added to the lunchbox: a coin and a photograph.

"Wait, was it that guy with the suspenders and shaded glasses?" Pete looked up from his work.

"Yeah, you've seen him there?" Leo said, closing the lid to the lunchbox and fixing the latch.

"No," Pete took a deep breath and blew away all the wood chips and shavings, "I was planting Grandma's flowers for her last summer and that weirdo drove by and called out his window." Pete recalled the rest:

"Don't dig too deep now. . . The soils very sensitive ya know?" The old man then spat a stream of tobacco spit through his dried and shriveled lips. It projected far out the window of the old Mercury and splashed onto the curb by Pete. "Watch yerself!" He snapped. And then he drove on.

"OW!!" Pete's hand drew back from the table in a flash of pain.

"What's wrong Pete? You okay?" Leo stood up with his lunchbox. His little shoes' Velcro straps were undone. "Ah. Crap, nothin'. Just freakin' cut myself. I'm alright." Pete began sucking at his thumb.

"Is it bad?"

"I'M ALRIGHT, I SAID!"

*CHAPTER IV*

# THE ANARCHIC HAND

**1**

“How can you drink that?”

“You wouldn’t understand, dummy.” Pete took a sip of coffee from his thermos. “You’re just a kid though. It’s not a big deal.”

“I’m eight, Pete. I’m not a baby.” Leo was ironically cutting shapes from his peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a plastic knife as he said this. One of his favorite babysitters used to do this for him. Pete always declined. Soon, two rather large boys approached the lunch table.

“Pete, what are you doin’ sitting with a bunch of babies?” said the larger of the two. At this, Samuel poked his head up from his Lunchables box. Leo and Pete never got Lunchables. Samuel got them every day. You see, Samuel’s parent loved him more, but Samuel would occasionally give his leftover shredded cheese crumbs and pizza sauce to Leo. His guilt would weaken him.

“Buzz off, Derek. I’m eatin’ with my brother,” Pete scoffed.

“And I’m not a baby!” Leo piped up.

“Shuddup and eat your damn sandwich, Leo” Pete took another sip of his coffee. Derek looked at his friend.

“Look at this punk, Frank. Mommy’s babysittin’ today.” Frank shoved Pete’s shoulder, and in an instant, Pete lunged at Frank, grabbing him by the shirt. Pete was still much shorter than either of the boys.

“Are you deaf, Frank? I’m pretty sure I said buzz off!” But after he said this, Pete saw a look of fury in Frank’s eyes and he pushed Pete again. This time, the middle of Pete’s back was bent by the end of the lunch table. Leaning back, Pete kicked Derek in the chest before he could get any closer. After staring awkwardly for a second, every kid in the cafeteria stood up together. A FIGHT! Dodging a second kick, Frank grabbed Pete’s leg and began pulling him off the table. Pete’s arms flailed behind him, knocking Samuel’s privileged meal from the table. And after his hands had searched, they found Leo’s lunchbox, and Pete grabbed the handle. Frank yanked at Pete’s leg and pulled him off the table. The back of Pete’s head smashed into the tile floor with a fleshy smack sound and small spatter of blood. The cafeteria gasped. Taking no notice, Pete bent up towards his feet and swung the lunchbox with extraordinary speed, creating a satisfying “clang” as the lunchbox, propelled by its contents, hit Frank squarely in the ear.

“NOO PETE!!!!” Leo screamed from the table. Jumping from the bench and quickly yanking his lunchbox from Pete’s hand.

## 2

Pete sat in the back of his dad’s car, his head wrapped in white bandages. Just in time, he thought; the old black eye was just starting to heal up. He looked up at the rearview mirror, but he only saw his dad’s vast forehead and left eyebrow.

“I didn’t do nothin’ wrong. You can’t ground me if I didn’t do nothin’ wrong.”

## 3

*Don’t go in there. You can’t. It’s not right. It’s so very dark!* Leo approached. The doorway’s wood was nailed crudely to the rock face. Before ducking his head under, he looked up at the surface stretching infinitely up, up, up. The mood was cool blue. The moment was now.

He ducked his head, stepping headfirst into the dark. He stopped about five feet into the room and shut his eyes. They would be of no use to him here, and he allowed his other senses to take over. He heard the strange noise of shifting air, as if the room were yawning. A deep sense of dread filled his thoughts. *You should never have come here.* Reopening his eyes, he looked back to the door. Was it smaller? He had to be sure. Walking back, it seemed to shrink with every step. In a panic he lunged towards the outer light, but it shrunk to nothing instantly and all light vanished. His breaths frenzied. Leo’s tremendously vivid

imagination was running wild with the blank slate of darkness all around. *There's something in here!* Leo's only hope was to focus on slowing down his quickening breaths. Faster, faster, faster. Stop!

*What was that sound?* He held his breath, and waited for its echo. *It's... Something breathing!* A faint... soft... breath... rising and falling somewhere in the pitch black surrounding him. *SHH! Turn on your flashlight. That's what it's for, dummy.*

*No! You can't! What if you wake it?!* He bit his lower lip in terror. *Decide!* He took a step forward, and he waited... Waited... No sound. He took another step, this one much larger than the first. He waited once again... Waiting... He could hear its breath again, rising and falling. *What's that! There! There it is again!* A distant flutter to his right. A scratch. A twitch to his left. Then it was gone. He paused once again and listened... then he slowly lifted his forearm trying to remove his backpack. *You left the flashlight in the backpack?! Seriously?! Well go get it!*

As he shrugged his left arm out of the strap, the back of his hand brushed against a fleshy surface. *AAHHHHH!!! What was that?? What's there?!* Leo began to cry. He did his very best to be silent, but he began weeping uncontrollably. *No sudden movements.* He was going to have to shine the light on it. He had to know the extent of the danger he was in. He managed to remove his backpack and knelt with it between his legs... His hands slowly... carefully unzipped the largest pocket. He recognized its touch and he was familiar with its layout. Groping at the items inside, he could not find the flashlight. Tears poured down his grimaced face. *Where is it???* He fumbled manically now. His trembling hands pushed aside all manner of objects in the backpack. He felt a jar, a rope, a hammer, a toothed blade... But then his weeping was pierced by a slight feeling of relief.

*There it is!* He held the flashlight tightly in his hands. Lifting his hands, he pressed its cold metal against his forehead in gratitude and prayed. He prayed the light would not turn on too quickly or too brightly. He prayed he could guess at what that fleshy surface was or what breathed and fluttered nearby. He prayed he could do this before he switched the light on. But he couldn't. He couldn't make it any easier. So he cleverly buried the flashlight into his shirt and looked down. He switched it on, and a faint light showed through his shirt and created a glow on his fish-inhabited pajama pants. He could see the ground past his dirty knees. And he paused in surprise as he recognized its texture.

“Leo, why can’t I get a girlfriend?” Pete spoke from his darkened bed corner. Leo was taken aback by this question. It’s not like Pete to show such fragility. Leo started a “hmm,” and thought carefully for the answer. Pete’s interest in girls was unusual for his age. He already had a plan in his head to settle down and start a family. No kid his age had every thought that far. And Leo suspected such determination scared a lot of girls away.

“Maybe they’re all just not ready yet. Nobody else from your grade has a girlfriend, do they?” Leo reached up and brushed his hand over the underside of the top bunk. Wood planks from Danny’s box-spring... wrapped in plastic mesh.

### 3 (cont.)

That’s where he recognized the texture. The underside of Danny’s bunk. Leo’s flashlight glanced over this familiar texture, and he wondered why he was kneeling on it and how it got there. Then he thought of Danny. Waiting a moment to summon the courage to investigate whatever was before him. He kept a layer of t-shirt fabric over the end of the flashlight and pointed it to the floor near the fleshy object. His eyes widened in shock, and his hand jolted as he drew the light back quickly. *Was that... was that an arm?*

The ghostly image stung on the inside of his eyelids if he squinted really hard. A group of hands with twisted, bent fingers. Mustering a little more courage and wiping his runny nose on his sleeve, he slowly brought the light’s focus back to the hands pressed into the mesh texture of the floor. His eyes gaped at the sight: the fingers cringed at the light and the whole arm quivered. Most of the fingernails had been gruesomely torn off and littered with wood splinters, and a few fingers tips lacked any skin at all as if they had been sanded down with a file. He spotted at least five more hands quivering within the same cluster, with fleshy arms above them, all shooting upward. His light traced up the arms and elbows which bent inhumanly higher and higher.

“*Danny?*” The name echoed in the space as his light crept up the arms at least six feet until he spotted the creature’s bulbous, pinkish-grey, blank abdomen towering overhead. When the light reached the abdomen, it shook violently and shrieked at an ear shattering pitch. And when its shrieks were loudest, it split open from the center, becoming a gaping mouth lined with hundreds of jagged teeth. From the open mouth, a black gelatinous slime oozed out into a puddle at Leo’s feet. And within the mouth, near the back of the throat, a shriveled, purple eyelid opened and gaped back at him. The white of this eye brightly framed a small pupil which dilated sporadically to different sizes. The creature’s waking shriek drowned out Leo’s

blood-curdling scream. In a moment, he heard other shrieks behind him and he ran from the creature, shining the flashlight on identical creatures in every direction, having been awoken from their slumber. Their arm-like legs, suspending their mouths high into the air, began to shiver, shake, and quiver like a violin's screeching strings... wailing like an animal's death cry. The light cast their twisted shadows on the bunk-textured floor. It was then that Leo realized this world was upside down. Hundreds of feet above him he saw his giant mattress and bed sheets. The shrieks grew louder and louder as each waking creature joined in. Covering his ears, he still could not hear his own screams. The creature he woke first began stretching its arm towards him. On his back, he pushed further away from the hand reaching out. He kept kicking back until he realized he was within reach of another creature's shaking arms. Rising to his knees, he threw the flashlight as hard as he could at the creature's eye. The creature took it into its mouth and swallowed it. The light diminished greatly, and all the shrieking ceased. The creatures instantly stood still around him. He could see them by the red light that illuminated from the flashlight through the creature's flesh. Its mouth and eye had disappeared and it resumed its still sleep. He collapsed on the floor and cried harder than he ever had before. Leo was safe for now. He continued to stifle his horrified screams as he calmed down, tightly embracing his backpack against his chest. After a while, his breath returned to normal frequency, and he began considering an advance through the sleeping creatures scattered about the surface.

"Leo?" The voice amidst the silence greatly startled Leo, but he recognized it as human and even familiar... He looked frantically among the shadows for the voice's source. It was the voice of a frightened child, crying out in the dark.

At the distant horizon of the plain he stood on, Leo could see the top of a huge head as it rose from the edge of the plane like a giant Macy's Day Parade balloon rounding building corner. He then realized that the head was Danny's, hanging down from the top bunk. But from Leo's upside down perspective, it seemed, rather, to rise from the plane's edge. It popped up further, and he could see the giant shadowed features of Danny's face. Danny looked terribly frightened, his giant features twisting into a panicking grimace.

"Leo! I can't breathe! I can't breathe, Leo!!!" But just as he heard Danny's cries, Leo turned quickly to a noise behind him, and the arm of one of the creatures shot out and wrapped around Leo's neck, lifting him off his feet. Pulling away as hard as he could, he budged enough room around his neck to scream. He screamed and screamed. He screamed to Danny's giant face. It was all he had... But then, he awoke.

Launching into the middle of his room from this dream, Leo continued to scream, unable to escape the creature's now limp arm that was still attached to him. No matter how many times he pushed it away, it

fell heavily back onto his chest. His screams shattered the room's previous silence, and Pete, too, jumped up from his bed. He screamed back at Leo, having been so suddenly awoken to such horrible sounds.

"LEO!!! STOP!!! WHAT??!!!! WHAT IS IT?????" Pete tried to help Leo... to quiet his screaming, but Leo couldn't separate himself from the creature's limp, wriggling arm. Pete watched as Leo tried to throw his own arm away.

"LEO!! You fell asleep on your arm!!! Your arm is still asleep!!!" Pete's hand pressed the bandage against the back of his head "AAHHH! STOP SCREAMIN'!! YOU'RE HURTING MY HEAD!!" The light from the hallway streamed in suddenly as the parents stormed in. After a few minutes of shushing and back rubbing, Leo's screams finally quieted under the shelter of his blanket. He then cried uncontrollably. Finally, realizing he was safe in his room, he stuck his head out from the blanket and checked the bunk above him. It was still vacant. He looked, then, over to Pete's distressed expression.

"My arm was trying to kill me! It was trying to kill me! I couldn't breathe! I couldn't breathe, Pete!!!"

*CHAPTER V*

# Déjà vu

**1**

“Well, what *kind* of monsters? What did they look like?” Pete bounced the yellow kickball forcefully on the sidewalk and, a few steps later, caught it over his head.

“They had these big eyes in their mouths and human arms that acted as legs.”

“Damn. That’s messed up.” Ordinarily, this would have been an opportunity for Pete to poke fun at Leo. But the fact is, Pete was frightened that night and concerned for Leo. “Have you been watching movies at Samuel’s?”

“No, I swear!” Leo swung his lunchbox by his side as he walked. Its contents clanked from side to side.

“Cause mom said you can’t watch PG movies without permission. So you better not have!” With large, clumsy steps, Pete began dribbling the ball between his legs. This didn’t last long, however, as he aimed the bounce wrong once and sent the ball straight into his groin.

“Doesn’t it make you mad how his dad lets him see all those bad movies?” Leo looked up at Pete as much as possible when talking to him. He knew that Pete didn’t often speak his mind, so he looked at his facial expressions for clues. Pete did not return the eye contact... something Leo had just become so used to.

“Samuel’s a messed up little brat, Leo. Remember that one time when he said he saw *Pulp Fiction*?”

“What’s that movie?”

“I don’t know, but it’s rated ‘R’. I remember ‘cause dad said something about seeing it one time and mom got really mad.”

“Yeah, but I thought grown-ups were allowed to see ‘R’ movies.”

“Me too, but I guess there must be a limit. Mom says there’s lots of bad things in the world. That’s what she told me when Danny...” Pete didn’t want to finish this sentence nor did he have to; Leo understood completely.

“I heard detectives see all sorts of things for their job.” Leo looked up at Pete for a sign of confirmation.

“Mom’s a *private investigator*, dummy. Not a detective.”

“Well she does see all sorts of things, doesn’t she?”

“I guess. She tracks down a bunch of psychos and murderers sometimes. I hear her talking about it with dad.”

“I never hear about that stuff.” Leo was sincerely surprised.

“That’s because they talk about it when you’re already in bed.” Pete stopped bouncing the ball and stuck it beneath his arm. “Last night I heard they were going to dig up a grave next week! They call it *exhuming*.”

“So?”

“So?? So... they’re going to dig up a bunch of treasure!”

“Why are they lookin’ for treasure in the graveyard?”

“They’re not lookin’ for treasure, Leo. They said something about trying to prove this one guy wasn’t dead by digging up his empty casket.”

“How do you know there’s treasure in the grave?”

Pete rolled his eyes “Jeez, Leo. What’s with all the questions? Everyone knows they bury a dead person’s possessions with their body... like the pharaohs.” Pete kept walking and Leo remained silent. But then Pete had an idea. “Leo! We should dig up the treasure!”

“You can’t mess up a grave like that! It’s a sin!”

“The police are going to dig it all up anyway, Leo. They won’t even know we’d been there.” Pete knew he had to persuade Leo gently. So he poured on the charm. “We could use the treasure to get you a new bike, Leo...” Leo had lost his bike during a dare to jump over the creek. Leo had targeted a narrow gap

of the creek and got a fast start. However, he became frightened just feet before the jump and abandoned ship, leaving his bike to fly right over the jump and into the creek to be taken away by the high water.

“What about you? Aren’t *you* going to get anything?” Leo was slowly... warily catching on to Pete’s artificial charm.

“Me? Well I’m sure there’ll be enough for the both of us. I’m hopin’ to take that blonde girl to the movies with my share.” Pete bounce-passed the kickball to Leo. “But you can’t tell anybody, Leo. You have to swear on your life!”

“Oh, alright.” Leo tossed the ball back to Pete, and they continued on across another street. Then Pete stopped in front of a house and wound up to punt the ball.

“Wait a minute, Pete. That’s our kickball!” Leo’s sudden high-pitched squeak greatly annoyed Pete.

“No it’s not! I borrowed it from Trevor like two years ago.”

“Isn’t that stealing?”

“No, dummy. If it was stealing, I wouldn’t be returning it now. Besides, we haven’t even seen him in forever.” Pete punted the ball over the fence, heard as it bounced off an assortment of plastic, backyard lawn fixtures, and walked back down the sidewalk.

## 2

Pete’s leather cleats dangled over the ground as he sat on the low, concrete wall. Dragging the untied shoestrings in patterns across the hot asphalt, he thought about what he’d do if his dad never arrived to pick him up. He was always embarrassed to be the last kid picked up from soccer practice as the coach always hesitated to leave him waiting alone.

“Are you sure he’ll be here in a few minutes?” the coach asked as his son loaded the numerous soccer balls into a white mesh bag.

“I already said he will be.” Pete had little patience for adults. He always found them condescending, but in his defense, there was little reason to trust them. Pete was unusually mature for his age. In fact, shortly after the coach left, he stared at the girls’ softball team practicing in the distance. One specimen particularly fascinated Pete, but he didn’t know her name. He just knew that something about her blonde ponytail was attractive. Pete never lusted because he hadn’t yet a proper and ordered understanding of sexuality. It seemed as if Pete had already unnaturally skipped the lustful adolescent stage and was gravitated towards more noble manhood. A manhood that desired a mere loving embrace... and also beautiful children. He knew he desired this girl with the blonde ponytail, but he could not fathom a logical

explanation. But at the same time his uncalculated attraction to her, or any girl for that matter, made him hopeful that he still could love another. These conflicting realizations left Pete extremely cautious and confused. He understood well that his longing was unusual. Indeed, at one point he thought this longing was what turned girls away from him. But he had since dismissed this suspicion and blamed his freckles as the girl-repellant. *Nobody likes a kid with dirt permanently on his face.* Deep in thought, he neglected to notice the blonde girl approaching him.

“What the heck’s your problem, anyway?”

“Me? Nothing. . . I—”

“You were starin’ at me! What are you? Some kinda creep?” Pete stared at her graceful arms bent as she put her hands on her hips. He frantically wiped the sweat from his face and tried to remember the line he had rehearsed from Dirk Kallibough’s show.

“Do you have a library card?”

“What?” She was perplexed and grew more impatient.

“I asked if you have a library card.”

“No. Not with me.”

“Well I should get one, because I’m checking you out.” Pete hoped this re-imagination of the pickup line would suit the situation better, but the girl ended up taking a big step towards him and slapping him in the face. Angry now, he called after her.

“It’s just as well! I can’t afford any late fees!” Hearing these words, she looked back at Pete disgusted. Even after she left, Pete felt the sting of her slap and thought “if only she slapped the freckles off.” Pete’s temper began to grow. And he sulked on the concrete wall, gritting teeth, growling, and staring back at the asphalt between his cleats. But then. . . an earthworm.

He saw an earthworm inching along the asphalt on its trek across the great divide. Pete could see its body’s surface drying up in the scorching sun. Then he noticed the ants crawling around it, closing in. There was no way the earthworm would make it across. It was about to die right there, burning on the asphalt. The ants began to swarm around and engulf it.

### 3

Pete tossed and turned in his bed. The nightstand clock read “3:21 A.M.,” and he decided to give in to his bladder’s demands. Rolling off his bed and onto his feet, Pete proceeded to the bathroom. He groaned as his toes met the cold tile of the bathroom. Careful not to wake anyone else up, he shut the door

entirely before turning on the light. As he flipped the light switch he buried his face into his arms and gradually looked up with squinting eyes at the toilet by the bathtub. His feet shuffled over to the small rug at the foot of the toilet where his toes were relieved by the rug's softness and warmth. Pulling down his pajama bottoms, he sat on the toilet seat and again groaned at the cold, plastic surface against his buttocks. The trickling of urine followed shortly as Pete rested his elbows on his knees and hung his head low between his shoulders. Then... there was a familiar sound.

*Hub? What was that?* Pete looked around the bathroom floor, particularly near the trash can for a fly or beetle, but he knew in the back of his mind exactly what he had heard. *There it is again!* He had heard it coming from behind the shower curtain... The light scuttling of a silverfish. He thought about ignoring it and returning to bed, but he refused to let the bastard get away so easily.

*That bastard won't get away so easily...* Pete searched the bathroom for his murder weapon. He saw his weapon of choice, the flip flop near the door, but because he would have to pull up his pants to walk over and retrieve it, he deemed this an unrealistic proposition and searched instead for a nearer option. He favored the spray bottle of bleach behind him on the toilet tank. Pete particularly liked the idea of bleach because he could picture himself spraying the silverfish, drowning it cruelly and brutally, and he liked this thought. But he knew the bleach might not be enough.

Then he heard a loud slam from behind the curtain. The silverfish must've knocked over a bottle of shampoo. *What? It knocked over a bottle of shampoo?* Pete began to wonder how large this insect must be and continued looking for a weapon complementary to the bleach. That is when he found the plunger. And, as he grasped the warm wood of its handle, waves of courage flowed through him and empowered him.

Pete leaned slowly towards the bathtub with his arm stretched out, ready to pull the shower curtain back with the spare fingers from his bleach-wielding hand. He lifted the plunger high above his head... *Be quick, Pete! Don't be a coward.* And Pete was quick. He was quick to yank the curtains open, and, seeing the shampoo bottle still rolling in the bathtub, looked around the other bottles in a frenzy, poised and ready to strike. But when the dark shape of the silverfish finally caught his eye sitting just behind the other soap bottles, Pete found his limbs unwilling to move at his command. He could do nothing but stare at this insect, this monster, whose body stretched the length of his hand. And its legs and antennae stretched even further, feeling the smooth surface of the tile wall. His widened eyes scoured the room for an entry point, but he could not find one. The baseboards had just been installed, and there were no crevices or crannies. The air vent was too narrow for this beast to fit through, and the window was inoperable. Then he saw it, its

point of entry: the gaping mouth of the bathtub drain. And he immediately decided that after killing it, he must flush its pulverized corpse down from whence it came.

He regained his motor capabilities and swung the plunger at the bottles, but at the last minute, the silverfish wriggled down into the tub, nearer to Pete. Instead of a forceful swing, Pete ended up tossing the plunger in fear and falling backwards, his bare bottom hitting the cold tile with a painful smack. He sat up and found the silverfish already on the outside of the tub wall, climbing slowly down... Pete then aimed the spray bottle and doused it in bleach. But after freezing briefly, it continued its slow approach towards Pete.

With all of his courage evaporating instantaneously, Pete shrunk backwards in terror. Reaching behind for the flip flop, his hands couldn't locate it. The silverfish broke into a sprint as it wriggled violently across the floor. Pete frantically grabbed hold of the aluminum trash can behind him and swung it over his head and onto the silverfish, stopping it dead in its tracks and throwing q-tips and balled-up tissue all over the bathroom. Pressing down hard onto the trash can, he twisted it and heard its dead crunching. Pete then collapsed backwards in relief, realizing that he would eventually have to check to be sure of its murder. But he couldn't stomach it. Not tonight. So he stumbled to his feet, pulled up his pajama bottoms, and returned exhaustedly to bed.

*CHAPTER VI*

# ...IT KILLED THE CAT

## 1

“Did you clean up the bathroom, Natalie?” Pete ate his scrambled eggs and stared stupidly at his mother’s high-heeled shoes. *How can they wear those all day?* His parent walked back and forth, carrying armfuls of clothes from the laundry room to the kitchen counter.

“Why would I clean up the bathroom?” Natalie growled from the living room sofa.

“Exactly what I was thinking. You’re a lazy-ass. But *somebody* did.” Pete’s impatience only grew as he had trouble getting the eggs to remain on the fork for their journey from the plate to his mouth. His mother said something about watching his language and talking nice.

## 2

Leo burrowed his fingers deep into the soft dirt.

“Was it you, Leo? Did you clean up the bathroom this morning?” Pete dug his pinky finger deep into his left nostril while he watched Leo digging. It was the second day of their digging. Their first visit to the grave proved challenging as they initially couldn’t locate the proper headstone. “Galager” said Pete’s

handwriting, misspelling the name he remembered his mother mentioning that night he had dropped eaves. They searched for the name amongst the low headstones. After a while, they realized the Gallagher grave was part of a larger monument with stone walls. Finding a crevice at the base of one of the walls, they dug out enough room to slip beneath the wall. On the other side, the monument was roofless, and the sun beat directly down on the boys' bare necks.

"I guess it's nice that we're surrounded by walls" Pete said as he struggled to free a bite of a caramel bar. He hated the taste of it and its consistency, but he thought the hard caramel strengthened the muscle in his jaw. So he bought the candy bars and chewed them vigorously.

"Can I have a bite?" Leo asked bravely from the bottom of the shallow hole, knowing the answer to come. And Pete, knowing Leo would ask the question, had the answer ready, responding so quickly that he nearly cut off Leo.

"No, dumbass. I bought it." Pete often ate candy in front of Leo to make him envious. It gave Pete a cruel sense of power over Leo, and he enjoyed this feeling too much to feel guilty at the pitiful look of disappointment that would flash across Leo's face. "WHAT DID YOU SAY?" Pete snapped suddenly at Leo while chewing the caramel faster.

"What? Nothing."

"You muttered at me! Dammit, Leo! How ungrateful can you be? Whining like a bitch just because you can't afford your own candy. Grow up." Pete almost smiled as he hissed this. His aggressive tone pronounced every harsh syllable like a knife stabbing Leo in the side. It was always like this for Leo... He never saw it as abuse as it was merely the same Pete he had lived with his whole life. He just assumed this was how older brothers treated each other. There was one time, however, when he visited his cousin's house that shed doubt on this assumption. Two boys, about the same ages as Pete and Leo, treated each other relatively well. The older even let the younger pick first for kickball sometimes. But Leo could only see this relationship as an exception to brotherly nature. *Their mom must be really strict about talking mean.* Leo looked up and saw Pete nibbling at the candy bar with his front teeth. Pete would find out the next day that such nibbling would produce a small chip in his front tooth.

Leo's digging was ineffective as he was fascinated by every eye-catching speck hidden by each layer. He was doing more playing than actual digging, and he burrowed his fingers deep into the loose dirt. Closing his eyes, a thought entered his consciousness. *You could be the first, Leo!* Leo smiled slowly, imagining such a scenario. *This dirt may have never before been touched by mankind! You're the first, Leo! You're the first.* A great joy lifted Leo's thoughts to the stars... to Mars... and he remembered those Chinese

astronauts on T.V.. Landing on soil that had never before been touched by mankind, he saw the planet's surface through the glass of his own spacesuit. He looked down at his shadow as it began to grow longer. *Do you feel that?* Leo, back on earth now, felt something touch his fingertips below in the dirt. This didn't scare him because he guessed instantly at what it was. Bringing the backs of his hands together in the dirt and then pulling them apart, he drew back a curtain of dirt. On the other side, dozens of earthworms wriggled around one another. Feeling the morning sun on their bodies, they quickly burrowed down... down... down into the cool dirt below. Leo watched and witnessed a rare, unexpected beauty in this. Their moisture glistened in the sunlight, and Leo peered down as if he had just opened a treasure chest full with glowing jewels. Little did he know that this unexpected beauty would soon evolve into an inescapable terror.

"Why'd you stop digging? We got work to do, stupid!" Pete stood angrily at the foot of the hole with his hand on his hip leaning favorable on his left leg.

"It's time to go to school. Can you hand me your stuff?"

"I think I'm going to stay behind and dig some more," said Pete, picking up Leo's book bag and lunchbox. Stopping a moment with the latter in his hand, Pete asked a question: "Hey, what's in here anyway?" He proceeded to fiddle with the latch, and, when Leo heard its metal rattling, he jumped immediately out of the hole and onto Pete's back.

"Give it to me! It's none of your business!" Leo had never dared fight Pete for anything, but this time he had to. He stretched his arms over Pete's shoulders, reaching for the lunchbox. Pete, however, continued to dangle it just out of Leo's reach, and with his younger brother's unexpected physical contact, Pete's temper lit up instantly. Using his free hand, Pete reached back and began mashing on Leo's face, particularly his left eye socket. Leo screamed as Pete added pressure.

"You stupid shit! You dare touch me!? YOU DARE TOUCH ME, YOU LITTLE SHIT WORM!!!" Pete drew his arm forward and shot his elbow viciously backwards into Leo's temple, knocking him flat on his back. Realizing now how immature his curiosity of its contents was, he threw the lunchbox back at Leo, aiming for his head. It missed him, however, and landed in the hole. "You touch me again and I'll beat your ass. You hear me? I'll beat your scrawny ass!" Pete turned away and looked for the shovel. Unsure whether Pete would use the shovel on him, Leo climbed quickly out of the hole. Wiping tears off his face, Leo collected his book bag and lunchbox and scurried out under the stone wall.

Pete's face still trembled with fury as he stared at the bottom of the hole with the shovel in hand. Rolling up the sleeves of his white undershirt, Pete looked tough as he stumbled down into the hole and

began digging. His violent stabbing at the dirt started to yield impressive progress. His anger fueled him a little, but Pete always tried to push the limits of his body anyway. You see, he had put extraordinary faith in an ideal of the manly man. A man that could overcome anything. The manly man was a Hercules with exceptional strength, having attained it from constantly pushing himself to his breaking point of mental or physical exhaustion.

Pete had been digging alone for nearly ten minutes... then he stopped and stood in silence. His hands had released the shovel's handle. Something was wrong. *What... what is that??* Pete peered down at the shovel's head lodged deep into the dirt. Pete could've sworn he heard something. Then his stomach turned as the sound came again... *Another silverfish?* The faint twitching came from below the dirt. After a short pause, Pete took a deep breath, and, grabbing the warm wood of its handle, Pete withdrew the shovel quickly and stabbed it over and over again into the dirt. He gnashed his teeth and let out a few growls. Soon, his stabbing produced harsh crunches, and Pete stopped. Then he saw them... the crushed legs poking out through the dirt... legs with the girth of a fast-food straw... legs belonging to a silverfish at least the length of Pete's forearm. *That's impossible!* Its dead legs twitched suddenly. And in extreme fright, Pete leapt clear of the hole, gathered his things, and abandoned the scene.

*CHAPTER VII*

# THE SHRINK

**1**

“What’s wrong?” Leo looked back at Pete whose feet were locked on the curb’s edge.

“Go on home. I gotta do something.” Pete’s response was soft and lifeless, and Leo chose not to question, afraid Pete was in a bad mood. Both of their faces were being scorched by the late afternoon sun. This early August heat had taken a toll on Leo’s fair complexion as splotches of sunburn marked his cheeks. To Pete’s chagrin, the sun hadn’t been as harsh enough on his freckles. *Maybe they’ll burn right off!* Pete scratched at the back of his blonde buzz-cut. The buzz-cut was his favorite haircut. He also appreciated the other military-regulation cuts... but Pete’s heroes were not soldiers. He had secretly believed that the whole ‘no man left behind’ thing was a lie. *They have to leave SOME men behind... You cannot sacrifice your whole army for a few dead men!* The primary reason Pete liked his haircut was because he believed it made him look good... that it made him look tough.

In contrast, Leo’s messy, dark brown hair perfectly fit a boy of his age. While he often sported ‘bed-head’ for days at a time, this was not because Leo, himself, was messy. Indeed, Leo, like a neurotic kitten, kept himself very clean. The messiness of his hair was due largely to his many, competing cowlicks. As a hot breeze whipped past his ears, Leo’s arm swung with the Peter Pan lunchbox at his side. With the zippers on

his backpack jangling cheerily, he fought hard to resist asking Pete where he was going—something which he knew was more than likely to get him smacked—but his tremendous curiosity prevailed.

“What’re you going to do, Pete? Can you tell me?”

“Go on home, I said!” Pete barked from the curb, and Leo scurried on down the sidewalk in fright. Pete was well aware that Leo might tattle. Mom wouldn’t be too happy if she found out Leo had walked home from school alone... But Pete didn’t need long. He just needed to calm down a little.

## 2

Pete grew calmer with the thought of “The Hovel.” About a year ago Pete had built a fort with Leo on the edge of a muddy creek about a mile from their house. He remembered the horrible smell of the water and the clouds of pesky mosquitos and hovering dragonflies.

“Why do you want to build the fort here, Pete?” Leo once asked while flipping over with both hands and his every fiber of strength a cinder block they had found on the opposite side of one grand clearing. Gradually, he flipped the cinder block to the spot Pete had designated.

“What do you mean by that? This spot’s perfect.”

“I mean,” Leo piped up, “it’s so smelly here. And the bugs keep flying into my ears!” He was terrified of the very idea. Pete continued stacking the rocks, scavenged bricks, and rubble to shape the fort wall.

“That’s what discovery is, Leo! It’s smelly, gross, and scary. Do you think America smelled nice when Columbus came over? Of course not, what with all the injuns and such. It was a mess! But that’s what blazing the trail is all about!” These words would resonate in Leo, and Pete resumed his stacking.

And when the boys were finally done discovering and blazing their trail for the day, they sat on the ledge over the creek and bounced pebbles off their shoes and into the murky water. And it was to *this* moment, almost a year ago, that Pete’s consciousness fled as he walked the sidewalk alone.

“What are we going to call it, Pete?” Leo asked, digging at the dirt beside him for more pebbles.

“How about ‘The Castle’!”

“Well it’s not a castle yet. We have a lot more work to do. It will take a whole lot more rocks before we have ourselves a castle. For now, the name needs to be more fitting.” Pete wiped his nose, “What are those things that Hobbits live in?”

“Hobbits?”

“Yeah. From all those kiddie books you read.”

“Um... Hobbit holes?” Leo had only read the first few chapters before switching to something that better fit his reading level.

“Oh yeah... But I guess that doesn't sound right.”

“We could called it ‘Human Hole’...” Leo suggested.

“Somehow I think that's worse, Leo. How about something like a burrow.”

“‘The Burrow’ works I think. But don't animals and poor people live in burrows?”

“Yeah, I think aardvarks and shit. What else?” Pete noticed the dusk blooming with a crescendo of cicadas. These summer dusks always brought on aggressive and intermittent breezes. A pattern one could rely on.

“Frankenstein's monster hid in a hovel because everyone hated him. I saw that on T.V. last night... but then I got scared and turned it off.” Leo tried to admit this while still looking as tough and mature as he could. He had noticed that, for whatever reason, Pete was being nice and patient, and he did not want to screw it up.

“‘The Hovel...’ I like it. After all, we're out here to hide from Mom and Dad... well all the adults, anyway.” And they sat there a little while longer, admiring their hard day's work. But it didn't feel like work—like chores. This was theirs. This was their own.

### 3

Pete branched off the sidewalk and onto a driveway, arriving at his destination. He proceeded up the pathway past a nearly bare graveled garden which gave home to assorted dry, brown branches... reaching upwards desperately from the dreariness. He firmly pressed the rectangular doorbell button and left a hesitant second before withdrawing. This wasn't Pete. Pete never asked for help because the Hercules never asked for help. Aware of this, he just convinced himself that this venture was not a cry for help, but rather, it was an opportunity to make Charlie, Pete's unlikely friend, feel important. This was charity.

Soon after the doorbell's ring inside completed, he could hear footsteps approaching the front door, unlocking it with a series of loud clicks and clacks. Soon the door cracked open, and a tall boy's head popped out. This was Charlie: a tall brown-haired kid with eyeballs so large they seemed at serious risk of popping right out onto the floor from even the slightest bump. What allowed for his unlikely friendship with

Pete was his similar, uncommon maturity for his age. In fact, Charlie had already been running his own business.

“Good morning, sir. What brings you here?” Charlie had the annoying habit of closing his eyes and raising his eyebrows nearly every time he spoke, but Pete had become used to this tick and hardly noticed it anymore.

“Charlie... you know me,” Pete reminded him because he disliked when Charlie was so formal and also because he was wary that Charlie’s social decorum and overall sanity could have very well unhinged entirely. But Charlie hesitated to respond... So Pete helped out, “I’m Pete. Don’t you remember my name?”

“Don’t *you* remember I’m a professional? Come now, sir. Imagine what *they’ll* say if they saw us talking like this.” At the end of this sentence, Charlie’s eyes remained fixed on Pete’s, but Pete disliked eye contact, especially with Charlie’s bizarre stare.

“We need to talk, Charlie.”

“I’m sorry, sir. But I do not know what you’re talking about. I’m at my home now; I only do business in my office.”

“You just said you were a professional! Just let me in, you moron!” Pete took a step towards the door, but Charlie shrunk back inside so that only the right side of his face could be seen through the narrow crack.

“If you are here for business, you must go to my office!” Then Charlie slammed the door, and Pete could hear his loud footsteps run off inside. Pete was amazed at how Charlie could be extremely mature and simultaneously childish. But perhaps this is what made Charlie an acceptable candidate for a friend—Pete couldn’t figure him out. In addition, Charlie’s general quirkiness—constantly verging on mental instability—gave their relationship a comfortable breath of distance.

It pains me to say it... to highlight this in our friend Pete... but this was a child who found a reverbing sorrow in the potentially close relationship with any human being. I’m not exaggerating; I promise. I find great trouble in telling you all of this... But Pete’s loneliness stemmed from fear, indeed, as every lonely soul will someday find. The trouble with loneliness is not that there is no one to love, but, rather, there is a fear to be loved. A fear to surrender oneself totally to the uncertainties of another. A fear to let a stranger into your home, to touch your belongings, to eat your food, and to make subtle yet scathing comments at the books on your shelf that, perhaps you claim to have read... and perhaps you lie... but those books are there nonetheless, if for no other reason but to commemorate or even substitute for an aspect of self you are compelled to nurture. Pete was locked in his own house: desiring always to let just *one*

person in, but too embarrassed to open the door to them... afraid that anything less than an immaculate house was something of which to be ashamed. And Pete was so very ashamed... feeling more so when he could hear those footsteps fading out down the crosswalk, unable to wait any longer. And when the last... quietest... footstep that his ear could discern had been followed by silence, Pete would extend his fingers slowly and slap himself in the face as hard as he knew how. A trembling hand and a heavy breath standing between each earth-shaking smack of flesh... Pete would fall to his knees and continue beating himself until he produced tears. He is supposed to cry... to hate himself for acting so foolish. It was all *fear*, and it was ruining Pete... rotting his home from the inside. What if *this*... what if *that*? ... And the only way to make it all stop was to bear the shame he knew would surface. Sure... fear and guilt haunt every man in his lifetime, but this is what troubles me... that such a burden of misery and inadequacy should be taken upon the shoulders of a young boy. *OPEN THE DAMN DOOR, YOU IDIOT!* No!

“I SAID, OPEN THE DAMN DOOR!” Pete found himself screaming at Charlie’s door, but Charlie had since retreated to the basement. A little surprised at his sudden outburst, he glanced over his shoulder to the empty street. Pete then stepped backwards off the patio and walked around the side of the house into the backyard. Trying his best to step only on the walking stones, Pete entered the backyard and was startled to look up and see Charlie standing motionless right up against the basement’s sliding door glass, waiting for Pete with a far-off look in his eyes. Approaching to door, Pete angrily mimed at Charlie to snap out of his trance and unlock the door.

#### 4

“I’ve got to ask, Pete...” Charlie spoke from his reclining position on his couch, “Why have you never taken advantage of my services until now? What’s *eating* you?”

“Now first off, Charlie: I’m only here because I have a few questions that my friend told me to ask you. And second: if you mention one word of this to *anyone* I’ll kick your ass. Got it?” Pete was playing it ever so cautious, but a response from Charlie was unnecessary. Pete at least trusted him *that* much. “Now my friend... Er... my *cousin* thinks he’s maybe crazy or something. He’s been seeing weird things lately.”

“What things? Aliens?”

“No.”

“Muppets?”

“No!”

“That’s all the weird things... that I can think of.”

“I mean, like . . . *bugs*. And he hears them too.” Pete tried his hardest not to look like this conversation bothered him. Even talking about bugs was making him uneasy. “I mean, he squishes these bugs, ya know? . . . Whenever they turn up. And then he looks under his shoe, and there’s no bug anymore.”

“You mean hallucinations? They say crazy-eyed people get that.” Charlie, now intrigued, sat up on the sofa. “Is that it?”

“Well, the bugs keep coming back, and getting bigger.” Pete clutched his hand tight to quell its trembling, but Charlie soon took notice, let slip a clever grin, and folded his arms.

“Oh, it’s *you*? You don’t have crazy eyes, Pete. Are you serious? Are you seeing hallucinations?” As Charlie said this, Pete knew he was caught and was too flustered to be defensive.

“I don’t know what to do, man! You can’t tell *anybody*! Understand?” But Charlie’s reaction to Pete’s words suddenly lifted into a toothy and creepy grin.

“Are you trying to make fun of me? Are you messing with me, Pete?” Pete was taken off-guard as Charlie continued, “You know I take this *really* seriously. . . I want to be a psychiatrist when I grow up. . . or a psychologist. I don’t really know how they are different. . . But now you’re making fun of me?” And perhaps he was overreacting, but Charlie was visibly upset. Pete’s typically severe expressions did not help either.

“Sorry. It was a stupid joke, Charlie. I made it all up.” And just like that, Pete retreated back into his own shell. “It was just a joke.” And for a few moments, Charlie did his best to look unforgiving and truly hurt. However, he could not keep this up for long, being as laidback as he was, and he let up a bit.

“Oh it’s whatever, Pete. Anyway, I knew it was a joke the whole time.” Charlie spun around in his chair a grabbed the T.V. remote, instantly ending the session. Turning on the television and snatching up a nearby game console controller, he flipped onto his stomach with his socked feet in the air. “Any plans for the weekend?” Charlie turned up the T.V. volume as the game’s menu appeared and asked him to ‘press start.’

“Leo and I are digging for buried treasure. Do you want to help us?” Pete tried to relax and watch Charlie play a video game.

“Do I get a cut?”

“A what?”

“A cut. You know, my share of whatever we find. If it’s you, me and Leo, then I should get a third, right?” asked Charlie as he took a hatchet to a zombie’s forehead. And while the action on screen was swift and shaky, the blood spillage and splatter that resounded was all too vivid, even for Pete. However, he felt that to cover his eyes was not worth the effort.

“You’re not getting a third, dude.”

“A fourth?” Charlie negotiated.

“A fifth. And we have to dig at night. It’s kind of in an open spot.”

“We aren’t going to get in trouble are we? ‘Cause my mom is still pissed about when we went swimming in the creek and I ruined my pants.” Though Charlie brought up this concern, Pete knew that Charlie didn’t care what his mom thought about his behavior. It wasn’t that Charlie was careless or rebellious, but rather it was that his mother was hardly ever home, unable to keep a clean house or a stable and consistent family environment. With this often resulting in Charlie having the whole house to himself, he would fill his time with instructional YouTube ‘how-to’ videos. One might describe him as a know-it-all, but perhaps he actually *did* know it all... at least far more than any of his peers. I mean, he even knew how to make smoke bombs out of newspaper and ice packs.

“Well of course we aren’t going to get in trouble! I mean, we gotta do it all sneaky. Then we’ll be fine. Is your mom going to be home this weekend?” Pete already knew the answer and was also now completely awake from his inner nightmare.

“No.”

“Then let’s have a slumber party here. And we can stay up digging all night.” Whereas most children would be more subtle when inviting themselves to another friend’s house—and heavens knows, reader, we all tried it—Pete was a doer and did not hesitate with social etiquette, at least not with Charlie.



*CHAPTER VIII*

# A TREASURE PROMISED

**1**

“What are you doing, Pete?” Leo whispered while drowsily kneading his entire eye with his clenched fist. In those same footy pajamas that he always wore at night (except for single occasion when mother insisted they be washed), Leo crept down the hallway to Pete sitting on the second-floor staircase.

“Shh! They’re talking about mom’s case,” Pete hissed with his ear aiming openly to the soft voices below. And for a number of seemingly endless moments, the boys remained silent. Leo was especially quiet as he could hear nothing downstairs and would have to trust Pete to gather every word. Leo thought of outer space...

**2**

And like a breath to a powdered-sugar covered brownie, a faint cloud of dust came forth as his moon boot pressed down on the planet’s surface. Looking up, Leo could see the red horizon as its sharp and craggy pinnacles penetrated upwards into the infinite black. And though this blackness was no doubt infinite, it was host to many bright colors of distant nebulae and stagnant, glowing stars. And thinking of this... of how something can be one thing yet allow for its opposite to coexist so beautifully... Leo remembered one particular night at the county fair. As he withdrew from the crowd, he found a smooth

boulder which stood at the foot of Sarah Garson's Lake (named after a seventeen year old who drowned there four years prior) and sat atop it, folding his legs like a pretzel. Leo sat there for nearly an hour while admiring the midnight blackness of the water. And soon he focused rather on the dazzling fairground lights glimmering with every ripple on the pitch black surface. And the stars beyond... even *they* sparkled in the dark waters. A cohesion like none other. Of course, Leo's vocabulary had not yet discovered words like "cohesion," but the word perfectly described his thoughts as, in this waking dream, his eyes widened to take in the very grandest view of the universe surrounding the red planet. Standing there on his own two feet, he was infinitely small, alone with the infinite stretching of the stars. But Leo, for the first time in his young life, felt like a giant, for his steps were the first. He had gone where no man had gone before. He stood there... a triumph for mankind. Contrasting with every daily instance where he came last in line—the bottom percent of the normal curve—in this moment, Leo was first. An un-replicable rush filled him as he knew he had done something that no other human in all of history had done.

### 3

Overflowing now with such peace, Leo looked back at Pete sitting on the top stair step who wore a look of concern.

"They're gonna dig up the grave on Monday!" Pete was very worried, but did his best not to let it show. "We have to..." But he couldn't finish his thought, and Leo jumped in.

"What are we going to do?"

"We have the weekend. We can still do it."

"But how? Mom's going to wonder where we are."

"We're going to a slumber party tomorrow night at Charlie's. Mom already said we could. We'll dig all night, and maybe fill it in the next morning."

"Can Samuel come too?" Leo knew this was a lot to ask, but they both knew they'd need help digging.

"Okay, but he can't have anything we find. It's all ours... and some for Charlie." And it was decided.

### 4

The following Friday afternoon, Pete and Leo returned to the dig site. They brought with them two large shovels and one small spade which they had 'borrowed' from their garage wall. Pete carried these in a raggedy quilt as they crawled under the grave's outer stone wall. As usual, the brothers spoke as little as

possible. After all, any forced conversation was likely to spark an argument, and there was important work to be done.

Pete took the first digging shift. Stepping down into the hole, he was immediately faced with the same chill of the other day with the silverfish. But he grit his teeth and began digging violently, not giving the fear a proper foothold in his mind. Leo's company helped as well, for Pete knew that only in solitude did such terrific visions appear. And with each violent stab of the shovel, the wood handle resonated and made his hands tingle and ache.

Pete's intensity began to frighten Leo enough for him to remain silent. Whenever Leo found he couldn't pinpoint the source of Pete's mood, he would assume fault, even if no particular reasons came to mind. But he had no opinion of this as it was all he had ever known. He just did that which felt most natural: to give Pete ample space and stay out of his line of sight. This new adventure reminded Leo of when he and Pete built the Hovel. To Leo these two exciting expenditures, the Hovel and digging out this grave, seemed far too childish to be something Pete would be so involved in. Pete usually invested his time into more mature tasks, such as creating a thriving lemonade business or memorizing a speech by President Lincoln, as activities involving the use of imagination seemed childish. And though Pete was definitely a child, his participating in these tasks was not a reaffirmation of his youth, but, as apparent to Leo, it was like an adult Pete was guiltily indulging in an inappropriate act of immaturity. All the while, this adult was insisting it was not childish at all, but just a way to unwind.

Pete found that the best way to feel comfortable with this dilemma was to never speak of or acknowledge its reality. And sure this never brought him true peace, avoiding the question, but it also spared him discomfort in its particulars.

Pete stopped digging and froze altogether. Leo, taken off guard, paused a moment with him.

"Pete. What—"

"Shh!!" he brought his finger to his lips, and his eyes widened. And after another pause... "somebody's coming!" And immediately the boys heard the rattling of the grave's wooden door as one by one its locks were released. As the keys turned, each metallic clank rang unnaturally loud in Leo's ears. The boys scrambled, so sure they'd be caught or even killed. As the door rattled on, Pete pushed the shovels through the hole beneath the outer wall and dragged Leo out with him. And gathering behind a bush just outside the grave, Pete and Leo watched through the crawl hole as the unexpected visitor entered. They could only see feet as they fell limping with each short step until they stopped in shock at the foot of the pit. And Leo gasped as he recognized these strange steps.

“It’s the old man from the playground!” he whispered. But Pete quickly shushed him, and they both looked on. The old man’s feet stopped in surprise... then shuffled and kicked a bit of dirt into the pit. The boys shuddered at every one of his motions, afraid he would suddenly kneel down and peer back at them through the hole beneath the wall. But instead, the old man’s tennis shoes pivoted around and left the grave. Shortly after, Pete and Leo heard the door close and the locks being restored. Expecting the old man would circle around the outer wall, the boys crawled silently back through the hole and were safe again behind the grave walls.

Once the old man’s uneven footsteps had diminished far beyond the cemetery fence, Pete took out the shovel again and began digging even more violently than before.

“What are you doing, Pete? We’re going to get caught!”

“Don’t you get it? Now we *know* there’s something buried here. And we’ll find it tonight! We got all night. And Charlie and Samuel will help.” Pete returned to his digging, and he made a lot of headway. However it wasn’t long before he became exhausted.

With his hands now bright red and throbbing in pain, Pete sprung out of the hole and subtly motioned Leo to pick up where he had left off. And as Leo cautiously descended to the bottom, he was eager to impress Pete with any progress his digging could make.

*CHAPTER IX*

# THE SLIDING HEAD

## 1

“Pete?” Leo abruptly stopped digging. And he noticed an envelope a darkness and bitter terror surround him. It must’ve appeared around him during his last blink. “Pete!!! Are you up there?” Looking up to the rim of the excavation, Leo only saw a looming nighttime sky with luminescent clouds rushing past at a harrowing speed. Leo was here. All alone.

*Keep digging!* And he abided. Unable to find the shovel in the pitch black below him, he bravely stretched his hands out and began clawing away clumps of mud. On the nape of his neck, he felt raindrops splash and run down the back of his footy pajamas. He couldn’t even see what he was clawing at... He could only trust his sense of touch as he knelt in the soft muck. Frantically, he grasped again and again for clumps of mud and flung them upwards to the surface. Then the rain came harder and poured into the pit. He could feel the water soak through his pajamas at the knees and it was so very cold... *Keep digging, Leo!*

The navy and grey sky above him boomed with thunder so loud that he jumped to his feet and yelped. Looking upwards again, he could now see the top of the grave’s outer wall as the downpour splashed atop it. *KEEP DIGGING LEO!!* And he turned back around and clawed harder at the cold mud. But then he felt his hand touch something warmer... as if he had reached a hot spring in the ground. The sensation was quite shocking to him, and for a moment he considered if he had cut himself on something or

even lost a finger. But as he contemplated this, he felt the warm fluid rush across the bottom of the hole and spread to his legs. And with this he knew something terrible had happened and that he would have to inspect his hands in the moonlight. Leo turned to face the wall's peak and held his hands up past the pit's edge. As the pit's veil of shadow yielded, slipping down his palms, Leo shook in terror, finding a thick coat of blood all over.

But switching his focus past his hands, he witnessed a stranger sight. There, beyond his bloody hands, peeking just over the outer wall, was the face of Charlie... illuminated by some odd glow. Though his facial features were recognizable, the shape of his face was strangely distorted, as if his head had been stuffed with potatoes to its near bursting point. And his eyes were terribly large and gaping at Leo as if ready to burst outward from their sockets like pinballs poised to launch. A fanged smile spanned the entire lower half of its face. But his smile... Leo could see his teeth were gone and replaced with clusters of human fingers, shivering... twitching. Then this head rose slowly over the wall, revealing a stretched, and crooked neck that, in proportion to his bloated head, was as thin as a lollipop stick. And with his rising head, came his pointed shoulders and their stick-like arms of equal width and extraordinary length, reaching over the top to scale the wall. His movements were slow and careful, while simultaneously jagged and abrupt, like a clay animation.

As Leo's face turned white with terror he heard a low gargle in the pit behind him at which he screamed and had to turn around. Peering into the blackness below, he heard the gargle as it was eclipsed by a low rumble beneath his feet. But before he could flee the pit, a geyser of blood shot up and blasted him in the face. Increasing its pressure, this geyser knocked Leo backwards against the wall of the pit. In a matter of seconds, Leo was waist-deep in this warm blood, and it filled the pit at an incredible pace. And though he grasped upwards for the surface, the rain made his fingers slip and fall back into the bloody pool. He tried to scream but almost immediately after his mouth was open, blood rushed in and silenced him. He choked and coughed trying not to drown. Leo should rather have drowned than endure what came next. As his last grasp to the surface slipped, a hand of baby's fingers pulled him up, up, up... out of the pool of blood by his soaking hair, and his body turned to face a wretched sight. He now dangled ten feet off the ground... face to face with Charlie's terrible grin. And now the monster's fingered teeth, just inches from Leo's face, snapped into a frenzy... fluttering in reach for Leo's face and perhaps aiming to engulf him whole. This horrible face, thirsty to gobble up Leo, scared him so much that he tried pulling out his own hair to escape its grasp. And in a desperate blow, he punched one of Charlie's grapefruit-sized eyeballs. The monster's grip was instantly

released, and Leo plummeted downwards, landing with a splash just next to the now overflowing pit of blood.

Stunned at his sudden freedom, Leo froze for a moment and saw Charlie's stick-like limbs and figure towering over him. This creature's arms and legs seemed to have awkward and knobby joints randomly located along their length. There was nothing symmetrical about its stance. In fact, its left leg was about a foot shorter than its right, and it stood with a crooked slump. *RUN YOU IDIOT!!*

In a flash, Leo flipped onto his stomach and wiggled through the hole under the stone wall. Tripping here and there over the many gravestones, Leo ran as fast as he could to the street. Once he reached it, he looked behind him to see Charlie's stretched figure climbing slothfully over the wall. But it was this laborious speed that made its image against the skyline so menacing. Leo became filled with paranoid dread as he ran down the street, and Charlie fell out of his line of sight. As the rain continued to pour down, Leo was careful not to lose footing on the slick black street.

And so he ran, and ran, and ran... looking down every intersection he passed... expecting Charlie's monstrosity to stand camouflaging next to any street lamp or telephone pole... waiting there for him. And as he never saw him, he grew more and more afraid, just as a wasp buzzing around a room is much more terrifying you lose sight of it. The streets were completely deserted. He knew Charlie was after him, but where? How far away? Perhaps he was just around the next corner, standing awkwardly stiff, waiting to devour...

Eventually reaching his own front lawn, Leo looked by the tall oak tree for a lurking Charlie. But he found nothing there. Reflecting on his run from the cemetery, it felt he had been running home for an eternity before arriving. *Or maybe your sense of time is wrong.* All he knew for sure was that despite his run, he was still soaking wet with blood as the pouring rain neglected to cleanse him.

In a haste, he sprinted across the lawn and through the already open front door. After slamming it shut behind him, he turned the handle's lock and drew its bolt. He then did the same for every other downstairs entrance, and at each window he would peer out in every direction, pressing his face against the pane to widen his field of vision. Yet he never caught sight of Charlie's monstrous figure. *You're in a nightmare, Leo. You need to wake up.*

Then Leo looked up the wooden staircase. The moonlight glowed from the upstairs hallway, and the baluster silhouettes sprawled across the opposite wall. Hearing nothing but the torrential downpour outside as it blasted against the windows, he ascended slowly—his sopping wet pajama feet squishing with each step and chance creak. Not halfway up the stairs, he could see the light on the hallway wall dancing

from the rainy window panes in his bedroom. A bluish haze that seemed to lull the house into a false slumber. Growing calmer, Leo finally noticed his bloody trail spread downstairs and following him up the steps.

... Slowly unzipping and peeling off his red and soaked footy pajamas, Leo stood on top of his stepping stool and looked hard into the bathroom mirror. His skin was stained red with blood, but he did his best to wash it at the sink. *Wake up, Leo.* He lightly slapped his face. *Wake up!!!* He squeezed his eyes shut with all his strength, but when he opened them again... nothing. And he looked to his left out into the hallway. He left the bathroom door open so he could hear...

He stepped down from the yellow plastic stool and reached across the bathtub, twisting the plastic handle and running the shower. Waiting on the other side of the curtain for the water to heat up, he sat staring through the open doorway... trying to hear over the running water and the rain outside. But it was no use.

Leo scrubbed his skin with the bar soap as the water turned bright red and mingled in the whirlpool spinning around the drain. Every ten or fifteen seconds, he would draw the curtain back a little and check the bathroom doorway. But there was nothing there. When he was clean, he twisted back the shower handle and a deep gargling diminished as the remaining drops circled the drain. Leo kept his eyes on the doorway as he stepped out onto the bath mat and dried off his shivering body. And when he finally took his eyes off the doorway, he saw his previously white towel had become splotched pink with faint blood stains. He then reached down to dry his feet when a strange sound came from outside the bathroom. It was so faint... almost impossible to hear over the wind and rain. But there it was... a scratching... a or chafing... It sounded exactly like if one were to rub two fingers together right by their ear. Like a one-inch tall man was sawing through a toothpick. Who knew that such a faint, ordinary sound would scare you so. And Leo was shaking again... unsure of how this nightmare would end. *Go to bed! If you go to sleep in a dream, you wake up in real life!* Leo had no choice but to listen. It was the only way out. And he had to get out...

Creeping naked into his room, the chafing sound seemed to have disappeared. He tiptoed to his dresser and withdrew a pair of pajama pants from the top drawer. Slipping them on, he stepped towards his bottom bunk. However, there was a body, bundled in sheets in his place. *Pete! What are you doing in my bed?!* He turned around and made his way over to Pete's vacant bed. Crawling underneath the covers, he sat back against the headboard and waited in silence. He couldn't hear any snoring from Pete, but still he waited... hoping that he would eventually fall asleep. And slowly his eye lids fluttered and he began drifting...

But then! What's this? That noise again! Louder this time! Leo looked over at Pete's body in his bed... *Pete?! Is that you??* The moonlight from the window continued to dance with the rain, and Leo began mistaking their shadows with something moving inside the room. But the chafing noise continued!

*Pete! Wake up! I think there's something in the house!* But Pete never budged, and Leo knew the noise was coming from his side of the room. Could it be a cicada trapped in the corner? Leo quickly sat more upright and cautiously leaned towards the foot of the bed. *Pete! Stop messing around! Pete, wake up!* And as Pete failed to respond or make any movement, Leo grew so frightened that tears streamed down his cheeks and he moaned uncontrollably. For a few more minutes he sat there crying, waiting as the noise grew louder and louder. But then... it stopped altogether. There was nothing to rise above the rain outside. And Leo perked his ears... waiting.

A slow creak came forth in the shadowed room, and Leo saw, to his horror, the closet door across from him swing slowly open. And as the door's shadow chased the moonlight into a retreat across the bedroom wall, Leo's throat grew dry... every scream within him, poised to release, fell hushed. For there, in the dark, shallow closet, stood Charlie's sickly figure... its neck and limbs hunched over to fit inside. Its eyes glowing like a cornered dog's, and its head quivering as the sticklike neck struggled to manage its weight. This monster stepped out slowly from the darkened closet and towards the bed, its limbs straightening and standing erect as much as the concave ceiling allowed. Its steps were as clumsy as those of a man on stilts, where all weight followed each step. But despite its long legs, its steps were short, as if it knew that for each step it took, Leo grew more and more terrified than he had ever thought possible. It craved Leo's fear. And when, at last, Charlie's silhouette stood before the bed, Leo found the ability in him to release a barrage of blood-curdling screams. And the creature's infant hands extending from its pipe-like arms reached out to grab Leo's legs. Though Leo flailed and kicked frantically, Charlie's mutant hands soon found deadly grip around Leo's ankles and dragged him to the edge of the bed. Crazy with ear-splitting screams, Leo looked up at Charlie's horribly large head as it gargled blood from its mouth and down its chin with the same low-drone as the bathtub drain. Then, as if a laser had sliced instantly through its throat, a spurt of blood hit Leo in the eye, and drips trailed all around its neck circumference down to its boney shoulders. And its head continued its low gargling sound as it slid slowly off its pedestal and plunged directly into Leo's lap.

Now finding the grip loose on his ankles, Leo shook wildly to knock the head off of him. But it only bobbed there between his knees as it grew larger... and larger... Blood dripped from its gaping eye sockets and nose and ears as its fingered teeth groped wildly for a hold of Leo. And Leo's screams topped themselves as it burst...

## 2

“Leo!! Wake up!” cried Pete. But Leo’s screams continued for nearly thirty more seconds. This night terror was still being projected from Leo’s mind. But after Leo’s screams diminished and were replaced by a violent sobbing, Pete held Leo’s head close to his chest... shushing him. But even then, knowing he was now awake, Leo could not begin to grow at ease. He could still feel the head bobbling in his lap. Even knowing Pete was holding him, Leo was afraid to open his eyes... afraid they still might be in their bedroom. But eventually he had to open them. And he almost slipped back into his fit of terror when he saw Charlie crouched behind the couch, looking straight at him. But he knew this was not the monster from his dream. He was in Charlie’s basement, and he felt safer now.

“I was so scared, man!” Charlie exclaimed. And Pete looked back at him.

“What about Joanne?”

“I think she’s still asleep upstairs.”

“After all that?” Pete was amazed.

“I don’t know. I guess it wasn’t that loud.”

“Dammit, Charlie. Why is she even here, anyway?”

“She’s my cousin. She’s here lots of times.”

“No, you idiot! What if she tells on us for being up?!”

“Don’t worry about it! She’s still asleep. Anyway, we got all of the stuff packed. We should head out now.” Charlie was already dressed with a backpack slung on his shoulder. Then Leo noticed Samuel staring at him from the basement corner. He looked away as Leo spotted him and continued to pack his own backpack. And as Pete helped Leo out of his sleeping bag, he felt it was damp.

“What the shit, Leo! Did you wet the bed?”

“Shut up! It was an accident.” This only prolonged Leo’s sobbing. He was still frightened and simultaneously filled with shame.

*CHAPTER X*

# THE HOLLOW

**1**

“A cemetery?” Charlie stood in disbelief. “You didn’t say anything about a cemetery, Pete!” But Pete ignored Charlie and continued past the iron fence.

“I left the shovels wrapped in a blanket by the spot,” he declared to the group following him, and he looked back at Leo quickly to be sure he was not still shaken up. And he wasn’t. . . but as they drew near the stone walls of the grave, Leo could think only of the geyser of blood that nearly drowned him. Still able to taste the blood in the back of his throat as it pushed to fill his lungs, Leo half expected to find his trail of blood leading out from the hole beneath the outer wall. *Of course it isn’t there, Leo. Come on. It was just a nightmare. It’s over now.* And it was not there. In fact, the hole beneath the wall had been completely filled in with fresh dirt. And suddenly there was a sinking feeling in the Pete and Leo’s stomachs. Somebody had found their secret entrance. Somebody knew they would come back.

Pete thought it was some kind of sting and hurriedly scouted the surroundings. *It was a trap! The police are waiting for us to return to the scene of the crime!* In fact, just at that moment, Pete heard a faint noise in the distance behind. Such a small disturbance was most certainly a squirrel or bird. But Pete saw nothing, and there were no cars parked along the distant street. *If they were here they would’ve jumped out by now.* And though this offered temporary relief, Pete then remembered the shovels. *Oh no! They’ll be*

*gone. They took them!* He dove to the blocked crawlspace and began clawing away the dirt. Samuel joined him shortly, and soon the hole was clear again. Pete was the first to wiggle through and after a few seconds he called out to the others.

“Uh... They’re still here.” But something in Pete’s voice seemed frightened. So Leo and the other two were quick to enter the grave behind him. Though Charlie and Samuel were still perplexed at Pete’s concern upon entering, Leo knew its source immediately. The pit was filled entirely.

“Pete, what happened to the—”

“The shovels? They’re right here,” Pete interrupted dismissively.

“No, I mean the—”

“I just told you, retard. The shovels are right here.” And here Pete sent such a stern glance that Leo understood to shut his mouth. Such sharp a glance took no trouble in catching Charlie’s attention.

“Something wrong, Peter?” And Charlie’s question and suspicious gaze met Pete’s.

“If there were, Charlie... you’d be the first to know.” Pete played it off masterfully. After all, there was no reason to worry the others. They were going to find the treasure that night. Nothing was going to stop them! Samuel was most anxious to dig, so he took the first shovel and Pete followed suit.

## 2

The boys continued rotating digging shifts, and in just a half an hour, the hole was dug out to yesterday’s depth. But digging in the dark seemed much different to Pete and Leo. When they reached their previous depth, neither of them wanted to dig further. Pete was still haunted by the silverfish corpse his shovel split... and Leo by the geyser of blood. Though their dread remained undetected because both simply handed off the shovels to Charlie and Samuel when they had reached this point. And as these other two began digging, within three stabs they hit something...

As the shovel head struck it a few times, it gave a low thud. The boys all recognized the sound from countless adventure movies. *We’ve struck gold!* Leo was terrified. And though Pete inwardly reflected the same smile worn by Charlie and Samuel as they exchanged glances, he maintained the stern look of their fearless leader. As if he were their pirate captain, he nodded for them to dig up the treasure. The two bent over and continued digging with their hands.

And then Pete heard it again. Not twenty yards behind them, he heard sounds of movement in the darkness. It seemed so loud to Pete. But looking at Leo, who was ever-so-cautious, he realized his own ears were the only to detect the sounds. Down on their knees, Charlie and Samuel cleared away the dirt with

awe-struck hands. Their fingertips found a gap between two wooden boards and followed it. The gap stretched further than they had expected as they uncovered the thin blanket of dirt. The more they uncovered, the more they realized that this was no treasure chest...

“It’s the coffin.” Pete said, not surprised.

“A coffin?” Samuel gasped, “we can’t open a coffin!” He looked up at Pete while Charlie continued clearing dirt. “No... no no no... We’ll get in trouble. You said yourself that they were going to dig it up on Tuesday. They’ll know we were here!”

“Monday... And besides, any treasure that is buried here will be inside the coffin, shit-head.” But then Charlie stood up.

“It’s not a coffin, guys...”

“What do you mean? What is it?” whimpered Leo.

“It is too a coffin!” Samuel snapped.

“I don’t know... it’s too big for a coffin.” Charlie said kicking a little more dirt.

“It could be a big coffin...” said Samuel taking a closer look. But he hadn’t even finished his sentence before Pete swung his backpack off his back and unzipped it. The other three watched as Pete withdrew a small hatchet and tossed it onto the wood planks.

### 3

Charlie had already started hacking at the wood planks with the hatchet before Leo could object. “Dad’s hatchet?” he asked, as frightened as he should have been.

“He’s not going to notice it was ever gone. When was the last time you saw him use it?” Pete calmed Leo.

“We could’ve brought something else. Not dad’s tools.”

“Like what, Leo?! I didn’t see you bring anything, except that stupid lunchbox!” Pete was always annoyed with Leo for carrying that thing around all the time. He remembered that as a child, he would always carry around a favorite toy. In his case, “Badger the Panda”—a stuffed panda with a hole up its ass so you could move its mouth with your hand. But this fixation on a toy was something for children, and if there was anything that annoyed Pete most about Leo, it was his childlike behaviors. And perhaps it was the sudden need to bravely explore what lied below that made Pete’s temper flare over the silly lunchbox, and Leo could see Pete’s anger boiling. But Pete had better to know... If there was one thing that Leo would defend until the very end, it was his lunchbox.

Finally, the brothers heard the splintering of wood as Charlie yanked away the fragmented planks below. “Woah!” he yelled from the bottom of the pit, “Get a load of this!” Charlie and Samuel had hunched over the opening, peering inside. Pete aimed his flashlight past their two heads and beyond the wooden planks. Even Pete was shocked at what he saw. Expecting a petrified corpse, instead he found the casket had no backing, and his flashlight beam stretched on into seemingly endless darkness.

“Ugh! That’s nasty!” Samuel exclaimed squeezing his nose, as a stench bellowed from the opening.

“Smells like a rotted body, you pussies! What did you expect?” Pete started looking around for a rock or stick... something to drop down into the darkness.

“Actually, that smell is mold. Which suggests a large amount of moisture,” Charlie corrected. Leo was keeping his distance from the darkness below, being careful not to look directly into it as he feared something might fly out. Bats, he thought. Or a giant jumping thing, like a grasshopper or wolf spider. He hadn’t noticed, but he had actually begun shivering from this fear. Pete, however, did notice Leo’s shivering and was deeply agitated by the loud rattling of something inside the aluminum lunchbox that Leo’s shaking grip clutched tightly now.

“Can you cut that out?” Pete snapped.

“Huh? Cut what out?” Leo responded, snapping out of the darkness he imagined below.

“You! With that stupid lunchbox!” Leo’s face squished into a frown, and he did his best to steady his hand.

“We going down there or what?” called Charlie over his shoulder, “Get the flashlight over here?” Samuel stepped forward with his arm in his backpack, digging around for the other flashlight. Finding it, he handed it to Charlie. Pete looked over Charlie’s shoulder into the dark chamber as Charlie shed light below. The floor of this chamber was not too far below, about seven feet. “What’s that there?”

“Let’s go find out,” said Pete, patting Charlie on the shoulder. “You go first, Charlie.” Charlie lowered his body as far down as he could before dropping onto the chamber floor.

“Alright, lower the little guys.” Charlie said, using his sleeve over his face to protect his nose from the moldy stench.

“Is there anything down there?? Did you look around?” called Leo out to Charlie.

“It’s just a big hole. Hurry on down here.”

“Let’s go, Samuel. I’ll lower you down,” Pete said. And grabbing Samuel by the wrists, he lowered him into the chamber while Charlie grabbed his legs and lowered him safely to the floor. “Alright, your turn, Leo. Throw the lunchbox down there so I can grab your wrists.”

“No! Just grab one of my wrists. I can hold onto it,” whimpered Leo clutching his lunchbox tight.

“I need both your arms, stupid. Just throw it down there.”

“I said no!! I’m really light. Just lower me with one hand.” Leo almost started crying here. Perhaps he was tired. Perhaps he was scared. Perhaps it was this lunchbox that comforted him in this moment of fear. But Pete hadn’t the time to argue with Leo, so he huffed and grumbled his curses, grabbed Leo’s wrist, squeezed it hard, and lowered him slowly into the chamber. Pete then leapt down by himself into the chamber and looked around.

“Get out the other flashlights.” Pete ordered, and Samuel abided, withdrawing two more flashlights from the backpack. Leo tried to procure one of these flashlights, but Samuel tossed one to Pete and kept the other.

“How far down do you think it goes?” asked Pete as he joined Charlie on the edge of a large hole in the floor. The diameter of this hole was approximately six feet. The great, unfathomable darkness below seemed to bellow in deep, subtle breaths, instilling dread and wonder in all four of the boys.

“No idea. It could be water below,” said Charlie. Pete scanned the chamber and his eyes caught sight again of the lunchbox, wrapped tightly in Leo’s arms.

“Well let’s find out.” In a flash, Pete tried snatching the lunchbox from Leo’s embrace, but Leo held tightly and cried out.

“NO PETE!! STOP! IT’S MINE!!” And as Leo maintained his grip on the lunchbox’s handle, a wrestling ensued. Pete leapt on top of Leo and tried prying each one of Leo’s fingers off the handle. Leo’s screams continued. “YOU CAN’T!!! IT’S MINE!!” Pete gritted his teeth in unfiltered fury and strength. Soon, this strength was too much for Leo, Pete flew back with the lunchbox. He then started walking towards the large hole. Leo was quick to dive at his legs and hold onto one for dear life. Pete kept walking, dragging Leo behind him. When he came close enough, Pete tossed Leo’s most precious possession into the opening and silence from all four boys followed. While Leo fell silent in shock, the others tried to listen for a clang or splash as the lunchbox travelled quickly down. *Wait for it... wait for it...*

Then they heard it. A faint clang and its grand echo that followed. The boys’ silence continued for a moment until Charlie could not help but pipe up.

“That’s really far down...” Charlie looked at the others. Leo’s tears had welled up so much that they had no choice but to burst.

“HOW COULD YOU! YOU JERK!! THAT’S MINE!” Leo screamed at Pete.

“I DON’T CARE, LEO! NOW SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Sure, Pete was furious at Leo’s rebellious response, but even Pete knew the shame that followed his use of such a word. Not even Leo could say anything in response, and the other two boys waited in silence for whatever Pete was going to say next. Afraid to correct him or defend Leo, Charlie continued staring down the pit while Samuel refused to make eye contact with anyone and just leered at the contents of the backpack. Even Leo’s tears now fell silent.

PART TWO

# THE GREAT DISCOVERY



*CHAPTER XI*

# THE COLLAPSE

**1**

“Now what?” Charlie asked, breaking the silence in the chamber.

“We look around. Maybe start digging again.” Pete replied, returning to his more decisive role as leader. Samuel was quick to obey and searched around the chamber with his flashlight. Leo sat still, knowing that Pete would not ask him to get up and help. Pete knew he had pushed Leo too far, but an apology or any sympathy was out of the question. The Hercules ruled with might over right. Suddenly, a tiny voice squeaked from their entrance above.

“I found you!” said the voice, and all four boys dropped their flashlights and squealed in terror that they had been caught. But Charlie, upon recovering his light and shining it above, found an extremely annoying face and reflective eyeglasses peeking through the broken wood planks.

“Joanne! What the heck are you doing!?” Charlie stood up and walked toward her horse-ish face.

“I’m telling! You guys are in huuuuge trouble!” she chirped.

“No, Joanne! You can’t!” said Pete, jumping to his feet and shining his light at her face.

“Hey, get that light out of my eyes!” She said, but it could be argued that most of the light was reflected off her thick glasses.

“Go back to the house, stupid!” Samuel chimed in.

“No! I want to stay with you guys!” she whined at an annoying pitch, then added awkwardly, “oh, hey Leo.” Leo did not look up and kept his tears buried in his sweatshirt sleeve.

“You can’t be here with us, Joanne. Now get out of here!”

“If I can’t come with you guys then I’m going to tell....” A grin dawned slowly on her face as she knew that they had no choice but to let her down into the chamber with them.

“This is horse shit.” Pete cursed as Joanne lowered herself as far as she could into the chamber. Charlie then grabbed her legs and lowered her to the floor. “If you want to come with us then you can’t fool around... at all! We’re here on important business, understand?”

“Yep!” she chirped. Just then, Samuel called out from the other side of the chamber.

“Hey! I found a tunnel!” Samuel’s voice was slightly muffled, but Charlie and Pete found him and inspected the discovery. The opening was only about three feet high.

“That’s not a tunnel, dummy. It’s a hole,” grumbled Pete.

“Well it seems to be our only option for moving forward. We can’t very well go down that larger hole.” Charlie had a good point. “What did we bring?” Samuel then looked into the backpack and reported his findings.

“One hatchet, a hammer, two boxes of Gushers,” Samuel listed. He could’ve just said ‘two boxes of fruit snacks,’ but, to a kid, Gushers and fruit snacks were entirely different. Fruit snacks were bought by parents who only sort of loved their children. These rare delicacies were from Samuel’s loving, privileged pantry. “...Some rope, one zippo, a jar of jelly beans, two walkie talkies, and Pete’s sweatshirt.”

“Then we’re all set. Let’s go.” Charlie rolled up his sleeves. “I’ll go first.”

“No, I will go first. I’m the leader, Charlie,” Pete interjected. “Let’s go. Leo... come on now.” And Pete got onto his knees and began crawling through the crawlspace with a flashlight in hand.

## 2

The summer was always harsh, with sticky humidity. But every now and then there would come such a strong wind to make tremendous waves through the trees by the creek. There was an open clearing where Pete would sit in with the older kids. Seventh and eighth graders mostly, they would gather in this clearing to blow things up, light things on fire, and shoot bb guns at small animals. One time one of the eighth graders, Liam, shot a squirrel, cooked it, and ate it with the others, except Pete... all in this clearing. The clearing had mounds of dirt and rubble scattered about. People from all around would use this clearing

to dump their junk that the garbage trucks could not take. A few mattresses... some tires... and a couch that Pete and this gang of older kids would sit on. Pete remembered one particular occasion... when he and these boys were smoking cigarettes.

“How do you lose a pack of cigarettes, you retard?” scolded Liam.

“I said I don’t know! I just told you that! What else do you want me to say?” Pete replied impatiently. And, indeed, he had no clue where this pack of cigarettes had gone.

“You shit head. I can’t just ask my brother for another pack. That’s the last time I sell you one,” said another boy, older than Liam, as a thick cloud of smoke left his mouth. Liam and a fourth boy took drags of their cigarettes.

“Aw, come on, Dave. Just bum him one,” Liam appealed.

“Fuck you, Liam. Bum him one of your own.” Liam hesitated, then reluctantly used two fingers to fish out a cigarette. Handing across the couch, Pete greeted it with a rare response.

“Thank you,” Pete said. And then, taking out the same zippo lighter he would one day bring to Charlie’s sleepover, he lit his cigarette and puffed hard. This hurt felt good to Pete, like his shiners. It was the kind of hurt that he thought proved him tough. But what he did not know is that it proved nothing. Yet he would sit here with these boys all afternoon... and he would feel invincible.

As the wind bellowed through this opening in the trees, Leo and Samuel approached. Pete saw them coming in the distance, but he showed no concern and took another drag of smoke deep into his lungs. Leo almost tripped when he got close; maybe it was the surprising sight of Pete smoking... or a scattered patch of rubble. But when Leo saw the smoke smoothly trailing through Pete’s lips, his stomach turned and his eyes watered which he struggled to keep hidden.

“Pete... What are you doing? Mom says you can’t smoke!” Leo said this about twenty feet away from the couch as he was afraid to approach any closer. It was a combination of his fear of the boys as well as his current and prevailing need to distance himself from Pete. “Hey! I said you aren’t supposed to be smoking, Pete.” And then Pete stopped ignoring Leo, if only for a brief second as he looked directly into Leo’s tear-filled eyes and said:

“Get the fuck outta here, Leo.” And when Pete said this colorful phrase, even the other, older boys fell silent. They had seen how far Pete would push Leo, and, though they’d never say it, they wished to distance themselves from Pete at that moment and comfort poor Leo. Liam even thought to put out his half smoked cigarette.

## 3

Pete's thoughts could not help but flee to that memory as he crawled through the narrow tunnel. Pete would travel about four feet at a time, separated by pauses of shining his flashlight into the darkness ahead. It was strange. While the flashlight was very bright, its light seemed to be consumed quickly by the darkness ahead. Looking ahead, Pete was unsettled by the way the light made shadows off the clumps of dirt in the wall. No matter what angle he shone the light, there was always a renegade shadow, a corner he couldn't see. He also noticed how incredibly dry it was in the tunnel. Whenever he reached a more narrow part, his shoulders would scrape the top and release a cloud of dirt. Even his hands were so dry, despite his heavy sweating. The moisture seemed to evaporate immediately.

There was very little talking in the tunnel, mostly because even if there was it would be hard to hear. Considering the narrowness of the tunnel, the only voice clearly heard was one's own.

"You have a smelly ass, Charlie," said Samuel as he waited in place for Pete and then Charlie to continue making progress.

"What?"

"Ah, nevermind. Hey, let's go already! This tunnel is giving me the creeps."

"Everybody shut up," said Pete trying to listen.

"What's going on up there?" asked Joanne.

"I said shut up!" He yelled this even though he could not hear exactly what she said, being as far in the back of the line as she was. Pete was listening... concentrating on any noise he could discern from the tunnel ahead. *What is that?* And Pete had a thought. *Turn off your light. Turn off your light... and listen.* Pete obeyed, switching the red, plastic button on the side. And then he stared deep into the blackness ahead... waiting. *What... what is that?* It sounded like someone were rubbing their fingers together right by his ear... but at the same time the sound seemed to originate far ahead. He recognized this sound...

"Turn back everybody.... We have to go back."

"What? Why?" cried the chorus of voices behind him.

"DO WHAT I SAID!!" Pete screamed in terror. But then he heard a low rumbling crescendo as the walls of the tunnel started to shake.

"Hurry, Pete! We have to go forward! The tunnel is caving in!" cried Charlie, the voice of reason. And Pete had no choice but to scramble forward in total blindness. The others followed, screaming

helplessly. As Pete crawled forward rapidly, his only sense of the tunnel were the sounds of a collapse, growing louder, and the touch of the tunnel floor, rocky and dry. And as the rumbling and crashing reached its loudest, he stepped forward with his hand to find nothing below and he fell forward onto a lower surface with Charlie and others landing on top of him. Then there was a scream behind them and they knew that somebody had been hurt. Pete groped frantically in the darkness for the flashlight he dropped. Feeling only loose rocks at first, he finally rejoiced when his fingers met the familiar plastic of the flashlight. He turned it on and looked behind him, seeing the pileup of Charlie, Samuel, and Leo. But then he saw a more distressing sight: Joanne's torso sticking out of the tunnels exit that had collapsed on her.

“OW! I'm stuck! It hurts, Pete!” she cried. “I think I hurt my leg!”



*CHAPTER XII***TUNNELS****1**

“Is she okay?” Leo cried. But nobody else knew what to say. They were all so scared for their own lives that they were just now beginning to process Joanne’s current peril.

“I can’t move! Somebody help me!” she pleaded to the boys. But even Charlie, the man with the plan, was speechless now. Pete was actually the first to jump up and bring his flashlight over to Joanne.

“Dammit, Joanne. Does it hurt?” He aimed the flashlight to the ground before her, trying not to shine the flashlight in her eyes. Through all the excitement of the collapse, her thick glasses somehow managed to remain on her face. Joanne could not respond to Pete’s question, and she sniffled, beginning to cry. Pete tried telling her to be quiet, appealing to her courage, but the only thing she could do, stuck helplessly beneath the weight of who knows how much rubble, was to cry for her mother.

“I want to see my mommy!!” she wept.

“Charlie! Samuel! Did you find your flashlights yet? Help me out here!” Pete called out to the darkness where he heard their groans.

“Here it is,” Charlie replied, “found it.” And Samuel soon found his flashlight as well.

“Come help me,” Pete called with the fresh optimism of a returning leader, “We have to pull her out.” Charlie and Samuel quickly stood up and joined Pete at the caved-in crawlspace. Leo stood now by

Joanne, holding her hand. Then Pete spoke again: “Okay. Charlie, grab her other arm and pull with me. On three. One... Two... Three!” And he and Charlie yanked Joanne’s arms hard. There was a little movement in the rocks on top of her, but they made no progress.

“OWWWW!!!! THAT HURTS!!! I SAID I WANT MY MOMMY!” Poor, poor Joanne cried out.

“SHUT UP, JOANNE! YOUR MOM ISN’T COMING!” yelled Pete, and his echo filled the chamber. And with this sudden realization, tears filled everyone’s eyes. Pete, however, was quick to dry them before they ever fell, Leo cried the second loudest, after Joanne. Even Charlie started to break down. Nobody could be upset with Pete for saying what he did; it was the truth... the truth they all faced now. They were now in serious trouble. But Pete was not going to perish here. He had made up his mind. The Hercules never despaired, he told himself. But he was wrong, you see. Everyone would have their time to despair, but Pete was not about to allow it be here and now. So he grabbed Joanne’s wrist again and looked over at Charlie, “Let’s go. Let’s try again.” And then Charlie made eye contact and understood, grabbing her other wrist. “One... two... three!” The boys yanked. Nothing.

“One...” Charlie counted off now, “two... three!” And they pulled again, but this time Pete’s strength pulled Joanne’s arm right out of its socket with a disturbing pop, and she let out a shrill cry.

“AHHHHH!! My arm!!”

“Holy shit, Pete! Her arm!” But Pete was already grabbing her other arm, desperate now to get her out. Samuel was trying to shift the rocks on top of her, but they were so heavy that he could not make any substantial progress.

“Wait, Pete!” Leo called out, but it was too late. Pete was pulling Joanne out by her last arm as hard as he could. And then Pete heard that same disturbing pop again as her other arm was pulled out of its socket. But Joanne could not scream anymore and she passed out.

“What the hell are you doing, dumbass! You made it worse!” Charlie shrieked, shoving Pete back a few feet. But Pete was mad now. Mostly because of his failure to help Joanne but also for being shoved.

“DON’T YOU DARE TOUCH ME!! EVER!! I’m not going to leave her here!”

“We should be looking for a way out! So we can get help,” Samuel said. And it was at this point that the boys realized they had not inspected their new surroundings. Shining their lights around, they saw that this chamber was a bit smaller than the last. Instead of a large pit in the middle, there were two five-foot diameter tunnels branching into two directions.

“Is there any other way?”

“No,” said Pete, “We have to split up.”

“We can’t just leave Joanne here, guys!” said Leo.

“Fine. If you want to be a pussy, then stay here with her.”

“We should give him one of the walkie talkies then, so we can find our way back,” suggested Charlie. And again, the man with the plan came through on another good idea.

## 2

The boys first decided that Samuel and Charlie take one tunnel, and Pete would take the other, but Pete appealed this, saying Charlie should go by himself and take the backpack with him if he needed it. Charlie said ‘That sounds fine to me,’ with his eyes annoyingly closed, and it was settled. Leo had a flashlight now and was given his walkie talkie, and Pete and Samuel took the other.

Pete and Samuel set off through their tunnel and tried utilizing their light source the best they could and trying to cast its light on as many dark corners as possible. Pete found a spark of hope in the tunnel walls. The dirt was quite compact and vertically ribbed as if a large drill had dug through. He mentioned this to Samuel.

“These must be man-made,” he said. And while this made Pete feel more at ease that they would find a way to the surface, it made Samuel grow frightened that there would be somebody down there to jump out and kill them. Samuel thought briefly of a Mortal Kombat kill move that he imagined their assailant might use, but then realized the ridiculousness of such a thought.

The tunnels were perfectly elliptical, which, perhaps, would not fit as well with Pete’s drill theory, but he had not even considered this. Like the inside the crawlspace before it had collapsed, Pete noticed again how the darkness ahead devoured the flashlight’s light, as if they were descending into a black fog. Then Pete’s nose caught scent of a strange and foul smell. As the boys continued through the tunnel on a downward slope, they approached a point where the tunnel went straight down into the floor. But this part was sealed off by a bunch of egg-sized rocks. As Pete drew close, he found these rocks were the source of the stench. They formed an even barrier from the tunnel below.

“CHARLIE!!” Pete called out. Then he heard Leo’s voice on the walkie talkie.

*“Charlie says he found a dead end with some stinky rocks.”*

“Okay, Leo tell him to come back to our tunnel.”

“Roger,” Leo said. *“Over and out.”*



*CHAPTER XIII*

# THE WOMB CHAMBER

## 1

“What do you think it is?” Pete asked Charlie as they crouched over the rock barrier.

“I don’t know. But it has to be our only way out. There were no other tunnels that we missed,” Charlie replied. And for a few minutes longer they considered other options, some options they didn’t even have. Charlie even said, “Wish we had some dynamite.”

But eventually Samuel said, “Looks like we have to dig through, then.”

“Let’s get started,” Pete affirmed, and they all started tossing handfuls of rocks to the side. This process took over fifteen minutes as they found the rock layer was thicker than they had thought. During this time, Pete brought the box of Gushers back to Leo in case he got hungry. “Keep her awake, Leo... She needs to stay awake.” But Pete soon ran back to the barrier upon hearing, “We’re through!”

When Pete reached the dig site, he found Charlie and Samuel crouched around the opening, shining a flashlight below.

“What do you think is down there?” Samuel spoke first.

“We’re going to find out...” replied Pete.

## 2

Samuel descended first through the opening with Charlie and Pete following. The boys immediately noticed the moisture in the air and on the walls of the elliptical, ribbed tunnel which continued downwards at a forty-five degree angle. They took careful steps forward, attempting to step around the thick wells of slippery film on the floor. They shone their flashlights forward and found themselves upon a fork, with five other tunnels radiating in different directions. The boys walked to the center of this fork and looked in every direction. The tunnels extended beyond their light beams, and each filled them with equal dread. Each tunnel filled them with equal dread.

“Should we split up?” Samuel asked.

“No,” Pete decided, “We stick together now.” They agreed to follow the tunnel straight ahead, and they progressed slowly... cautiously. Now and then they would almost slip on the strange layer of mucus-like fluid beneath their feet as each step yielded a soft, wet clap. Samuel, the smallest of the three, found he needed to stable his balance by grabbing onto the walls. Then Pete dropped his flashlight and heard a clink. Picking it up, he found around thirty bullet shells scattered on the tunnel floor.

“Woah! Look at this,” Pete exclaimed, reaching into the mud and recovering a shell.

“Maybe somebody is still down here. We’re in luck!” Charlie rejoiced.

“I don’t know...” Samuel replied, “...they also have a gun.”

“Either way, there must be a way to the surface.” Charlie was optimistic.

“Or maybe it was the tunnel we just collapsed...” Samuel had a point, but Pete kept them on course...

“Let’s keep going.” And the three continued down the tunnel. It seemed to continue endlessly straight now, without turns or slopes. Then Pete stopped dead in his tracks when that terrible sound came forth from the darkness once again... like someone trying to turn a book page but unable to grip the corner. But after taking a breath, Pete decided not to allow this terror to gain a foothold in his consciousness, and he bravely continued onward with the others following. Eventually, the boys reached what seemed to be a dead end but with a narrow opening in the center, like a closing eyelid. The opening spanned from the top of the tunnel to the bottom, but its width was only about one foot at its center. As they approached, they found this opening sealed with a soft, colorless resin.

“What the hell is that?” Samuel asked.

“Here, give me the knife,” Pete said, turning to Samuel who reached into the backpack, withdrew the pocketknife and handed it to him.

“Are you sure? It could be dangerous” Charlie spoke up. “I’ve never seen anything like this...”

“Don’t puss out on me now. Aren’t you curious?” As calm as Pete seemed, he was actually hiding his inner dread. Mustering all the courage he could at this moment, Pete proceeded to slice slowly through the resin. With a series of soft crunches, a sizeable incision was produced. Pete bravely reached his fingers through and pulled out as much of this thick film as he could, clearing the opening.

“Eck! That is disgusting,” Charlie added. And when most of the mucus was cleared, Pete stuck his head through and shone the flashlight on the other side.

“Holy shit,” the other two heard him say. And then he stepped through the opening and disappeared into the blackness. Charlie and Samuel were too frightened to wait, and they followed after him. With Samuel holding the other flashlight, he looked all around the chamber they had just entered.

“This is so cool,” Pete said. But it was not cool at all. As they inspected this chamber they found a most bizarre and unnerving sight. Every surface of this place was coated with a thick mucus... colorless like the resin. The Chamber was perfectly cylindrical with rounded walls, and scattered around this continuous wall face, where it met the floor, were narrow tunnels. Scattered on the floor, there were piles of torn membrane.

“No... No, no, no, no...” Samuel whispered harshly, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

“This is truly fascinating,” Charlie said in wondrous amazement. “Something must’ve lived down here once!”

“Once? What makes you think there isn’t something down here now??” Samuel was frantic.

“There aren’t any new egg sacs. These are all torn up.” Pete added, “Whatever was down here must’ve moved to a different place.” But then there came a wet, slimy sound from above their heads. When Pete looked up, his flashlight followed something dropping slowly from the ceiling. Just three feet above, a fresh egg sac was being lowered slowly by a discharge of mucus. Then Samuel and Pete looked upwards and saw it... the plane of the ceiling twitching and throbbing as a living organism, with small pores that widened to pass another egg sac a few yards away which was also lowered slowly by a trail of mucus. Charlie watched, distancing himself from Pete and Samuel as the two flashlights shone above. And when the other egg sac reached the chamber floor, its mucus trail broke and it lied there motionless. Pete hesitated momentarily but then approached the egg sac. Across its surface was a rough, bulbous texture. Withdrawing his pocketknife,

he cut through its thick, fibrous outer-layer. As if under great pressure, its contents of millions of little larvae spilled out onto Pete's shoe. Startled by this, he stepped back.

"Do we still have the jelly beans?" Pete called to Samuel.

"Yeah."

"Empty them into the bag and toss me the jar," he commanded. Samuel obeyed, hoping Pete had some sort of plan. Pete removed the jar lid and, using his knife again, balanced one larvae on the bladed edge and put it into the jar.

*CHAPTER XIV***CHARLIE****1**

“Am I going to die here, Leo?” Leo was startled by this question, not just for its morbid nature but also because he wasn’t aware that Joanne had finally awoken.

“What?” Leo asked while clearing his throat and thinking of how to respond.

“Do you think I’m going to die here?” Joanne’s voice quivered as if on the brink of tears, but Leo did not want her to cry. He was afraid he, himself, would cry.

“Didn’t you hear Pete? He said he was going to get help. That means he *will* get help.” But even as Leo said this, he grew very afraid. Joanne saw this in his facial expression as Leo’s flashlight, pointed at the ground, faintly glowed on his face.

“Leo. Hold my hand?” She asked, and Leo abided. “Tell me a story.”

“About me? I don’t have any good stories. But I know one about Pete that is pretty funny!” Leo’s spirits were lifted, if only a little, as he thought of this humorous story and prepared to tell it with care and craft. “One time when we were little, Pete, Danny, and me were playing hide and seek with our stuffed animals. Well, Pete is the oldest so he was in charge of hiding them. Me and Danny counted to fifty and found a lot of the animals, but not all of them, apparently. Later... we were in our room, and my mom called Pete down like ‘Peter Henry!! Come down here!’ So we knew she was super mad, but we didn’t know why.

So... well... this is what Pete told me happened... He went downstairs, and our mom was standing by the couch. Danny and me could smell a weird smell from upstairs. And she said 'Were you playing hide and seek with the stuffed animals?' and Pete said 'yes.' And then she said, 'well, it looks like you missed one.' Then she took the lamp shade off, and Pete's favorite animal, Badger the Panda, was melted all over the light bulb!" Joanne's laugh was weak, but she smiled at the story. "Mom had turned the lamp on without knowing and melted its bum!" Leo joined into Joanne's laughing.

"Did he cry?" she asked, still chuckling.

"No. Pete doesn't cry. If I were him, I probably would've cried, but that's just because I'm younger."

"What did Danny think?"

"Uh... I don't remember. Danny told that story really good. He read a lot of books and knew all kinds of big words."

## 2

Meanwhile, Pete collected the larvae specimen into the empty jelly bean jar. Twisting the lid back on, he shone his flashlight through the glass for a closer look. It was vibrating subtly now, and what appeared to be little pincers extended now out from its head. It was a dull, translucent, flesh color. *Got you! Ya sonnuwabitch!*" Pete had conquered this insect, imprisoned it. And with feeling of tremendous pride, Pete turned around and started walking back to Samuel.

"No, Pete!" Samuel cried, but it was too late. Pete had forgotten about the other egg sac which his foot now stepped directly into, crushing it. The sound that echoed was similar to if one were to step into a jack-o-lantern, except more moist.

"Oh, shit," Pete cursed, trying to shake the slime and crushed larvae off his shoe.

"Did you squish them?" Samuel asked, approaching with his flashlight.

"I think so. At least some of them." And as Pete said this, he heard a distant sound. The twitching, chafing sound came again. And it now grow louder... and louder... and louder until it was right in the womb chamber with them! Pete and Samuel shone their flashlights down at the broken egg sacs, but there was no movement from the millions of larvae. They had all become totally still. And the sound continued, as if scratching inside Pete's skull. Pete and Samuel were startled when they heard Charlie on the other side of the chamber.

"Pete!" he hissed in a terrified whisper, "O— Oh my god!" And when Pete and Samuel traced their lights back to Charlie's face, a sickness pounded in their stomachs, and their blood seemed to curdle

instantly in their veins. This twitching sound rang out as their lights witnessed two, black, fibrous antennae reaching out from the darkness behind Charlie's petrified face. These antennae rapidly traced Charlie's figure... feeling him... gathering a taste...

"Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit!" Charlie whispered, on the brink of tears, with his stance frozen. And when Pete and Samuel tried shining their lights on the shadow behind Charlie, they froze in terror. Standing just behind Charlie was the giant head of an impossibly large insect... Though the thick darkness of the chamber disallowed their lights to shine far, they shone far enough for the boys to catch a glimpse of the insect's long, segmented body as it stretched far beyond into the shadow. Hundreds of foot-long legs extended from its centipede-like body. The same colorless, flesh tone as its larvae, it no doubt heard the silent cry of its spawn. It must have been standing on its back legs, as its front half bent at an upward angle right behind Charlie. Despite Pete and Samuel's light shining directly at it, this insect was entirely motionless apart from its antennae which bent down from the top of its head and continued to feel the sides of Charlie's face and shoulders. Its eerie stillness was statue-like. On both sides of its head, two clusters of small, black eyes of varying size glimmered in the light. A segmented protective shell ran from the top of its head down its back. Samuel and Pete's light beams shook with their trembling hands. Pete, while afraid to make any sound at all, knew he must say something, and, through his teeth, his quivering whisper hissed through the chamber:

"Run, Charlie." His lower lip shivered. "Run... NOW!!" But then Charlie, unable to contain it any longer, let out a tortured scream, and almost immediately, this giant centipede poised upright, towering over him. Then the tip of its head split in two, and two large, jagged pincers were unsheathed... protruding outward through its outer membrane. As Charlie screamed, the monstrous centipede discharged a thick stream of black fluid out from an orifice between these pincers, spraying all over Charlie... engulfing him whole.

"AHHHHH!!! IT BURNS!!!" Charlie's smothered scream created thick bubbles in the fluid over his mouth. This would be Charlie's last scream as when he inhaled for another, the tar flooded his lungs. And this black fluid blinded him and scathed his skin. A precursor for digestion, Charlie's skin began smoking from this tar-like fluid. And Samuel and Pete joined into the terrible screaming. Pete leapt forward and tried pulling Charlie by the arm, but then the centipede lunged forward, locked its pincers around Charlie's neck, and with a snap and terrible crunch, releasing a heavy spurt of warm blood. Charlie's decapitated body dropped limply to the ground.

“HOLY SHIT!!” Pete screamed as he fell onto his back. And it was Samuel now, who grabbed Pete’s arm and dragged him away from this creature along the slick floor of the chamber.

“GET UP NOW!! RUN!!” And the boys turned to the other side of the chamber. Seeing the small holes scattered around the wall’s base, they dove in, head first and slid down into darkness.

*CHAPTER XV*

# CAVERNS

## 1

“Aren’t you done yet?” Pete called from the kitchen table.

“Not yet,” replied Leo as he shook the newspaper before spreading it flat in front of the fire place. He had plenty of light from the lamps in the living room, but he liked reading the Sunday comics by the warmth of the fire. His snow pants were still damp as he had just recovered the paper from the snowy driveway. He scanned the page for the family circus and found its bright colors in the top right corner of the page. Still learning to read at this time, he did not quite understand the caption, but found humor in the goofy looking blond boy happily holding a stick of cotton candy. But beyond this page’s corner, a headline caught Leo’s eye, and he took the time to read it and re-read it. “Local Boy Still Missing After One Year.” He pulled out the page to look at the article’s picture, but Leo’s father quickly snatched the whole stack of paper from him, stared at the curious headline, and threw everything into the fire where Leo watched as the every inked letter turned to ash.

But his father did not know that Leo would later steal next door and retrieve the neighbor’s copy of the paper.

## 2

Leo and Joanne heard the screams of Pete, Samuel, and Charlie. Leo did not know what to do. Long after the screams had diminished, neither he nor Joanne dared call out after them, though at this point Joanne has lost so much blood that she had barely enough strength to stay awake. Her dislocated arms just dangled down from her shoulders, but Leo never let go of her right hand. More frightened than he could bear alone, he sniffled once... then again... and with a painful grimace, he started to weep. But as silent as he tried to cry, he could not contain his trembling breaths, and his tears were broken up by uncontrollable whimpering. Joanne was barely awake, leaving Leo virtually alone in the chamber. He sat crying in the dark, trying to conserve their precious flashlight battery. The silence enveloped him. So it was quite startling when the sound of static burst through this silence from the walkie talkie at Leo's feet.

*"Leo! Leo, are you there?"* Leo excitedly picked up the walkie talkie to greet the voice he recognized and dearly missed. He fumbled briefly to find which button to press.

*"Pete! Are you okay? What happened?"*

*"It's Charlie..."* and then Pete paused, with his finger still on the button and empty static filling the chamber. Pete could not bring himself to be gruesomely descriptive. *"We lost Charlie..."* he said instead. And Leo responded with a similar silence. *"How is Joanne?"*

*"She's falling asleep, Pete. I'm keeping her awake like you told me."*

*"Well sit tight. We are going to come find you... somehow."*

*"Promise?"*

*"What?"*

*"Do you promise you'll come back for me, Pete?"* And Leo heard a curious pause after he said this. So he knew Pete's response was sincere.

*"I promise, Leo. I promise."*

*"Okay. Over and out,"* Leo said. And for the first time since they had descended below this soil, Leo felt safe, and this feeling filled him up. Leo leaned his head back on the chamber wall, and, quite accidentally, he fell asleep.

## 3

After escaping the womb chamber, Pete and Samuel had landed on a large rock face. Pete could only feel the cold, hard surface that had most likely bruised his rump upon landing.

“Pete. Are you okay?” echoed Samuel’s voice in the darkness.

“Yes,” Pete replied, “I’m okay.”

“Do you have the backpack still? And your flashlight? I think I dropped mine.” Samuel’s voice waned weakly as the trauma of what he and Pete witnessed started to sink in.

“Yes. Let me get it.” Pete felt around in the darkness for the canvas texture of the backpack. When his fingers found it, he brought it close to him and searched for a flashlight nearby. Pete inwardly rejoiced when he finally found the flashlight, but he hesitated to flip the switch as he heard Samuel start to cry. *Stop crying, Samuel. We have to keep moving*, Pete thought of saying, but he just sat silently holding the flashlight. He waited. He let Samuel cry. Samuel’s weeping was so pitiful. Then Samuel’s words sliced through the darkness:

“Charlie... Charlie’s dead... isn’t he?” And when Samuel had said this, Pete, himself, almost broke down crying. But he held his tears back behind his closed eyelids. Pete then caught his breath and regained composure.

“Yes, Samuel... Uh...” Here, Pete’s voice cracked, and he nearly broke down... the levees holding back a flood of tears... about to burst. “He’s gone.” Then Pete switched the flashlight on and immediately located Samuel who squinted tiredly at its brightness. His face was wet with sobbing. Pete aimed the light down at the rock face which he noticed was the shore of a large body of water. Neither Pete nor Samuel could see how far this lake extended, but they noticed how still the water was. In fact, the cavern was so large that there was no surface near enough for the flashlight to illuminate. Then Pete remembered Leo, and a new fear found him.

“Leo! Leo, are you there?” he said into the walkie talkie.

*“Pete! Are you okay? What happened?”*



*CHAPTER XVI*

# A FULL STOMACH

**1**

*“Are you hungry, Leo?”* said a strange-sounding voice. As Leo opened his eyes, he was blinded by a bright, white light. And while he could not see, he knew that the voice must have come from a P.A. speaker directly above him. The raspy droning buzz of the speaker was not, however, the source of the voice’s strangeness. The voice seemed split in two, with one voice a lower pitch and the other a higher pitch, but both overlapped simultaneously, melting into one mechanical sounding entity. *“Leo... Dearest Leo.... It is time for you to eat. Think of how hungry you are.”* But Leo was not hungry. Not hungry at all.

Leo lied on his back and slowly gained back his sight, his eyes adjusting to the bright lights above. He felt ever so cold... So cold that his legs were shivering, yet bound down to something. His arms as well. Bending his neck up, Leo discerned out of a bright blur the leather straps that bound his hands and feet. And soon he saw enough to realize he was strapped to a metal table. The cold surrounded him, both from the metal table and the air he breathed. In fact, he was surprised that after exhaling deeply, he could not see his own breath. The leather straps around his bare ankles and wrists, however, were much warmer. With

every tug to free himself, Leo cowered slightly at the harsh clanking of the metal buckles that fastened them tight.

Leo observed the room in which he was imprisoned. Apart from a large, black, glass pane on the wall six feet in front of him and the bright quadrants of light above, every surface of the room was covered in white, square tiles. *Is this... a hospital?* Leo noticed his reflection in the black glass pane, but nervously avoided looking into it. *What if they can see me... Through the glass...*

The room was extraordinarily silent, but with every slight motion he made, what would usually create a slight rustle of fabric, sounded now like a thunderous avalanche... as if the volume of the room were turned up to each maximum decibel. And as Leo's nervous breathing increased, its sound filled the room and droned in his ears. He could even hear the thump of his heartbeat speeding up. And as much as he wanted to cry for help... for Pete to rescue him... he was afraid that this would produce a sound so loud that it would puncture his eardrums. But then there came a sound that nearly did... A huge boom filled the room, as the tumblers fell in a lock somewhere. *Is there a door behind me??* But a quick glance into the reflection of the black glass relieved Leo. Then Leo's body jumped with a start as a quadrant in the wall beside the glass pane swung open and two large figures stood in this previously undetected doorway. Stepping into the room, these figures made no sound with their steps. Both men of incredible girth, they waddled in wearing white lab coats and surgical masks. As they approached Leo and stood on either side of the table, he could hear the squeaking of wheels of a smaller table accompanying them. Leo first noticed their incredibly fat fingers, covered by white rubber gloves which highlighted every fold of fat at every knuckle. Looking at their faces, Leo thought them to be identical, both having black, greased back hair. Their black, bushy eyebrows hung a darkly curtain over their almost cartoonishly-large eyes. Despite their shady brow, the whites of their eyes shone just as bright as their lab coats. One of them must have then hit some sort of switch because a deafening grind began as the back of Leo's table adjusted towards an upright position, and Leo got a better view of the room. At the foot of his table, he now saw the smaller table with a plate of what appeared to be food atop it. The doctor to Leo's right then spoke through the surgical mask strapped tightly to his bloated, purple-tinged face.

"Are you hungry, Leo?" asked the doctor in a soft and unsettling voice.

"It is time for you to eat, Leo," said the other doctor in an identical manner.

"Think of how hungry you must be," added the first doctor as he turned to the smaller table, picked up the plate, and brought it to Leo's chin.

“Does it not smell delectable, Leo?” said this doctor as the other unbuckled the leather strap binding Leo’s left wrist. Leo looked down, and on the plate before him was a thick slab of dark meat with a large leaf of rotting lettuce beneath it. The meat looked bloody and raw—a deep shade of purple with grey on the edges. Leo knew he could not eat this, but he was afraid to deny them. He looked anxiously at the plate as he could feel the two doctors staring at him... awaiting his decision. The terrible stench of the meat, however, made him decidedly unwilling to eat it.

“I’m not hungry,” his response boomed in his ears despite his best attempt at a hushed whisper. Leo looked up at the doctors who stared eagerly at him as if they had not heard his response... or as if they were waiting for Leo to change his mind. But Leo said nothing more... cautious to see what the doctors would do next and also fearful of making such loud noises with his every murmur. The doctors continued to gaze at Leo... with their whole bodies completely still, and for a moment, he suspected that they might have turned into stone statues right there. But then with an inhumanly smooth motion, the doctor to Leo’s right slowly carried the plate of meat away from Leo and set it back onto the wheeled table. Leo found instant relief at this despite their continued staring. Finally, the two doctors slowly turned their heads and looked at one another. Then, with similar inhuman motion, they stepped away from Leo’s table, and wheeled their own table back through the doorway. With his freed left hand, Leo pressed his palm hard into his head, covering his left ear. He turned his head quickly and tried pressing his right ear into the table, awaiting an ear-shattering boom as the door swung shut behind them. But despite his efforts, the boom rang forth, proving his attempt to protect his ears near futile. But soon its echoes subsided.

Leo tried to use his free hand to undo the other leather straps, but the buckles were out of reach somewhere underneath the table. He was certain not to make any sudden movements, both because of the sound it would create and because he was still unsure of what lied beyond the black glass before him. *Think, Leo... THINK!* Leo closed his eyes and thought. *I mean, are you in any danger? All you did was say you didn’t want to eat it... You just have to keep doing that. I mean... if they were going to make you eat it, wouldn’t they have done that already?* Just this short string of thoughts seemed to Leo to last an hour or more as he lied there frightened and out of ideas. *Wait... What’s that? What’s that muffled sound?*

Leo opened his eyes and looked forward. *The glass! But how?* Leo saw as the once pitch black glass had become clear, looking into a room of similar design as his, except the table was against the wall. He heard the muffled noise grow louder to the point where he could discern people yelling. Then Leo saw, behind the glass, the old man from the playground backing into the room with his hands raised by his shoulders. Leo at first could not see what the old man was looking at, but he was talking to somebody. As

the old man backed up into the far wall, Leo's eyes traced the barrel of a pistol entering the field of the glass. As its pair of hands and forearms, pointing the gun at the old man, came into view and were followed by the body of Pete, Leo's heart jumped in rejoice. But Leo knew he could not call out to Pete, so he watched quietly.

The muffled exchange that reached Leo's ears could not be discerned. He had only to attempt reading their lips. Pete was furious about something, cocking the gun and pointing it specifically at the old man's head as he drew nearer. Leo watched as both the old man and Pete stopped speaking for a moment and shot stern looks at one another. But then a smile grew on the old man's face as he turned his head and looked directly at Leo through the glass. Leo found a threatening darkness behind the old man's gaze that made him unable to look away. And Pete, too, shifted his attention towards the glass, and, seeing Leo, he quickly whipped his head back around and fired two shots into the old man; one hit him in the shoulder and the other in the eye. There came forth a brilliant, indeed quite beautiful, splash of deep red scattering on the wall behind the target. Its muffled shots met Leo's ears. They were the first sounds that Leo had heard in this prison that sounded just right. And once Pete knew the deed had been completed, he turned back around and his eyes met Leo's with a fantastic sense of ecstasy. Pete then ducked beyond the glass and the booming of the door locks rang out again as the door to Leo's cell was opened.

"Leo! Are you hurt?!" Pete cried out, sprinting through the doorway and right up to Leo's table.

"Pete!" Leo bleated but then whimpered as the amplified sound pummeled his eardrum. He then wondered why the volume of Pete's exclamations were not similarly compounded. In his elation that Pete was now with him, Leo quickly brought his voice back down to a faint whisper. "You're here to save me!"

"Of course. Just like I promised! Are you okay?" Pete said while drawing intimately close to Leo. And Leo felt a welcomed and remarkable warmth from Pete's body. The mechanical voices of the doctors once again droned forth from the P.A. speaker above.

*"Leo... You really should eat. You really should. Oh, Leo.... Oh, precious Leo... It is good to eat."*

"I'm alright," Leo whispered to Pete, "but those doctors came in and told me I should eat their food."

"Oh, good. Did you eat it?"

"What?"

"Didn't you eat the food they brought you?" And when Pete said this, Leo's heart sank.

"No! It's poisoned!"

"Leo, don't be stupid! You have to eat what they serve you! Everything!"

“But Pete...” Leo started to cry, but both boys froze in panic as the booming locks once again thundered from behind the door. “Pete! You have to hide!”

“I know! I’ll hide here under the table. You must accept the food, Leo! It’s the only way they’ll let us go!” Then Pete ducked below the table as the prison door swung slowly open. Leo watched as the same two doctors entered just as before, wheeling in the same plate of meat on the smaller table.

“My goodness, Leo! Look at you... You look so very hungry...”

“So very hungry indeed!” said the other doctor while grasping Leo’s shin and squeezing lightly. Finding little meat on Leo’s shin-bone, this second doctor stopped and looked up at the other and their eyes met. There was a long pause here that made Leo even more uneasy, and even Pete, hidden below Leo’s table, could not imagine a reason for the silence. Then Pete heard a scraping on the table above him as the doctors slid the plate of meat onto Leo’s table between his legs. Footsteps came next, and Pete turned and saw the doctors’ black, rubber boots exit the room with the door slamming shut behind them. At this, he leapt from under the table and found Leo staring petrified at the darkly colored meat.

“You’ve gotta eat, Leo.” But Leo remained motionless, so Pete swung to the end of the table, picked up the slab of meat and tore off a chunk. “Come on! We have to get you out of here!” Still... nothing. Leo could sense Pete’s temper about to flare, but he just could not make himself eat. The very thought of it brought on a rebellion of forces Leo could feel pushing up from his stomach and being kept at bay at the back of his throat. “Dammit, Leo!” Pete exclaimed, nearly deafening Leo, as he began eating the meat himself. His canines and molars sunk deep into the meat slab and tore away crude chunks. Pete’s teeth gnashed at the cold muscle, producing dark juices which began to drip down his chin and neck. Horrified at this sight, Leo began to shake and sob violently. There was a turn in the air as this meat that Pete ate began to creep down his esophagus and into his stomach. It was as if the very oxygen in the room turned sour in that instant... and Leo found himself struggling not to pass out.

Then Pete caught scent of the meat. Its fowl stench was paralyzing. About to double over, Leo screamed his name and pointed to the large pane of glass. The boys struck terror as the glass had turned clear, and standing on the other side were the two doctors. One faced the boys, smiling with his white, now-gloveless palms pressed up against the glass. And on a table much like Leo’s, the other doctor wielded an electric carving knife. Splattering blood everywhere, the mechanical blades tore viciously through the stumped leg of a child... unrecognizable with its eyes, nose, and mouth, sewn shut with thick black wire. Its whole body jerked as the knife tugged violently at its flesh and produced a slice of meat identical to that

which Pete had just finished devouring. As Pete watched this, he suddenly felt the eruption within him, and a geyser of dark fluids and chunks poured out of his mouth at an incredible speed.

“NOOO!!!! PETE!!!!” Rang Leo’s scream and its sound instantly punctured his own eardrums. And in this final, deafened silence, Leo’s own stomach turned against him as he saw the child from behind the glass, move its fingers. Leo’s screams concluded as he awoke from this night terror in pitch black.

*CHAPTER XVII***MUD CRAWLERS****1**

“Did you hear that!?” Pete froze and shushed Samuel. Pete’s ear perked at the faintest echo. “That’s Leo!” he cried and darted through the tunnel ahead, following the echoes. And Samuel had no choice but to follow.

**2**

Leo’s sense of sight was entirely useless here as he was suspended upright from the waist down in some kind of wet resin. As he tried to shift his weight he found it solid but malleable, though Leo would not know the meaning of such a word. He was still in tears from the images he dreamt, and there was no one to comfort him. He was entirely beside himself with fear. And as he realized he lacked the strength to break free from his bonds, his thoughts kept returning to the leather straps that bound him to that cruel table. *I’m going to die here!*

But then Leo heard, very faintly, the far off echoes of Pete's cries calling out his name, and Leo's heart nearly leapt out of his chest. *Pete's coming to save me!* Leo then found new strength in his limbs and once again struggled to break free from these strange bonds. It was not long before he could hear the resin cracking and feel his wrists moving freely. *It's working!* TSSSSSSSSSSST!!!! ...Leo froze instantly and listened... and waited... and listened...

TSSSSST!! The sound came again, hissing nearby, interrupting the surrounding silence. *It sounds close by, but muffled...* And with his now freed left hand, he reached out in front of his face and felt another surface made of resin. *It's some kind of shell* he thought, and realized it justified the muffled sound. *There's something out there!* And as scared as he was to venture out of this resin prison, he knew he must escape. He pushed hard on the thin wall before him and heard it crunch at this force. Pushing again and again... he finally punched as hard as he could and broke through completely, his whole body breaking free and falling forward through the wall. He landed, then, on a slippery floor. His hands felt sticky strands of slime scattered every which way. *Where is the flashlight!* He began feeling around this slimy surface, hoping desperately for his fingertips to meet the metal, ribbed texture of his flashlight's handle. TSSSSSSST!!!!

The sound was terribly louder now, not three feet in front of Leo. *Oh my gosh! Oh no!!!* But then he felt his ankle mashing into a hard object beneath his weight. He reached back and found it. *The flashlight!* But before turning it on, he remembered his dream. *Cover it with your shirt, Leo!* And after stretching a layer of his shirt fabric over the flashlight, he turned it on and aimed it cautiously at the ground. By its faint glow, he saw the floor coated with mucus. Looking back from where he fell, he saw what had imprisoned him. *It's.... a cocoon!* And wasting no time, he soon directed the light in the other direction towards the hissing sound. *Oh--!* And his eyes met an ovular shape also coated in mucus. *An egg!* TSSSSST!!!! He heard again, but not from the object before him... rather, coming from far off to his right. Leo pointed the flashlight in its direction. There was another egg, with a long tentacle detaching and withdrawing slowly from it. Leo took his shirt away from the flashlight and frantically pointed its unfiltered beam all around. There were hundreds of eggs, some which stood alone and some which were connected by one of these tentacles.

Leo followed the flashlight along the path of the tentacles to their source. *Close your eyes, Leo!* There at the center of the room, was a large, bulbous mass. Its slippery, colorless surface pulsated slowly like a beating heart and millions of waving hairs reached out... searching... in the chamber's darkness.

Then Leo heard a low gargle... *Whub??* And turning toward it, his light met one of the egg sacs sinking slowly down through a permeable tissue in the floor. The gargle subsided as the sac disappeared

below. Leo's gaze fixated once again on the organism in the center of the room. As he approached it, stepping between the many egg sacs, he noticed how its waving hairs flowed as if suspended in water. He drew closer... and closer... relishing each adventurous step he took towards it. With his arm and hand outstretched, he bravely dragged his fingers through these hairs. And while it seemed, at first, that nothing had happened, he began to notice these hairs, one by one, extend completely outward like if one were to rub a latex balloon on their head. Their new reach was motionless, frozen. What had Leo disturbed? He shone his flashlight back at the egg sacs around him, but everything was still. And there it was... to Leo's greatest horror... the sound from his dream... the same sound Pete had heard before Charlie met his terrible fate... the sound of chafing... jittering flesh.

And Leo now looked up towards its source... the very top of the chamber. His flashlight showed those terribly large centipedes... called to protect their offspring... now crawling down the chamber's domed ceiling from a narrow crevice above. And, friends, were you and I both there, we would have mistaken Leo's terrible screams for those of a pig about to be slaughtered. Those terrible squeals flying swift to meet unaffected ears. The boughs of fate falling deftly still... just breaths before breaking. And the eyes that looked up and saw them... yet unable to move.

But Leo broke from his temporary paralysis and frantically searched for his escape. He ran towards the chamber wall, stepping clumsily around the scattered egg sacs. And, losing master of his feet, Leo slipped twice on the slimy, gelatinous floor but pushed himself quickly to his feet and pressed on. As his eyes searched the dark wall for a small hole or tunnel, they rejoiced in the sight of one... just a leap away. And Leo leapt to this exit... as he saw just a few feet on the wall above it, one of these centipedes... these mud-crawlers... scaling downwards to seal his fate. And after he reached this narrow hole, he felt one of the egg layer's tentacles grasping firmly around his knee and pulling him away. "NOOOOOO!!!!" he squealed, and the mud-crawler was now there with its antennae encompassing him. He clawed through the slippery mucus, not finding any grip... but then a saving hand reached out through this dark crevice and pulled him through by the wrist.

"RUN LEO!!" cried Pete as he helped his brother to his feet. And the two of them plus Samuel, raced through the tunnel and a seemingly endless series of twists and turns. But Pete could hardly see what lay ahead and soon found himself flying through the air downwards into a deep pool of water. Beneath this surface, he heard the muffled splashes of Leo and Samuel following him, and he flayed his arms violently until he reached the surface.

## 3

Pete was the first to find the shore of this underground lake, and he called out to Samuel and Leo, "Guys! Swim over here!"

"I have Leo here!" called Samuel.

"I'm here!" added Leo. And as Pete heard them both swimming towards him, he listened carefully for the sound of the mud-crawlers, but heard nothing. They were safe for now. The faint splashing of the other two drew nearer, and Pete felt around the dry rock face for one of the flashlights.

"Samuel, do you still have the backpack?" Pete called quieter as he heard Samuel and Leo reaching the shore and standing up.

"Yes. But it's obviously soaked."

"If it's obvious then you don't need to tell me that, dummy," said Pete. "Look for my flashlight in there."

"I have mine," bleated Leo as he shook water off his body and turned it on. Leo immediately located Pete in the distance with the light and felt at ease again. "Thank goodness you found me, Pete! There were these horrible bugs and they were going to eat me! You saved me!"

"Yeah. We heard you screaming like a girl and managed to find you. Don't you have your walkie talkie? I was trying to reach you." Pete spoke flatly to Leo.

"I don't know. I fell asleep with Joanne, but when I woke up she was gone. And I was in a cocoon!" Leo could barely even whimper these words as he was still shaking from both the frigid waters that soaked him to the bone as well as the terror he had narrowly escaped. And Pete heard the fear in Leo's voice, feeling the same way himself, but he would not communicate those fears.

"Son of a bitch, Leo! I can't believe you lost my walkie talkie! Do you ever think!?" And as Pete said this, it took Samuel all the self-control he had not to blurt out "leave him alone!" and anything else that would remind Pete that he should be grateful his brother was still alive. But all he could say was...

"So Joanne is gone too?" And all the boys fell silent. Since the collapse, they had slowly come to realize that Joanne might... you know... but they all avoided the thought of it until now.

"And Charlie?" asked Leo. He was afraid of the response he would get from either of the other boys, and Pete's words justified this fear.

"Those... *things*... decapitated him," he answered.

"What??" said Samuel angrily on the brink of tears.

"You idiot! You were there, Samuel! You saw it yourself!"

“I know! I know I saw it! But how could you say it like that!” Samuel stood up as he said this. “Don’t you give a crap!? Charlie’s dead now!” But Pete also rose to his feet and violently hissed at Samuel.

“Why don’t you shut your mouth, Samuel! I can say whatever I want!” And having successfully intimidated Samuel into silence, Pete sat down again and began digging through the backpack. His fingers felt a toothed blade, a rope, and a jar before finding the crinkling wrappers of unopened Gushers. He tossed one pack of them to Leo and began eating his own. Pete then held up the jar from the backpack and showed it to Leo. Almost immediately after Leo laid eyes on the larvae inside, it wriggled violently, producing soft ‘tings’ as its body thrashed up against the glass walls.

“See this? I stole it from one of their egg sacs,” Pete continued as he saw Leo’s face turn pale. “This little bastard couldn’t escape me! I got him. I got him.” But Leo’s could not focus on this for long as his mind was elsewhere... pondering how Charlie’s death had so similarly mirrored his dream.



PART THREE

# A PROPER DEPARTURE



*CHAPTER XVIII*

# THE HOVEL

**1**

“We cannot stay here,” said Pete, rising to his feet and slinging the backpack over his shoulder.

“I’m still soaking wet though!” whined Leo.

“Who cares! We need to keep going before we can set up camp. We’re too close to those bugs. Now, let’s go.” Samuel and Leo took this point into consideration and admitted it was sensible. They followed Pete away from the lake and into a very large cavern. As Leo followed the others, his squishing steps plodding one after the other, and his thoughts escaped to one particular memory...

Leo approached the creek line... the horizon which looked over the rushing waters far below. He saw Pete’s bike, violently cast aside in the tall grass and off in the distance the slouched figure of Pete, himself. Leo had walked all this way from his house as several days earlier he had abandoned his bike shortly before it flew off into the creek. Danny had said he would go in and get it, but Pete said it was too dangerous... so now Leo had to make the long walk to the creek. But today he knew he had to... and he knew he could not complain about it...

As he walked towards Pete, he began to notice the buzzing gnats and mosquitos that spawned near this creek. He covered his ears with both hands as there was nothing that frightened him more than when he would suddenly hear a gnat buzz right in his ear. When Pete heard someone approaching, he glared back over his shoulder and, seeing Leo, quickly turned back around and hurriedly wiped his eyes and face. Leo sat on the rock by Pete and brought his knees up to his chin.

“What are you doing here?” Pete snapped. But Leo did not answer right away. There was a pause before he spoke.

“The police will find him, Pete... They said that to mom,” said Leo with a desperate squeak. Pete shook his head and changed the subject.

“We should run away and live out here... where they can't find us,” Pete said bravely. And this sentence turned darkly in Leo's ears which were still half-covered by his hands. The water rushed below... careless of their troubles... of their loss. The cicadas spoke volumes again. Words of what had passed from here to there... and from one side of that creek to the other. Smashed bottles and broken tires. Torn hopes and shattered spires. Of all that a child could count on... All of it... lay waste now in this bitterest of winds... lost at dusk and scattering aimlessly through the tall grass for refuge. “We should build ourselves a place of our own... nobody else's. Just ours.” There was a very long pause here... as Pete summoned the courage to say what he needed desperately to say, “I was supposed to walk him home, Leo. I was supposed to, but I didn't 'cause I was mad.” And as he said this, Pete finally made eye contact with Leo who now saw the shallow wells of tears in his eyes. Pete stretched out his arm, and Leo climbed down from the rock and ducked underneath, wrapping his own arms around Pete.

“Do you think Danny will be home for his birthday?” Leo asked.

“I don't know.”

“We should still make his present and draw his card... just in case he does.”

“Okay, Leo.”

## 2

The boys continued through the caverns in single file. Leo, trailing in the back, was fascinated by the many colors in the rock layers surrounding him.

“Do you think we're the first ones to explore these caves?” Leo asked, and the thought alone excited him to where he forgot about being afraid.

“No. There were some bullet shells that Charlie found on the ground. Somebody has definitely been down here... see?” Pete pointed to a rock which depicted an arrow, drawn in chalk, pointing further into the cavern.

“Wait,” said Samuel, “Are we following these markings?”

“Duh. Can you think of a better way out?” Pete spat. Samuel could not. And Leo was only thinking about how disappointed he was to find out that this was just another cave... that this was not a *true* adventure. But then remembering how frightened he was, he admitted that, perhaps, he was too small to handle a *true* adventure. But it was at this time that a true adventure found Leo... ready or not.

“Stop walking!” hissed Pete, “Get down!” And all three boys got down on their bellies and awaited Pete’s next command. As Pete crawled slowly ahead, he reached an upward sloping rock face with what appeared to be a spacious cavern beyond. Reaching its horizon, Pete’s head popped up and looked over it. Spotting something, his shoulders followed, and his gaze was locked on what laid ahead.

“What is it, Pete?” called Samuel. But Pete said nothing. Instead, he beckoned the other boys over. Leo was first to jump to his feet and run over, but Pete quickly scolded him and smacked him in the head as he drew near.

“Mind shutting the hell up?” Pete made a hiss again. Samuel joined them and the gang looked over the ridge and spotted a light on the far shore of a dark lake. At first, the boys could not make out its source; their eyes had not yet adjusted. This yellow glow sent a soft shimmer down the still surface of the water, apart from which left it pitch black. Leo, almost ignoring the curious light entirely, gazed deep into the water and was reminded of Sarah Garson’s lake, except void of the brilliant stars in its reflection that promised so much and shone so bright.

“It’s... a house...” Samuel spoke slowly, unsure of whether to believe these, his own fantastical words. The structure that Pete, Samuel and Leo, in turn, identified was more a shack than a house. Though little of its detail could be discerned at such a distance, it appeared to be made of wood and cardboard scraps. The shore it stood on was littered with miscellaneous junk—tires, barrels, a shopping cart, and (peculiarly) a crooked arch from which hung a playground swing—all of which cast long shadows towards the boys from the curious yellow light.

“We need to figure out how to get across,” said Pete

“Are you crazy?” Samuel snapped.

“Somebody must live there! Look at all the tires and stuff. They must know how to get to the surface!” Pete was so excited by this that his voice rose above a whisper.

“They also might kill us! We can find our own way out,” Samuel said. But Samuel and Pete both fell silent when they heard a click behind them. Turning quickly to Leo, they saw what appeared to be a pale, disembodied hand pressing the barrel of a silver revolver deep into Leo’s ear. The gun’s wielder was cloaked in the darkness of the tunnel behind them.

“My, my, my....” a voice croaked from the shadows. “Three curious cats we’ve found.” Pete heard that voice and turned away from Leo, strangely directing his gaze to the cave floor.

“Please, mister! We’re trapped down here!” burst Leo. And then the figure nudged Leo and stepped forward into the light. Samuel instantly recognized the man’s awkward limp, his slouched shoulders, and wrinkled face from the sandbox.

“Now, you two better follow me or this little one gets his brains splattered.” And this reminded Samuel of his violent video games. *EXECUTION!*

## 2

Leo peaked through narrow metal bars... a prison so small that not even he could stand up. Though he, Pete, and Leo were crouched inside, looking out to the interior of the shack. The shack was square and divided into four small rooms. This iron cage was situated near a complex computer terminal with six screens facing them. The whole shack was dimly lit with a few scarce light fixtures, and the walls were covered with dull, miss-matched scraps of wallpaper. Pete could still hear the gasoline-powered generator they had passed on the way in.

The elderly, sickly man used his twisted legs to pull his rolling chair towards the boys. Thick smoke trailed smoothly from between his lips as he ashed his cigarette just over Leo’s head.

“Where are the others, child?” he said lowly. “...The girl and the tall one.”

“The bugs got Charlie and Joanne,” Leo winced as the old man’s smoke stung his eye.

“Hmm. Is that so?” said the old man, turning to Pete. Pete did not look at the old man but nodded instead. “Well, yer some brave fellas... I’ll give ya that.” The old man coughed and leaned back in his chair. “You boys still have meat on yer bones... That’s good. And you, little one,” he said looking at Leo again, “You’re going to go exploring for me.” He took another drag from his cigarette, and with each word he spoke, a small cloud of smoke sputtered forth. “You see... there is something down here... that contains treasure beyond the Cave of Wonders. Since the dawn of time... the caves of this earth have lied dormant... waiting to be explored. And there’s nothing special about most caves... Most caves you can just walk into...But *this* cave,” he said looking all around, “...This cave is very different. It has no entrance...” the old

man smiled. "Since the dawn of time... it existed completely independent from the outside world. An entirely new ecosystem... breeding who knows what sorts of life. Well... I *must* know." The old man leaned back in his chair and took another, long drag from his cigarette. "Trevor!" he yelled to the other room, and a skinny boy walked through the doorway shortly after. Pete and Leo's eyes widened in shock as they recognized this boy as one they had once 'borrowed' a kickball from. Pete immediately looked away.

"Yessir," replied Trevor faintly.

"Looks like you won't be going through The Door after all," smiled the old man, looking at Leo. "Lucky you." And Trevor's face lit up.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you!" But it was clear that Trevor's feeble body could barely express his true excitement as every word he spoke seemed agonizing. Pete pressed his face into his hands.



*CHAPTER XIX***THE BRAIN-EATING WORM, PART I****1**

*Why am I so sleepy?* Leo found himself lying face-first in the dirt. His eyes were crusty with sleep as he struggled to keep them open. As he began pushing himself upright, Leo realized he had awoken in the middle of a vast soy-bean field with the little shrubs forming neat rows. Beside him was an ornate lantern. *It glows a pretty blue.* Leo grasped its handle firmly and stood up. The sky gleamed the brilliant gold of dusk as Leo stepped through the field and entered a dense forest. *I must find my way back!*

There was not one tree in this forest that stood straight, with each branch shooting out from every trunk at unlikely angles. Thick vines created a tangled network of shadows as Leo searched for the clearest path to follow. Holding the blue lantern high above his head, he stepped carefully over scattered rocks and fallen logs. Leo did his best to direct his path towards the golden sunset but felt the forest wished otherwise. Then he came upon a small and brilliantly green clearing with hundreds of lightning bugs hovering about. *How beautiful. How breathtaking.*

But Leo was distracted by the glowing bugs and when his foot snagged on a root, he fell down into the clearing's center. On impact, a cloud of pollen leapt into the air from the mossy floor. Leo felt incredibly drowsy upon inhalation and might have preferred to stay there and rest, but from a hollow log before him

came a swarm of curious creatures. They were hooded caterpillars with brilliant blue and red stripes down their bodies. Emerging from the crowded hollow, hundreds of them inched slowly towards Leo's face and he grew frightened. *Get up Leo! Run!* And Leo did.

Leo picked up the lantern and ran as fast as he could from the clearing, but the dense forest and his sudden drowsiness proved challenging obstacles for him. Looking up, he saw on a hill beyond the forest, an old barn with a golden light glowing brightly. *I can find shelter there!* He glanced back at the small clearing, however, and saw the hooded caterpillars still in slow pursuit. *Hurry, Leo!* And with incredible strength and desperation, Leo pressed on through the winding vines and scraping branches until, finally, he emerged from the forest at the foot of the steep hill. The barn towered darkly above... its silhouette against the brilliant dusk. He scrambled up the slope, tripping a few times but never stopping, afraid he might fall asleep. His eyes fell heavily with every blink and wince as each effort to reopen them proved more challenging than the last. But lo! Our Leo reached the top at last, and, with powerful arms, swung open the barn door and then closed it behind him.

The blue glow of the lantern cast an eerie shade on the darkness inside. *There... Up the stairs!* And in a dizzying haze, Leo ran quickly up the stairs and found the barn attic lit by the waning sunset streaming through a window. He walked slowly to the center of the attic where the light shone most, set his lantern beside him, and prepared for sleep.

SNAP! But what is this? *What was that?* Leo stared deeply into a shadowed corner where he heard a squeak and whimper. Cautiously, he lifted his lantern and leaned forward to investigate the noise. And Leo sighed in relief at the discovery: a pile of about a hundred mouse traps... One of which had just freshly snapped a mouse in two. This gave Leo an idea.

Collecting all the traps from the corner, he set them carefully in a perimeter around his place of rest. Wary that some sinister creature might devour him in his sleep, he was sure to leave no gap in his defenses. Feeling safe now... Leo curled up into a fetal pose with his lantern beside him and slowly... drifted... to sleep.

## 2

At this time, he felt two hands shaking him awake from his dream. *A dream... that had not ended in screaming?* Leo was perplexed but was immediately awakened by the realization that he, Pete, and Samuel were still imprisoned in the old man's shack.

“Leo! Wake up!” Pete whispered. And Leo quickly sat up in the iron cage. Samuel was also awake, and Leo could hear the old man whistling a cheery tune from elsewhere in the shack. The room was dark, but there was a light that shone faintly through the doorway from another room. The boys listened as the old man’s clumsy footsteps drew closer.

“TREVOR!!” the old man screamed suddenly. The three boys jumped, startled by the outburst. “I told you to put this shit in the bag!” And weaker footsteps rose from the following silence.

“Yessir. Sorry, sir.” The boys then heard the sound of metallic objects scraping a heavy fabric and clanking against one another. Shortly after, the old man’s slouched figure filled the doorway and slowly approached the cage. With the jangle of keys, the old man fumbled with the cage lock.

“Alright, little one. Yer coming with me,” he said. But Pete immediately hissed back.

“No he isn’t!” And he wrapped his arms around Leo’s neck and shoulders, pulling him in.

“LISTEN YOU LITTLE SHIT!” the old man screamed back with a startling volume. “I could plant a bullet in your skull if that sounds nicer!”

“He isn’t going anywhere without me,” Pete replied bravely. And the old man stood up, paused briefly, then swung open the cage door.

“Trevor! Get in here.” And Trevor’s figure, in turn, appeared at the old man’s side. “Alright, then. All of you come out,” he said calmly. Pete held tight to Leo’s arm as they ducked through the gateway together. When they both stood up, the old man grabbed Pete’s jaw tightly, like a scorpion’s pincer around its prey, and pulled his gaze directly towards his own. Pete shut his eyes, however, and struggled to break free. “Look at me...” but Pete refused. “I SAID LOOK AT ME YOU LITTLE SHIT-HEAD!” But Pete held his eyes tightly shut. “LOOK AT ME OR I BREAK THE LITTLE ONE’S ARM!” And the old man’s powerful hand grasped Leo’s arm tightly and began to squeeze...

“NO!” Pete screamed and opened his eyes, looking directly into the old man’s. A darkness beyond words looked back at Pete. And he thought of the shivers and shakes of sleepless nights, and the mountains of life... he was too deformed now to climb. His freckles. The stains on an innocent face. “Don’t hurt him. Please.” And Leo watched as a curious thing started to happen, like a child’s first snowfall. “I’ll do anything. Please.” Pete was about to cry.

“Those damn freckles...” murmured the old man. But before a tear was shed, Pete launched a thick wad of spit in the old man’s eye. The rest happened almost instantly. Two thundering blows from those powerful fists cracked hard into Pete’s face. Trevor reached into the cage and dragged Samuel out by his ankles. And the old man shoved Leo to the ground and began swatting at Pete’s ears which soon dripped

with blood. Pete could not stand up anymore. The old man threw Pete back into the cage and closed the door. Then he lunged towards Leo, and Pete screamed.

“LEO! RUN!!!” But there was no time. The old man yanked Leo up by the arm and lifted him off his feet so that they were face to face.

“Leo, is it? Leo the lion, eh?” the old man whispered to Leo, “Isn’t that wonderful.” Leo began to cry as he looked at the old man’s face and Trevor dragged Samuel out of the room. “Well, Leo... I have a very important task for you.”

Pete’s face shone a smattering of blood and swelling as he lied alone and watched his last brother being carried out of the shack.

*CHAPTER XX*

# WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE...

**1**

"When can I see Pete?" Leo cried from the lake's shore.

"You have a long journey ahead of you, little Leo. Your brother will be here when you get back," said the old man as he shoved a thick blanket into a backpack.

"I want to go home," Leo said, breaking into a sob. "I'm scared."

"You have to be strong now, little one," said the old man kindly as he sat on a tire and lit another cigarette. "This mission... takes courage."

"Are there going to be bugs?"

"Bugs?"

"Like the giant crawly ones," Leo added. At this, the old man froze and turned slowly to Leo.

"There ain't any of those no more. They're all gone. I killed them. They're gone." And Leo was afraid to argue with the old man. He just tugged nervously at the Velcro straps on his shoes. "Little Leo... you have something special that many people hate. You got fear in you." Leo was perplexed by this and did not respond. Shortly after, Trevor walked out of the shack holding a white plate with both hands. He brought it obediently to the old man. "That there's for this one here," he said pointing to Leo, and Trevor

brought the plate to him, setting it down on a small plastic crate. Leo looked at it and saw a singular slab of red meat.

“It’s raw,” said Leo.

“It’s dinner,” said the old man. Leo stared at the meat and a terrible thought occurred to him.

“Where’s my friend Samuel?”

“Are you hungry or not?! Just shut up and eat it!” the old man said, frustrated.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Fine.” And as the old man said this he stood up, walked over and grabbed the plate himself. “Not going to waste good food on somebody who won’t appreciate it.” When the old man sat back down with the plate, he grabbed the meat with his bare hand and began savagely gnawing at it with his big teeth. Leo felt sick.

## 2

Leo hardly slept that night. He had been brought down into the basement of the shack and locked in a small wooden cellar. And the cellar door was under watch by Trevor all night who slouched lifelessly against the narrow corridor wall. After what seemed like an eternity of sleeplessness, the old man returned with another plate of meat.

“Good mornin’. Feelin’ peckish yet?” asked the old man cheerfully through a narrow slot in the door. But Leo cowered from the plate. “Suit yerself.” The old man unlocked the cellar door and motioned Leo to follow him. Leo obeyed.

“Now, this...” said the old man yanking a rope attached to Leo’s waist, “...This is going to make sure I can yank ya back if there’s any danger.” Leo looked on down the dark, narrow tunnel at a glass door. “That there is where you are going to decontaminate. It’s going to spray you down before goin’ in and before comin’ out so that we don’t disturb whatever ecosystem we find in there. Now, look here...” the old man tapped his fingertips on the side of Leo’s sealed helmet. “This is your headlamp switch. Now, don’t be afraid to use it. Anything that will be in there won’t have eyes to see with. Since the dawn of time this cave has lived in total darkness so don’t worry about being seen by anything. They have no use for eyes...” Leo’s breathing was heavy and lightning fast.

“Please, mister. I don’t want to go in there!” Leo began crying.

“Listen here, little one,” he said looking Leo straight in the eyes, “I’ll make you a deal. You go through The Door and into the cave... get some specimens like I told you... and I will take you and your friends to the surface. Scout’s honor.” But Leo did not trust the old man.

“I can’t. I’m scared! Make Pete go! He is braver than I am.”

“LISTEN KIDDO!” the old man shook Leo, “Shut your damn mouth and do as I said or I’ll feed you both to the big mamma, ya understand?” Leo had no choice but to nod. “Now let’s turn your oxygen on so you can get on in there.” With a few more valve openings, zippers zipping, and knot tying, Leo was ready to walk through The Door. The old man opened the plexi-glass box ahead of him and motioned Leo to enter.

As the tiny metal sprayers began showering upon Leo its chemicals, Leo was beside himself with fear and began crying immediately. He looked down at the yellow vinyl body suit he wore, with its thick gloves and heavy boots. And more than anything else, the thought that he would not be able to wipe his own tears made him feel hopelessly trapped.

In the shack, Pete heard the old man approaching and sat up in the iron cage. The old man entered, flipped a few switches by the computer, and sat in the rolling chair, facing the many terminals. Pete watched as the computer screens lit up with activity. One, in particular, showed a live camera feed.

“Alright, little one,” said the old man into his headset. “Go ahead and walk out of the decontamination chamber and into the tunnel.” And to Pete’s surprise, the camera feed showed Leo doing that very thing.

“What have you done to him!! Where is he!” Pete yelled from his cage, shaking the bars with all of his strength.

“If you want me to make sure nothing happens to your brother, I suggest you shut the hell up,” said the old man looking over his shoulder to Pete.

“If you let anything happen to him I swear I’ll kill you!!” hissed Pete, but the old man ignored him and continued directing Leo into the tunnel.

“Alright, Leo. Now, you have glowsticks and a waterproof flashlight with you in your pack, but let’s hold off on using those in case we need them, okay?” The old man spoke in a friendlier tone, but only because he was getting what he wanted.

Back in the cave, Leo walked slowly through the dark and narrow tunnel. It was crudely hollowed out, possibly with dynamite, and the ground was terribly uneven.

“Was that The Door?” Leo asked.

*"Don't worry about that kid,"* buzzed the old man in his earpiece, *"I'll let you know when yer close."* As Leo walked on, each heavy step created a thud that vibrated his whole suit and rattled his skull. The rock surrounding him was slate grey. In fact, even a child as young as Leo noticed how unusual it was that these rocks had strangely uniform color throughout. The tunnel went relatively straight with no dips or turns. But then, Leo's headlamp caught a curious image about twenty feet ahead. *A reflective surface.* As Leo drew closer, he found the whole tunnel ended completely at a small pool in the floor, only two feet in diameter. Then looking down into it, Leo's light shone directly through the water as it was crystal clear.

*"That, little lion Leo, is The Door."* And when the old man had said this, Leo thought at first to refuse going through. But then a little shade of courage flowed through him, and he held his tongue. Perhaps it was the stunning clarity of the water... or the absolute stillness of its surface... But Leo felt invited to go through this Door, as if it had been waiting for him his entire, albeit short, life. I cannot say exactly what it was that lifted our Leo from his consistent schedule of fear, but then he said:

"Ok. I'll do it." Hearing these words through the computer terminal, even Pete was surprised.

*"I hoped you'd say that... Now, listen carefully to my instructions. The underwater tunnel below you continues about fifteen feet directly forward. Do not worry, your oxygen supply will not fail. At the end of the tunnel, you will see a mark above for you to break through the rock... so you will need to take out the pick and hammer from your pack before submerging.. Do you know what that word is?"*

"Yeah. It means going underwater," said Leo, unzipping his pack and withdrawing the pick, hammer, and a glow stick.

*"Now crack that glow stick and drop it into the water."* Leo did so and saw the water light up in a brilliant blue. As the glow stick sank, Leo saw an unnerving sight... There... at the bottom of the pool were five other expired glow sticks.

*"Exactly. Now, Leo. The rock should be about one inch thick by now, and you must break a large enough hole for you to pull yourself through. You then will have entered this isolated cavern. Good luck."* This was happening too quickly. Leo realized he was not given enough time to fully process the dangerous task before him... but he acted. And with a sudden hop, he splashed deep into the pool.

Back in the shack, Pete watched Leo's terminal carefully... afraid of what might befall his brother. As he witnessed Leo's incredible bravery, Pete's stomach turned with guilt as he had so often called him a coward. But in Pete's defense... this was a Leo he had not seen before. Then Pete heard Leo's scream through the terminal.

After touching his feet to the pool's floor, had Leo looked up and seen a most gruesome sight: the bodies of five boys, in suits similar to Leo's, suspended motionlessly in the water. It was as if his oxygen tank had already run out... Leo could not breathe.

*"Breathe, little one! Or you'll wind up just like them."* But Leo could not catch his breath. He had never seen a dead body before. But here were three... three that were given the same task as him... who had failed.

"I can't do it! I'll drown!"

*"Yes you can do it! Now stop bitching and swim!!"* screamed the old man into Leo's ear. And Leo obeyed... swimming cautiously around the floating corpses. And while it may seem silly to us that Leo feared one of them would reach out and grab him as he passed, just try to put yourself in that position and be more understanding. Leo avoided looking at any of their faces as he swam awkwardly down the tunnel over fallen picks and flooded oxygen tanks, kicking his legs and thrashing his arms. And when he had passed them all, he looked up and saw where they had started breaking through the rock. In an otherwise smooth rock face, there was a crater with large chunks knocked out. Leo pushed off from the floor, and, floating to the top, he began breaking away the rock with his pick and hammer. With each swing of the hammer, he heard a muted 'clink' as bit by bit he chipped off chunks of the rock. CLINK... CLINK... CLINK... The bodies floated on... apart of the serene silence... their resting place that was now being interrupted by every CLINK... CLINK...

But then, Leo's pick sank further through, as he finally broke into the isolated chamber. In a few minutes, Leo chipped away a hole large enough to climb through. He could see the infinite darkness above and dreaded emerging head first into it. In fact, he was so frightened that he even looked back down the corpse-littered tunnel and considered turning back.

*"This is it, little Leo..."* Now climb through! And Leo reached through the opening and pulled himself through, crawling belly-first on the cavern's floor as his feet followed. Having completely emerged at the foot of this narrow opening, Leo rolled over immediately, unstrapped his backpack and fished around inside for another glow stick. Finding one, he cracked it and shook. And from it bloomed another dazzling blue glow. Beginning to look around the cavern with his headlamp, something compelled him to switch it off. *Leo. You don't need eyes to see.*

Then Leo took the glow stick and buried it back, deep into his backpack.

*"Leo... what are you doing."*

“Shhhh!” he said, “I’m an astronaut.” And in complete darkness, Leo took one brave step forward... followed by another... and another. Before his mind’s eye... all he could see was the red surface of Mars. ...With each step kicking up a cloud of space dust and each boot-print leaving man’s mark where no man had gone before. For these moments, Leo’s prior, diminutive existence was erased. It did not matter anymore that he was a kid. It did not matter anymore that he was little. All that mattered was that he was the first. He was the only. He had expanded the horizon of all human achievement... with those small steps. “I’m going to go to sleep now,” he announced and sat down on the ground. Then, taking the glow stick back out of the backpack and withdrawing a blanket, Leo observed his immediate surroundings. He sat at one end of an incredibly large cavern... so vast that neither the glow stick nor his headlamp could define it. But he saw no life-forms, and oddly felt safe. Curling up into a ball, Leo fell asleep.

Pete was afraid for Leo, and the old man’s frustration at Leo’s strange decision to sleep produced a colorful vocabulary that not even Pete fully understood. As Pete watched the old man lean back in his chair and light another cigarette, Trevor entered the room holding a plate.

“It’s for this shit-head,” said the old man pointing his thumb over his shoulder at Pete. And Trevor brought over the plate and set it down just outside the iron bars. Pete was ever so hungry... and without a second thought, grabbed the meat and devoured it quickly. While to say that Pete ‘gormandized’ this portion would be accurate, such a word would lie far beyond any child’s vocabulary. Shortly after eating this meat, he could feel a pit of darkness in his gut.

*CHAPTER XXI*

# THE BRAIN-EATING WORM, PART II

## 1

*Aren't you going to see what that sound was??* Leo lifted his head. Though at first he thought he had awoken from his short slumber in the cave, his fingertips suggested otherwise as they dragged over the dry, splintered wood of the barn attic. *The dream!* In a panic, Leo sat up quickly.

*What was that sound!?* He waited, staring aimlessly off into the darkness as he rotated his head so his ears could take in all that lied in the thick darkness surrounding him.

SNAP!! Leo jumped and spun around. He waited... But no sound followed. The sound did not sound too close to him, but he knew it meant there was something in the room with him. Leo continued to spin nervously around with the blue lantern... holding it out as far as he could... but its light could never stretch far enough to observe the outermost mousetraps. SNAP!!!

*That was much closer than the first!!* Leo's ears discerned. SNAPP!!!! Leo heard this sound behind him now. *They are all around!* Stretching his arm out as far as he could... he shrieked suddenly as the light now reached far enough. SNAP!!! Leo witnessed two hooded caterpillars... each snapped in half by a mousetrap. *But surely they won't get through!* Leo stretched his arm to shed light on the far and dense perimeter of about 500 mousetraps surrounding him. And amidst the darkness, Leo caught a faint glimpse of a thousand more hooded caterpillars inching slowly around the staircase corner and towards Leo. SNAP!!

*OH NO!!! Snap!! SNAP!!!* Leo's hands began shaking with fear, and the lantern handle rattled. But Leo then noticed his lantern growing dimmer and dimmer. *SNAP!!* The mousetraps clapped in every direction as slowly... the blue light of his lantern faded entirely, and Leo stood in complete darkness. Leo could only hear the advance of the caterpillars as the snapping of each mousetrap grew louder... and they inched closer. *What am I going to do!?!?* He began stomping his feet hard on the wood floor... afraid some of the caterpillars had already reached him.

*"I was supposed to walk him home, Leo."* Leo yelled shortly at the raspy voice that came from far into the darkness behind him. (*SNAP!*) And Leo recognized the voice as Pete's... yet it did not sound very much like Pete's. It sounded old and worn thin... with just barely enough energy to go on... (*SNAP!!!*) It was a voice crippled with old age. Then, a soft moonlight glow lit up the barn attic through the window, and Leo looked to the voice. Instead of Pete, he saw the old man's shadowy figure slouching... struggling to stand up.

*"It's my fault, Leo. I was supposed to walk him home."* (*SNAP!!*) Leo watched now, as the figure of the old man with the voice of Pete collapsed upon itself, like when one sucks the air out of a Capri Sun. His eyes, however, remained intact and popped out of his shriveling skull onto the wooden floor. Leo did not know what to think... or what to do! He could not save Pete now. *SNAP!!*

*Wait... what's that?* And in the same hand that he had previously held the blue lantern, he now recognized a familiar plastic handle. *My lunchbox!* Leo instantly felt better as he fell hard to his knees and began undoing the lunchbox latch. (*SNAP!!*) This simple task seemed to take an eternity. (*SNAP!!!*) But then... click! The latch flew open, and Leo's fingers scrambled to lift its lid. And when his eyes met what lied inside... he smiled ever so subtly. But just as he did so, a golden mist sprayed from the box onto his face. *ECK!* It smelled like vinegar! (*SNAP!*) And Leo began feeling quite unusual. *CLANG!* The lunchbox fell from his hands and onto the floor. *No!* Leo commanded his hands to pick it back up, and at first they nudged in the appropriate direction... but soon they grew rigid and stopped... they would not obey! *You dummy!* (*SNAP!!!*) *Pick it up!* But Leo found his whole body paralyzed... frozen like a statue. All he could move were his vocal chords... and he used them to desperately screech through his teeth. He then felt a slight tug at his shirt sleeve. A caterpillar was inching up his arm. His screeching continued louder now as it stood lightly on his shoulder. Its body leaned back so that it stood up on its back legs, shaking violently. And from the corner of his eye, Leo saw its hood draw back over a red, inner body with tiny, sharp teeth punctuating its tip.

Through these teeth, a smaller, purple worm wriggled free and fell before the caterpillar. But soon, this worm was out of Leo's sight as it inched slowly up his neck. *NOOOO!!!! SOMEBODY HELP ME!!!!* But

only Leo's muffled screeching could be heard in the barn attic as the purple crawler climbed up into Leo's ear and burrowed deep.



*CHAPTER XXII***BIRD MOTHS****1**

“ARE YOU OKAY?!” Pete whispered as loud as he could towards the computer terminal. “LEO! CAN YOU HEAR ME!? IT’S PETE!” But the screaming from Leo’s night terror continued, cracking and distorting through the terminal’s small transmission speaker. It had woken Pete up, and out from his cage he saw the dark interior of the shack. Now Leo’s screams subsided into desperate gasps for air.

“Leo!” Pete whispered once more, “Can you hear me?” Leo briefly fell silent.

“*Pete?*” he croaked.

“Yes! Leo it’s me. I’m still in the shack. Did you have a bad dream?” But instead of answering ‘yes,’ Leo answered by breaking down into whimpering tears. “Hey...” Pete started... trying to comfort him, but he found this difficult to do. “Stop that crying... now. Stop it.” And Leo obeyed, but his muted tears yielded short, pitiful gasps of breath that no matter how hard Leo tried, would rise up again and again like an impossible case of the hiccups. “There you go,” said Pete.

“*There is something in here, Pete!*” Leo’s voice was still trembling. “*I can bear it above me...*” But all the computer terminal screens were off. Pete could not see what Leo saw.

## 2

Leo rose to his feet in the pitch-black cave. *The glow stick must've burned out.* But Leo used his hands to find the backpack. Above him, he could hear brief flutters. Even Pete could hear them through the terminal speaker, and he recognized them immediately. Like every silverfish he had conquered on the surface... he heard the sound just like two fingers rubbing against one another right by his ear.

Leo found the flashlight deep in the backpack and withdrew it.

"*What is it??*" Leo could hear Pete say in his earpiece. Leo flipped the switch on the flashlight and a bright yellow glow shone forth that temporarily blinded Leo. Struggling to regain his sight, he pointed the flashlight behind him and stared at the ground. Nearby, he found the burnt out glow stick, and a few yards further he saw the pool through which he had entered the chamber.

"*What do you see??*" Now Pete had to know. He could not see it for himself... Leo would have to see it for him. And when Leo pointed the flashlight above him... he saw it. Something so impossible... something never before seen. At first, it appeared to be a fuzzy worm... with colorless hairs over its entire surface. But then Leo's horror turned into awe as its giant wings unfolded softly from its back. Each wing shone bright and reflective colors that were perfectly complementary to the other. And Leo's light did not affect it in the slightest. It was blind, you see. And Leo thought how curious it was then that its wings featured such beautiful colors. *It cannot even admire itself.* While Leo had stared up at this stunning creature, Pete had matched his silence. But Pete could not take it anymore.

"*Leo... What do you see??*"

"It's... a moth. A pretty moth... as big as an eagle." After Leo said this, another moth glided through the air and the rest of the cavern. And as Leo's light followed it, he saw hundreds of moths... some smaller than others... clinging peacefully to the cavern walls. Leo saw the rock beyond each moth sparkle and glisten with the flashlight's every glare. A vast spectrum of light reflected back to Leo's voracious gaze. "Is Samuel there with you?"

"*No. I don't know where they took him.*" For some reason, Pete felt his whispers needed to be softer now.

"Pete..." Leo froze with dread.

"*Yeab??*"

"Did Trevor give you anything to eat?"

*"Yeab. I ate some meat. Why?"* But Leo could not reply to this. He felt as if all life had been sucked out of him in an instant. And though he could not fully grasp the horror of what it meant, he realized the meaning of his dream... as well as Pete's corruption. *"Leo? Why do you ask?"*

But before Leo could reply, Pete heard a ruckus from the basement of the shed. Crashing and yelling. He could barely make out what was being said, but it sounded as if the old man was yelling at Trevor or Samuel. There were terrible words screamed, but I'd rather not tell you them. Even Leo could hear the yelling through the headset as the old man emerged from the basement to another room of the shack. Pete watched through the doorway as the old man's silhouette cast crooked on the wall of the next room and grew larger. His hobbling figure lurched through the doorway and exhaustedly collapsed in the rolling chair before the computer terminal. And as he sat slouched in this chair, Pete could hear him muttering aggressively through his dry lips.

The old man fell silent suddenly and turned his head to the transmission speaker. He listened and could barely make out Leo's breathing and footsteps over the radio. Flipping on the lights suddenly, the old man spun around in his chair and smiled at Pete.

"You been talking to him? Did you tell him everything?" But Pete refused to respond, which prompted the old man to spin around in the chair and start turning on the computer monitors. And when he caught a glimpse of Leo's camera feed, the old man froze in excitement.

"Well, holy shit. What are those things on the wall there, Leo?"

*"Moths. Giant moths,"* said Leo approaching a small pool.

"Well, well, well... We just found ourselves a new species!" laughed the old man, clapping his hands together. "Get a sample of that water, there."

Leo withdrew a bag full of tubes and removed the black rubber stopper on one. Dipping it at an angle into the pool, Leo allowed a few drops to trickle into the tube before replacing the stopper. The water was so clear, and before turning away Leo caught a glimpse of colorless flatworms swimming around below and colonies of algae along the shore.

"Alright little one," said the old man from the terminal, "Pack it up and come on back. We'll call it a day." And as Leo gathered his things into the bag, he cracked another glow stick and dropped it down into the pool from which he entered the chamber.

Back at the shack, the old man put on his jacket which hung over the rolling chair and exited the shack to meet Leo at the decontamination chamber. Pete knew he hadn't a moment to lose. As soon as he heard the last footsteps of the old man fade away from the shack, he grasped the bars of the iron cage

around him and tried lifting them with all of his strength. *He is going to kill you, Pete!* Failing to lift the bars, he took a deep breath and tried again. *You can't be weak!* Finally, Pete fully understood the peril that he, his brother, and Samuel were in. Rolling up the sleeves of his white t-shirt, Pete grasped the bars once more and gritted his teeth. And as if he were Hercules himself, Pete slowly lifted the heavy metal bars and flipped the whole cage over his head. He was free.

*CHAPTER XXIII***SPLASHDOWN****1**

“Samuel? Can you hear me?” Pete whispered as he crept through the rooms of the shack. As he explored the shack, each room seemed stranger than the last. One room he suspected was the old man’s bedroom, though it merely contained of a water-stained mattress on the floor and a standing swivel lamp. Despite the general disarray, Pete noticed that all of the old man’s clothing was kept neatly on metal hangers suspended on scattered clothing lines. While the floor of the computer terminal room was covered by a thick shag carpet, every other floor featured nothing more than cardboard slabs laid over the cave rock.

There was one room, however, that once Pete had entered immediately took his breath away. Its walls were covered with faces. Faces of young boys gone missing. The lost boys. Their last images lit by a dim yellow bulb swaying curiously above. Spanning the far wall, a wooden workbench stood at Pete’s shoulder level. Scattered on its surface were unspecific tools and parts. But one thing here caught Pete’s eye... A rectangular photo box. Lined with green canvas, its corners were adorned by worn gold plating. What lay inside this curious artifact? Pete could not help but wonder, himself. Reaching up by his eye-line, he pressed his pointer fingers into the lid crevice. Surprisingly, its unlocked latch yielded to Pete’s curiosity, and these fingers pried it open. Its contents were just over his field of view, and it took a brave hand to reach in and scoop out the contents. Struggling first to gather them all, Pete’s tenacious grip collected a

small stack of photos. And when their images met his eyes, he hadn't the slightest clue of the proper way to react.

This one, he did not recognize. This one... this one was Trevor... but with nourishment on his bones and life in his cheeks... This one intently reading "Tom Sawyer" he did not recognize. Nor this one with the wire-framed glasses. Nor this one wrapping a scarf around a crudely-formed snowman. Nor this one with his gigantic belly. And maybe he had seen, at one point before, this boy crying beneath the monkey bars... or maybe he just wished he had. Perhaps he wished he recognized any of these... But a sickness churned in Pete's gut as he understood... from the very moment he laid eyes on these photos. And he came across one photo... the background of which he recognized... featuring a child he could no longer recall. A photo he clawed into a wad and buried in his jeans pocket. But the photo that lay behind it took Pete's breath away. Two skinny arms outstretched... with hands clasped together... poised to dive into the murky waters of Garson's lake...

"Danny..." Pete unknowingly mewled softly. For a moment, he could not decide whether or not to take this photo with him... whether or not it was already too late to save... So Pete did not dwell on deciding and boldly acted, sliding the photo into his back pocket and being careful not to crease it. And while he stretched up with the remaining stack and slowly set it back in the box, the back of his fingers felt a metallic chill. A sour brew of fright and hope filled Pete as he wrapped his fingers around it. As he lifted it out of the photo box, this silver revolver gleamed fantastically in the bulb's affirming light. *We're going to get out of here.*

Pete knew that his best chance to escape with Leo was to find a strategic hiding place within the shack and wait for the old man to return with Leo. But Pete also knew that he had to cover his back... which meant making sure Trevor could not sneak up on him. *He must be guarding Samuel in the basement.*

Pete remembered the westerns on television. Though he had never held a revolver before and could not fathom the full experience of firing one, he felt confident enough to firmly push out the cylinder and check the chambers. *Fully loaded.*

## 2

While it took a few waves of searching through the cluttered rooms of the shack, Pete eventually discovered, behind a cardboard door camouflaged perfectly with the wallpaper of the room, the entrance to the basement. Holding the revolver with shaking hands, Pete slowly descended a number of crooked, crudely built stairs which led down into a dimly lit tunnel. While the stairs led in a constant direction

forward, they twisted and turned, creaked and moaned, as every drunkenly hammered nail squealed softly from Pete's weight. Soon, Pete reached the bottom and, looking down the natural tunnel, saw a series of lights fixed to the crown and linked by black cables hanging just low enough to graze Pete's scalp.

As he proceeded cautiously, setting each step softly before the last, his ears were met with a faint wailing. For the first one hundred feet, there were no side routes or crossings. It just stretched hypnotically onward. But soon Pete saw an intersection in the distance and prepared for danger around either corner. While Pete felt a certain sense of security by leading with the revolver, he had not thought to cock it... But that proved to be unnecessary as he reached the intersection and saw nothing but empty, well-lit tunnels in either direction. However, at the end of the left tunnel, where it changed direction, a bright, fire-like light glowed a warm orange, and Pete suspected this to be a likely place for Trevor and Samuel to be.

Not halfway down this tunnel, the echo of strange mumblings from Trevor proved Pete correct. Pete's head slowly rounded the corner and spotted Trevor standing awkwardly in the center of a round room, swaying for balance, and staring intently down at the cowering figure of Samuel.

"You rotten kids," he slurred, "The good sir just wanted to live away from the others... And you rotten kids come down and ruin everything!" Trevor was only two years older than Pete.

"We didn't mean to come here! I just want to go home!" Samuel screeched and bore his teeth. His face and eyes were bright red from violent sobbing. Pete jumped swiftly into action, leaping into the room and pointing the revolver vehemently at Trevor.

"Why, Trevor? Why are you here?" Pete began this line of questioning with an interrogating tone, but a wave of sadness and pity soon crept into his voice. "Don't you remember us?" Trevor's head still faced Samuel but his eyes turned directly to Pete.

"I remember..." a renegade tear snuck down his cheek, but his stare maintained its menace. "I remember you, Pete..." Samuel was still too afraid of Trevor to move... so he sat still and kept quiet.

"Listen to me you shit head..." Pete hissed, "I don't know what the hell happened to you... But we're leaving... and I think you should go with us. I think you should go on home."

"There's no home for me anymore..." said Trevor as his shoulders swiveled towards Pete and his dangling arms followed in swing.

"What? ...Stop talking weird, Trevor!" Pete grew more nervous with every word Trevor spoke. He struggled against his need to squirm as each of Trevor's syllables struck the air like the hammer to a piano string desperately out of tune. "Your mom... She doesn't know where you are, Trevor... She misses her son,

Trevor...” And Pete’s words were working. New tears began to crawl slowly down Trevor’s cheeks before dripping off his gaunt jawline.

“No...” he sobbed miserably, “Pete... You *know* we can never go back... That nothing’s the same.” Pete thought about these words and was so terribly tempted to agree with them. But there was something new... growing inside Pete’s heart... that convinced him otherwise.

“Some things are the same, Trevor... and they make it all worth it. I swear,” and, again, an incredible thing nearly occurred as tears welled up just above Pete’s freckles. But with a swift wipe of his forearm, alas, he kept them at bay. And Trevor did the same. “Now, let’s go, Trevor,” Pete exhorted, and the three boys rallied together. Trevor first led Pete and Samuel to another part of the basement where their backpack and belongings had been kept, assuring them he knew the best way to escape once they recovered Leo.

*CHAPTER XXIV*

# Déjà vu

**1**

“Why didn’t you escape a long time ago?” Pete turned and asked Trevor as they continued through the basement. Even though he needed Trevor to direct him through the dizzying tunnels, Pete insisted that he lead the way and that Trevor just tell him where to turn.

“You have to pass through the labyrinth.”

“Like a maze?” Samuel chimed in from the rear.

“Only he knew the way through—take a left up here—and the other boys didn’t live long enough to learn it.”

“But you figured it out?” Pete said, turning left.

“I found a map in the shack. I knew he’d miss it if I took it. So whenever he was gone I’d try to memorize it.” Trevor could barely keep pace with Pete and Samuel due to malnourishment.

“Well then what are we waiting for!? Let’s go home!” whined Samuel panicky.

“No! We’re not leaving without Leo!” barked Pete.

“We have to hurry! The Door isn’t too far from the shack! They should be back soon... Let’s cut through the galley.” Trevor made a sharp turn at an intersection, dragging Pete with him by the sleeve, and

the boys ran quickly down the tunnel. At the end, Pete could see a wooden door ajar with warm light peeking through.

“There it is!” Trevor exclaimed, and when the boys reached the door, Pete waited for Trevor to push it open. As it swung, squeaking on its hinges, the boys’ faces were met by long shadows. The soft patter of dripping blood and the appalling stench was enough to sink their hearts in dread, and the sight their eyes beheld was all-together too much. Dangling from hooks above, raw bovine carcasses hung in two rows. As the boys passed through their midst, their shoes spattered and swashed through the streams of blood draining towards a grated drain which gargled softly and low from the center of the room. Strewn across the floor were all manner of innards and sinews, rotting in piles both old and new. *This was the kind of shit they fed you... and you ATE it??* Pete followed the other two boys this time, and he shot a grimace for every wet smack from his shoe soles. But then... one step produced an unexpected sound... a faint crunch. And looking down... curiously down, down... he lifted his wet shoe and saw the most unnerving sight... *Joanne’s glasses??* But what might occur to us, in light of Leo’s dream, was not realized by Pete at this time. He was merely puzzled.

A screech made Pete jump to attention as Trevor and Samuel leapt back from the door they opened across the room. Pete drew the gun as quickly as he could, but as the old man’s silhouette filled the open doorway he noticed the hostage.

“LEO!” he screamed.

“Listen to me you SONSABITCHES!!” the old man said with drastically differing volume, “Don’t be stupid, now...” He held Leo off the ground by the neck and in front of his body. “Don’t wanna shoot yer baby brother, do ya?” The old man smiled and let his words slither cruelly from his mouth, “Right, Pete? I mean... you only got *one* left...” But as he followed this with a maniacal laugh, Leo shot his heel viciously backwards into his groin. The old man’s grip of Leo’s neck released instantly, and Leo ran across the room behind Pete.

The old man cried out a number of terrible expletives, but as he took one step forward with his hands outstretched, the sound of Pete’s gun being cocked stopped him dead in his tracks. Pete focused on the old man’s lower neck, unwilling to make eye contact. Pete clenched his teeth and wasted no time.

“Where... where is he?” Again, it seemed as if miraculous winter storm clouds were gathering over hell itself; tears were filling in Pete’s eyes. “Tell me... or I swear... I’ll shoot.”

“He’s right there you little shit. Unharmed, as promised,” croaked the old man menacingly.

“NO!” Pete was afraid now... Afraid to ask. But he asked... he had to... “Where...” he sniffled, “where... is Danny?” And though Pete could not see his face, he knew that Leo heard these curious words and would soon start to cry, himself. “Where’s my brother Danny?” And perhaps a tear dropped from Pete’s tired eyes, but the other boys could not tell, standing frightened behind him. The old man’s smile disappeared as he tried to lure Pete into direct eye contact, but Pete stood his ground. There was a long pause in the room... While nobody spoke, Leo remembered Danny and realized now all the grim fates he might have faced.

“I should never have taken him...” said the old man gently. “But it was his own fault...” he cleared his throat. “He didn’t follow the rules...” Leo gasped and began whimpering. “Last week... he finally got the others to rally together...” the old man’s upper lip snarled as he said this, “...and they tried to kill me in my sleep. Wrapped trash bags over my head... But they failed.” Then he looked over Pete’s shoulder at Leo’s distraught face. “Mongrels had to be punished... So I let them die in their sleep...”

“NOOO!!!!” Leo screamed, his face bright red and screwed up into an ugly grimace. “NO!!! DANNY IS ALIVE!!!!” Leo’s terrible cries cracked and waned from despair. “DANNY IS ALIVE!!!! HE’S ALIVE!!!!” And it would have seemed ordinary for Pete to silence an outburst... a childish tantrum... but he let Leo scream... because he hadn’t the strength, himself. “DANNY IS MY BROTHER!!! HE’S MY BROTHER, AND HE’S GONNA COME HOME!! DANNY IS GOING TO COME HOME!!! WE’RE GOING TO BE TOGETHER AGAIN!!! HE’S GONNA COME HOME!!!” Pete’s eyes, still purple with bruises, glazed over in shock. His battered face, expressionless. And when Leo’s screams became dampened by weeping, the old man took a small step toward Pete.

“Did you tell him it was your fault?” hissed the man. And before the last ‘t’ sound was given chance to echo, the sound of Pete’s shot cracked through every tunnel around. A thick, rich red poured out from the old man’s neck... right through the adam’s apple. And once this creature fell to the floor, the soft trickling of his blood joined with the rest in the room. As Pete squatted to the floor, Leo’s sobbing continued. Leo stood with his hands apart, his elbows locked, and his face terribly twisted in tears... helpless... like a child who had just accidentally rubbed soap in his eyes. But Pete looked first over at Trevor who was silent, yet equally as distraught as Leo.

“Trevor...” Pete grit his teeth with such seething fury. “Were you there when...”

“Y-y-yes.” Trevor stuttered as his lower lip trembled. “Oh, God!” he added, cradling his head in his hands. Pete momentarily grew sick.

“Are you listening to me? Listen to me very carefully...” Pete wiped the sides of his face with his index finger and his thumb. “You’re going to take us there... And then you’re going to take us home... Understand?” Trevor nodded. “Alright then... We need to get out of here.”

## 2

As the boys continued through the twisting tunnels, Leo astonishingly gained control over the tears but only by telling himself that the old man lied about Danny. *Danny is still out there. He’s still out there... waiting for us to rescue him. Don’t lose it now, Leo.*

Leo thought about a number of other things as they boys crawled and stooped through tunnel after tunnel. He first thought of how much he wish he still had his beloved lunchbox with him. There were several times when Leo came close to saying “Keep a sharp eye out, guys. We might spot my lunchbox down here.” But he was afraid of what Pete might say. *He had hardly reacted to the stuff about Danny...*

The whole group was strangely silent, with the exception of Trevor’s intermittent relays of direction. ‘Turn left up here,’ he’d say, and Pete would abide without response. Samuel carried the backpack now, a task that had become much easier by this point in their journey as many of their original equipment was lost. And when Pete deemed it time to take a break from walking, he, Samuel, and Trevor lied down by the shore of a large, shallow pool. Leo stepped a little ways away from the others and sat down. His thoughts flew to the past... To one specific memory of when he awoke at night in his bed to whispers across the room.

“What? I—“ hissed Pete in the dark, bundled underneath his bed sheets and comforter to dampen the sound. “No! I *don’t* understand!” Leo listened carefully. *Who is he on the phone with?* “No, please... Please... No! I swear it’s not like that!” And then Leo realized who it was. *It’s that library girl!* Yes, Pete had a girlfriend once. Well... sort of. He’d say they were going together, but she would not.

Leo continued to discern Pete’s muffled whispering... But he soon stopped speaking altogether. Then Leo, with eyes adapted to the dark, saw the mountain of sheets that Pete had hidden underneath as it began to very subtly shake. And then... Leo heard the softest whimpering. *Oh no. She hung up on him...*

This was the first and only time that Leo ever witnessed his brother, Pete, crying. As he lay there, fascinated by these new sounds, Leo could not help but allow a few tears to stream down his own face. The sound of his oldest brother crying... alone.... trying his best to keep silent... made Leo feel sad. You may still not understand, reader, so I will tell you: these were very troubled tears from our friend, Pete. Like I said before, no child should bear the weight that was yoked upon Pete’s shoulders in every waking moment. The

eternal fear that one can never live a normal life... If you only knew of such weight... perhaps you would cry with him.

Leo thought to get up from his bed to comfort him... but he knew that Pete would be angry... ashamed that he had been discovered crying like a big baby. Leo was relieved, then, when a creak came from the bunk above him, and the bare feet of Danny climbed softly down the ladder.

“Shush, Pete. It’s okay. Scoot over...” and Danny ducked underneath the heavy comforter and held his older brother, pressing their foreheads together, feeling the warmth of Pete’s brow against his, and using his thumbs to wipe Pete’s tears. Even in the pitch-black beneath the blankets and sheets... He could not be afraid. He was being embraced. The warmth of darkness... foreign to most... like the turning words and promises uttered in its midst. An infinite slumber... It was Leo’s greatest wish to be as good of a brother to Pete as Danny was... But maybe Pete would not allow it.

### 3

“Where the hell is it?!” Pete called out to the others. Samuel and Trevor both stood up to see what Pete was talking about. “Who unscrewed the lid?” Pete held up the empty jelly bean jar.

“What is it?” Trevor asked.

“I had a worm in here! I was going to take it back home! Now, who unscrewed the lid!?” And when Leo heard these words from Pete, he froze... petrified. *OH... MY... GOSH!* He stood up quickly and dug his fingers deep into both ears... *Nothing!* And by the light shed by one of the glow sticks, Leo searched the cave floor for sight of the worm. Meanwhile, Pete used the flashlight to search the inside of the backpack of any trace of it. “Well shit!” he said dropping angrily to his knees. Pete did not have the energy to accuse the others of tampering with his specimen. In fact, he was completely exhausted, and he only realized this fully while on his knees. “I guess we can camp here for tonight. I’ll keep first watch.”

“No! I will!” blurted Leo. Leo had become extremely frightened by the missing worm and was determined not to fall asleep. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Well, I’m obviously not letting you hold the gun, dummy.”

“That’s fine. I’ll just wake you up if I see anything.”

“As long as don’t fall asleep on the job...”

“I won’t,” said Leo. But Leo did...



PART FOUR

# AN IMPROPER DEPARTURE



*CHAPTER XXV*

# THE MIRROR

**1**

*Where... where am I??* His palm pushed off the damp floor, shifting his weight on the wall. The blur ahead was dizzying as a light above flickered ominously. He sat in the corner... all three surfaces were ice cold against his back. *What trouble have you gotten yourself into now, Leo?* Leo shakily rose to his feet as his vision started to clear.

His steps forward were cautious as the floor felt dangerously slick. There was a leak somewhere; Leo could hear its dripping. He stared first at the floor's wet and grimy green tiles as they came into focus. **BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!**

**WHAT WAS THAT!** He swatted at the sound of something zipping right past his ear. Leo looked up and saw a sink beside him. Its porcelain rim lit up with every flicker from the light above him. There was a toilet and bathtub to the right. Leo noticed the dingy, olive wallpaper which peeled and sagged so badly that it seemed to hang onto the walls for dear life. Dank would be the most appropriate word to describe this place that Leo now found himself in. Each corner seemed to project its own darkness... in constant battle with the occasional flickering of light fixture above the sink. About to look up from the sink to the light, something in the mirror between caught Leo's eye.

“Samuel?” And just as Leo said this, the image of Samuel mouthed the same thing. *But that can't be...* Leo looked down at his own shirtless body, wearing his own pants and confirmed this perplexity. His reflection was that of Samuel's. Every movement he made was matched perfectly by this completely different person in the mirror. When Leo leaned forward, so did Samuel. Even their facial expressions were the same. **BZZZZZT!!**

*There it is again!* He swatted once again at his ears. Leo turned away from the mirror and searched the room for a glimpse of a pesky, flying insect. He would stare in one direction and wait a few moments for it to fly through his field of vision. *Nothing.* He'd turn and look in a different direction. *Still nothing.*

Leo was growing terribly uneasy. It is quite unnerving to hear a flying thing buzzing around a room and not be able to locate it. But now Leo looked back in the mirror at this foreign reflection.

“Hello! I'm Samuel!” he said in a goofy, low voice. “I have a face... that's a butt!” Leo laughed as Samuel's mouth spoke this humorous caricature. But Leo's laughing ended abruptly as something crawled slowly up the wall behind Samuel. Leo spun around in a flash, but there was nothing there. But there! Looking back through the mirror, Leo saw it clearly behind Samuel... creeping slowly up the wall. Six spindly, black legs... bending crookedly into its body, hunched like a fishing hook. Its small head twisted slowly in various directions... and its black, compound eyes took in all things. From its head sprouted three appendages: above its eyes were two furry antennae, switching randomly... and its mouth... a proboscis whose color ran from blackest night to a fiery red at the tip. A mosquito which Leo wagered was about the size of his foot... And as it continued to climb menacingly up from behind Samuel, its starved, shriveled abdomen came into view, with its black wings, spotted white, draping over.

Leo did not know to be afraid, and he turned around a few more times, just to be sure there was no threat on his side of the mirror. *That's so... weird... BZZZZZZZTT!!* But when Leo heard this buzzing by his right ear this time... he did not swat at it. He just stood still and listened. It was gone again. Leo turned his head to his left shoulder where he felt something touching him... but nothing was there.

Suddenly Leo felt a terrible stabbing pain in his neck. He felt a warm trickle of blood flow down his chest. Leo screamed in agony and looked back into the mirror. There his eyes beheld a gruesome sight. Alighted upon Samuel's bare shoulder, this mosquito had sunk its proboscis deep into his neck. The insect shook violently as warm blood filled its abdomen... inflating like a water balloon.

“AHHHHH!!!” Leo shrieked, swatting at the invisible mosquito at his shoulder... and in the mirror, it ripped its proboscis out in a splash of blood and zipped off into another corner of the bathroom. *I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!!!* Leo made a run for an old wooden door at the other end of the room, but the slick tile

floor gave him no footing and he fell flat on his side with a thud. He was now in such terrible pain, having just bruised his whole side from falling and bleeding still from the puncture wound in his neck. But Leo pushed on, clawing aggressively at the walls for grip as he crossed the bathroom floor towards to exit. Even through all his screaming, he still heard the “BZZZZT!!!” by his ear and was quick to swat it away. Having reached the door, he pushed his body up from the floor and stretched his hand up to twist the handle. *LOCKED?? NOOO!!!* And Leo twisted it again and again, and again... each time with greater force, but it would not budge. *BZZZZT!!!!* He swatted again... this time in every direction. And even from the door, he could see it flying by in the mirror’s side reflection. This was one of Leo’s greatest fears... being trapped in a room with a deadly insect. What’s more... it was invisible to him. As Leo began pounding furiously on the wooden door, he noticed each successive, thunderous pound took greater strength to deliver. His fist grew heavier and heavier. Leo realized soon that it was not just his fist... all of his limbs seemed to get heavier and harder to move. *It poisoned my blood!* Soon, screaming was the only action Leo could achieve... his muscles completely paralyzed now as he slouched back against the door. *BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZT!!!*

And when Leo heard this buzz right in front of him, his screams reached an ear-shattering pitch. On his groin and right thigh, he felt the weight of the mosquito landing. And before his eyes, the skin just below his rib cage parted, creating a dime-sized puncture wound out of which flowed more of his blood. He could even feel its invisible body shivering violently as it gorged itself on this paralyzed morsel.

## 2

When Leo awoke from this night terror, he had not carried his screams with him. In fact, Leo woke up in the dead silence of the dark cave. He could hear the others snoring, but there was no light. So Leo felt around the camp site until he located the backpack. He hastily reached inside and felt a glow stick which he snapped, shook, and shone on his surroundings. The other three boys were asleep nearby, using their balled-up t-shirts to cradle their heads on the cold, rock floor. Leo sat back down and crossed his legs like a pretzel... trying to catch his breath from such a horrible dream. But soon, his shivering returned as he felt a strange sensation... a warmth trickling down his neck and over his clavicle. Leo held the glow stick up and found blood. Wiping it with his hand, he traced its trail up, up, up... and he let out a soft, choked peep. *My ear!* His fingertips met his dripping earlobe, wet in one place and crusted dry with blood in another.

He froze. And soon tears filled his eyes. Of all the things Leo was unsure about in this world... whether he could ever be close to Pete, whether Danny were still alive somewhere, or whether they would ever make it back to the surface... he had now assured himself of one tragic thing: *I'm going to die.*

His tears were interrupted by a sound from one of the others. Samuel turned onto his back and began muttering words in his sleep.

“When can I see her, daddy?” Samuel smacked his lips. “Love you. G’night.” And by lightly bending his wrists by his chin, Samuel simulated his father tucking him in at home.

“Oh, shut up, Samuel,” Pete muttered back, half-asleep as he turned to his side. Samuel was sound asleep, however, and did not hear him.

*CHAPTER XXVI*

# THE BURIAL PLACE

**1**

“How much food do we have left?” Pete called to Samuel as the gang unrolled their t-shirts, put them back on, and prepared to travel onward. Samuel proceeded to rummage through the backpack he was designated to carry.

“Some loose, dirty jelly beans... Umm... and two packs of Gushers,” hollered Samuel as his face was still practically inside the bag.

“Can I please have one of the Gushers?” whined Leo. But this was not an unnecessary whine. The desperation in Leo’s pathetic tone perfectly suited his bodily need for nourishment. In fact, he could not remember another time in his life he had been this hungry.

“Why should *you* get one?” asked Samuel.

“Well, ‘cause I’m hungry.”

“We’re *all* hungry, Leo!” snapped Pete. “Nobody needs it now... we’ll save it for the time being. Now let’s get moving. Trevor?”

“It’s this way,” Trevor replied as he ducked through a tunnel. The others followed, this time with Pete in second, followed by Leo, then Samuel taking up the rear. As the gang stumbled through the often

narrow passages, Pete frequently turned to check on Samuel and Leo behind him. While he led with the confidence of a good leader, he was inwardly frightened that any one of his party members might fall and injure themselves or become dehydrated. There was to be no man left behind, if he could help it.

Pete's thoughts strayed often to Danny. And when they would, he would correct himself, shut them out, and turn around to check on the others again. Leo would often straggle, and Samuel would have to lightly push him onward. Perhaps he should have given Leo one of the Gusher packs... It could have just been the bright light, but every time Pete shone the flashlight back on Leo, he noticed his strangely paling face. *Maybe he is thirsty.* But when Pete turned back and handed him his canteen, Leo declined.

"I'm not thirsty," he'd say. And Pete would be left wondering why Leo was becoming sluggish. He thought to scold him and tell him to hurry up, but there was something in the way his steps plodded heavily and his eyelids hung heavier that made Pete think that Leo was trying his very best to avoid being yelled at.

"Is everybody doin' alright?" Trevor called back when he had reached an intersection in the tunnels.

"Yes," replied Leo quickly.

"Okay... well we're almost there."

"The surface?" Leo asked excitedly, but Pete turned back to Leo and, with one look, reminded him of where Trevor had agreed to lead them first. To Danny's resting place.

## 2

This next stretch of their journey was eerily silent. And while each boy wished someone would start a conversation... none of them had the courage to do so, themselves. The gang passed through a narrow passage whose walls stretched high above their heads, and when this path split into a 'y' shape, Trevor stopped and looked back at Pete.

"It's down there," he pointed. As Pete leaned forward and looked down the dark passageway, Trevor did not budge from where he stood. Pete understood.

"We'll be right back..." he said. "Come on, Leo." And Trevor and Samuel waited at the intersection as Pete and Leo proceeded down the left passageway, their flashlight guiding them. Pete could hear Leo start to sniffle as they took slow steps forward. A silence gripped their path. Even the murmuring of Trevor and Samuel back at the intersection dissipated quickly as the brothers walked on.

"Is it safe?" said Leo softly... breaking the silence.

"Please, Leo... Don't talk to me now," Pete replied. Up ahead, Pete saw the passage open up into a wide chamber, and the boys' steps fell slower here. Pete aimed the flashlight up as they approached the

entrance and could see something wooden in the distance. Passing through the doorway, they walked to the center of the circular chamber. Pete's flashlight traced, from left to right, a perimeter of eight wooden caskets around them. Pete gasped upon seeing this as Leo started to weep. As Pete approached the caskets on the far right, he stroked the wooden lids with his palm as he passed them counterclockwise. His eyes scanned the opposite ends of each, and in crudely carved markings he read, "Stephen," "Connor," "Paul," ... and another which took his breath away. Leo knew—in the way Pete stopped dead in his tracks... in the way he stared longingly at its letters—exactly which name he had just read. Unable to stand any longer, Leo collapsed to the ground by the entrance and cradled his head in his hands. Then a series of terrible screeches and squeaks pierced the air as Pete dug the hammer's head underneath the casket's nail heads, yanking them free. From where he sat, Leo sobbed and watched as Pete pulled the final nail out and lifted the casket's lid.

As it swung open on its hinge, Pete first saw the lid's interior side... and his breath was swiftly taken from his lungs. Scattered markings... scratches and dried blood... The sign of his lost brother's desperate will to live. The markings of a little boy, sealed inside an airless coffin. And Leo did not have to see the bloody handprints... the broken fingernail tips embedded in the wood... to understand how his brother died two weeks ago. He only had to recall his dream from that very night... and the sound of this brother calling out to him.

*"Leo! I can't breathe! I can't breathe, Leo!!!"* His brother... *their* brother... had suffocated here in darkness. Robbed slowly of oxygen, he had died in his sleep... exhausted from screaming... exhausted from clawing for freedom. Leo cried now... harder than he ever had and ever would... but he remained completely silent. He saw Pete, whose head hung now in agonizing heartbreak, lean forward and wrap his arms around his brother's stiff shoulders. And pulling him up slowly to himself, Pete embraced the corpse, closed his eyes, and pressed their foreheads together... and held him still... so very still...

For years, Pete had longed desperately to feel his lost brother's brow pressed against his own once more. And for the longest time, he had come to believe that he never would. But now... Even though it was not warm like he remembered... even though it was lifeless and cold... he could not help but be thankful for it, nonetheless. He had missed it so.

Leo looked on, leaving Pete alone with his favored brother... And he was happy to do so. He knew Pete had gone without him... without his embrace for far too long. But after a few minutes, Leo piped up.

"We need to find my lunchbox... we *have* to!"

"Shut up, Leo," Pete muttered as he set his brother's head back down in the casket.

“Won’t you help me find it?? I need it for Danny!”

“Please, Leo... don’t say his name... don’t say his name anymore,” Pete sniffled, nearing tears. “He’s gone now... he’s with Grandma Ruth in heaven.” It took a lot of willpower in Pete to release his hold of his brother’s cold hand. He knew this was the very last time their weathered palms would ever touch. But after one firm squeeze, he let go and swung the lid back over his resting place. “We have to go now, Leo.”

*CHAPTER XXVII***SAMUEL****1**

“Was Danny there, Pete?” asked Samuel as he and Leo returned to the intersection.

“Let’s go home,” Pete said, completely ignoring Samuel’s question. Trevor proceeded to lead the way down the opposite passage, with Pete, Leo, and Samuel following, respectively. They had not walked far before the path narrowed and ended at the foot of a thick, wooden door. It was barred shut by a long iron pipe which had been jammed secure in opposite wall crevices.

“This is the entrance to the labyrinth,” Trevor said, turning to the others. “Beyond this door... it’s *their* tunnels.”

“The mudcrawlers,” Pete moaned.

“That’s why sir chose it... to be the entrance down here. So that if any of us tried to escape, we’d die in the labyrinth.” Trevor’s own words were beginning to frighten him more.

“And you’re sure you remember the way through?”

“Yes... I think. But either way, it’s our only way out now.”

“Well, how do we fight them?” Samuel spoke softly. “Pete has the only gun.”

“We don’t fight them, stupid,” Pete snapped, “We run.” And Pete looked over at Leo as he said this... Just in the way Leo swayed tiredly as he stood cast doubt on whether they would be fast enough. Leo had been through so much... “Are you ready, Leo?” And Leo nodded, while still looking down at the ground.

“Alright, let’s go,” said Trevor as he raised the iron bar and slowly opened the heavy door. And as the door swung open, a gust of air was exhaled from the tunnel beyond. Pete and Samuel immediately recalled this foul stench and remembered Charlie. Before them was a mound of those same strange rocks they had broken through before. And just beyond them, the tunnel’s perfectly cylindrical walls were coated in slippery, colorless mucus. Pete noticed at once how unusually dense the tunnel’s darkness was. Trying to scan the area ahead, his flashlight now seemed only able to shed light ten feet forward, at most.

“Won’t they see the light?” Leo whispered.

“No. They are completely blind. They can only smell us,” Pete whispered back. With each cautious step forward, the boys’ shoes plodded heavily through the mucus. Leo occasionally lost his footing and slipped, but Pete was quick to yank him by the arm back to his feet.

“I’m terribly hungry, Pete,” Leo said after a few minutes.

“Ugh. Fine. Samuel, give him one of the Gusher packs,” Pete replied, well aware of how Leo’s steps grew weaker behind him. When Leo tore open the plastic pack, he shoved all of its fruity contents into his mouth and consumed it voraciously. This was no way to eat a pack of Gushers. Such a fine and exotic treat should be enjoyed... eating one piece at a time. And while Leo knew this to be true, his incredible hunger got the better of him.

Trevor continued to lead the gang through the many tunnels by a seemingly random pattern of lefts and rights. *How could he remember all of this?* Pete thought to himself. Suddenly, all four of the boys stopped walking and stood silent... listening.

“What is that?” Pete hissed to Trevor.

“Shhhh! One’s coming.” Trevor then crouched low to the tunnel floor and the other boys followed suit. Pete shone the flashlight down the tunnel at a crossroads about eight feet away as the sound of hundreds of thumping legs grew louder. Then, all four boys gasped as a mudcrawler’s antennae peeked out beyond the left corner. It paused for a moment, then crossed the intersection to the right tunnel. As its long body passed by, Pete stood frozen in amazement at its terrible size. *It must be at least twenty feet long!* And unsure of what to do next, Pete looked to Trevor who paused momentarily and motioned for them to turn left ahead. The boys hurried quickly around the corner as Samuel continued to check the tunnel behind them with their last glow stick. The far off twitching of more mudcrawlers would echo throughout the

passages, but the way the sound travelled and hit their ears, none of the boys could discern whether its source was far behind them or just around the next corner. As they all grew more and more frightened, they began running down extended lengths of one tunnel and slow down cautiously whenever they reached an intersection. Samuel's neck began to hurt as his head swiveled from the others in front of him to the tunnels behind... making sure they were not being followed.

Trevor slowed down and crouched as they reached another crossroads. He gave hand motions to the others that they were to turn right ahead. He listened carefully for a moment. Hearing nothing, he suddenly jumped to his feet and turned the next corner sharply. And just as Pete's light followed him, he squealed loudly and slipped onto his back in an attempt to stop. Right as they had turned the corner, they saw a mudcrawler lying right in the middle of their path just four feet ahead. And as Trevor scrambled to his feet, ready to retreat, he stopped and stared.

"It's... it's dead," he said, approaching for better inspection. He examined its motionless corpse and nudged it with his shoe.

"What are you waiting for?? Let's get the hell out of here!" Pete said hurriedly. "How is the glow stick holding up?" Pete whispered, shining the flashlight to Samuel in back. Just beyond Leo, Samuel lifted his arm wielding the glow stick high above his head.

"It doesn't have much left!" but right as Samuel finished saying these words, two pincers snapped around his elbow from the darkness behind him, severing his forearm completely. A sudden burst of blood splashed against the tunnel wall as the boys screamed in unison. Samuel's face wore a look of such terrible agony.

"AHHHHH!!!" he screamed. And as Leo and Trevor took off down the tunnel, Pete jumped back to Samuel, grabbed him by his other arm and yanked him down the tunnel, past the mudcrawler corpse. Samuel ran fast with Pete as they caught up to Trevor and Leo. None of the boys dared to sacrifice speed for a glimpse behind them. They just ran as fast as the slick tunnel floor would allow them. Through the wet plodding of their frantic steps, they could hear a stampede of crawler legs hot in pursuit. Pete led the others now as Trevor screamed out directions. There was no time to cautiously peek around each corner and intersection before them... Pete simply prayed that, whichever direction they turned, there would not be a creature waiting to intercept them. Just ahead, Pete found a chance to shake the mudcrawler off their tail. Spotting a narrow crevice in the tunnel wall, Pete squeezed through, pulling Leo with him by the hand. Luckily, the crevice was deep enough for all four of the boys to hide inside... in fact, it formed an entirely new passage. While it was a tight squeeze as the boys side-stepped through, Pete knew it was far too narrow

for the mudcrawler to follow them. And shortly after all four boys were safely inside, the mudcrawler thundered by, its thunderous steps disappearing down the passage.

Without wasting time, Pete unfastened his belt buckle and yanked it out of his jean loops.

“Give me your arm, Samuel,” he said. Samuel leaned in, but had neither the strength nor blood left for much else. Pete quickly wrapped the belt tightly around Samuel’s gushing arm stump. With a sharp tug, he bound the leather tight, and Samuel’s bleeding was soon stopped. “Is everybody else alright?”

“I don’t feel good, Pete!” Leo moaned tiredly. “I think... I think I’m gonna...” and, out of his mouth and almost exclusively onto his own shirt, Leo spewed vomit scattered with unchewed gushers and dark colors. Pete swore at first that some of these colors were blood, but he soon dismissed this to be the fruit punch candy. “I want to go to sleep, please.”

“No, Leo! Are you crazy? We can’t stop now! Come on,” Pete yanked Leo up by the arm, “Stand up!” And Leo obeyed, doing his best to lock his knees and remain standing. “Trevor, how far are we?”

“Two more lefts and one more right. Not too far of a run,” Trevor called back, keeping careful watch of the crevice entrance.

“Can you carry Samuel if he can’t run?” Leo slurred, drowsy but still concerned for his friend. An inquisitive look from Pete restated this question.

“Yeah. I think so,” confirmed Trevor.

“Alright then,” Pete whispered. “Let’s go.” The boys emerged from the crevice one by one and took off running as Trevor led the way. But Pete’s light was the only one they had left. So Trevor ran half-blinded by his own shadow in front of him. They took their first left and kept running. But then Pete heard a lack of footsteps beside him.

“TREVOR!” Pete called out. “Samuel is down! Come help me!” They all backtracked a bit until Pete’s flashlight caught Samuel’s collapsed body... the frozen whites of his eyes shining brightly back. He wore the far-off stare of death. In just the short few seconds after collapsing, a pool of blood had already started to form; Pete’s makeshift tourniquet had slipped off soon after they set out from the crevice. “OH SHIT! OH SHIT SHIT SHIT!” Pete hollered, clawing violently at his own hair. Suddenly, Leo collapsed beside him... possibly due to the shock of his friend’s death or perhaps due entirely to the little, toothed worm that had been slowly eating its way deep through Leo’s ear canal. “Leo? Leo... LEO!!!” Pete screamed as he tried yanking his brother to his feet, but his legs were limp.

“Pete... I feel sick,” he mumbled. “I need help, Pete. Will you help me?” Pete used his fingers to spread Leo’s right eyelid open. *Okay*. Now the left... *Oh... no*. The white of Leo’s left eye was no more, as a burst blood vessel had flooded it bright red.

“What are we going to do with Samuel?” Trevor panicked.

“Leave him! Let’s go!” Pete tossed the flashlight to Trevor, picked Leo up, and carried him on his back through the tunnel as Trevor lit the way. Trevor recovered the pistol from the backpack and cocked it, ready to fire on any mudcrawler in their way. Pete moved his feet as fast as he could, carrying Leo and following Trevor around a left turn.

“It’s this right up ahead!” Trevor exclaimed, and as his voice echoed through the tunnels, the slow thunder of giant centipede legs began its crescendo. “Hurry!”

As they turned the final corner together, they rejoiced as they caught sight of the door, barred shut like the first. They slid through the mucus as they reached it and Pete set Leo down and immediately began working on unjamming the heavy bar.

“LOOK OUT!!” screamed Trevor as his flashlight caught a mudcrawler charging at them from behind, suspended from the ceiling. “HURRY!”

“I’M TRYING!!” Pete screamed back, but the iron bar was jammed tightly in a narrow crack in the wall. Trevor knew there would not be enough time, so he aimed the revolver carefully and opened fire on the mudcrawler. The first shot dislodged it from the ceiling to fall on its back. But it soon flipped off its back onto its feet. Trevor’s three other shots all hit... the last splattered its head, vanquishing it effectively.

...And just in time. Finally, the iron bar budged loose, and Pete opened the door. He dragged Leo through to the other side as the sound of more mudcrawler legs grew louder in the distance.

“TREVOR! COME ON!” he called through the open door. But Trevor heard the mudcrawlers coming and tossed the backpack to Pete.

“You were wrong, Pete. But thank you... thank you for trying. We can’t go back, you and I... It’s just that you’re not ready to admit it yet.”

“NOOO!!!” but before Pete could go back for him, Trevor swung the door shut and barred it again. Pete banged on the door with such uncontained might. “NO TREVOR!!!” But then he heard a burst of gunfire followed by heavy pounding from the other side of the door as the mudcrawlers outnumbered and overpowered Trevor.

The tremendous force with which the mudcrawlers tried to break down the door began to shake the ground as dust and small rocks fell from above onto Pete's head. *Holy shit.* The tunnel was about to cave in. Pete jumped to his feet, picked up Leo again, and moved as fast as his strength allowed down the tunnel. He could hear the tremendous rocks crashing just behind his steps. Just ahead, Pete saw the tunnel open up to a larger opening. Upon entering the chamber, the tunnel behind him collapsed completely in a great cloud of dust that lingered and spread into the chamber. Pete saw no other exit from this chamber, and, looking up, spotted a soft light two hundred feet above. *It's... it's the sun! It's where we first broke through!* But looking around him, Pete discovered that Trevor had led them to a place with no escape... with no way to reach the sunlight.

*CHAPTER XXIII*

# BYGONE MONUMENTS

## 1

“Where have you gone?” The whispers carved through the darkness and bounced in every direction. Pete sat with Leo amid the faint glow of sunlight at the center of this chamber.

“Leo... Leo... wake up,” he said, shaking Leo lightly. Soon, Leo’s eyes opened slowly and looked up at Pete.

“Hello, Pete,” Leo smiled faintly. “Wh-where... Where are we?” Pete used the backpack to prop Leo’s head and shoulders up.

“We’re back at the bottom... at the bottom of that big pit... remember?” Pete’s lower lip started to tremble, and he struggled to stop this. “Remember when we broke through the wood planks at the grave?”

“Oh? I can see the sun!” Leo said, widening his eyes and staring upwards over Pete’s shoulder.

“Yes! Yes... that’s the sun!” Pete’s voice grew shaky.

“Pete...”

“Yes, Leo?”

“Do you promise you’ll come back for me?”

“What? I’m not going to leave you alone, Leo. I... I swear.” But then he heard faint voices above, and his face lit up. *It’s Monday!* Pete had thought about what they’d do if his parent never arrived to pick them out of this place... But now his fears were quelled as he felt new hope for their fates.

“HEEEELP!!!! MOOOM!!!!” Pete screamed. And as a head poked through the hole so far above, he heard his mother’s voice call out to him. “Did you hear that, Leo? They’re coming down to rescue us!” Leo was smiling and staring blankly, and Pete was unsure if he understood what was said.

“I heard mom!” Leo’s voice cracked ever so softly. He was so very weak. And just as Pete had begun to rejoice, he watched as thick blood dripped from Leo’s nose onto his lips. “I can’t see you, Pete.” But Leo’s eyes were wide open. The worm had eaten its way into poor Leo’s brain. And Pete, realizing now, that Leo would not make it... let go.

“No... Please, Leo!” and from Pete’s eyes came a beautiful sight... tears. “Leo... listen to me. You listen to me, you understand? We’re going to go back... both of us...” Pete’s tears made his voice quickly turn into a sad croak. “We’re going to go back to the creek... to our fort... Just you wait.”

“What will we do then?” Leo mumbled... staring blankly upwards and barely moving his lips.

“We’ll... We’ll just sit. We’ll just sit and look out over the water...”

“That’s what we’ve always done...” And as Leo said this, Pete broke into a heavy sobbing.

“I... I’m so sorry, Leo!!” he wailed... “I know I’m a shitty brother! I’M SORRY, OKAY?? I’M SO, SO SORRY! But please... Don’t leave me alone, Leo!! Please, Leo... I... I love you... Please... I love you...”

“I know, Pete... I love you too,” he smiled softly. Pete hugged Leo tightly. “Pete, I’m really cold... Can I take some of Danny’s blankets?” But Pete didn’t know what to say. He speechlessly shook his head as tears washed over his freckles. This silence began to break Pete’s heart. But then Leo called again: “Pete...”

“Yes?” Pete sniffled.

“Look...” And Pete followed Leo’s pointing finger... across the chamber... to a small tin lunchbox. Pete jumped up and retrieved it.

“Do you want it?” he said to Leo.

“Open it...”

“But it’s your stuff, Leo... Are you sure?”

“It’s for all three of us...” Leo whispered as a single tear fell from his eye. And Pete brought the lunchbox back to Leo’s side and opened the latches. The shock that ran through Pete as he swung open the lid and laid eyes for the first time on the contents of this lunchbox made his nose tickle and his eyes well up again with fresh tears.

Pete was overwhelmed by the collection of surprises he found inside. Among various, oddly colored stones... was a baseball card of his that Leo had recovered from the dump... Pete's long-lost pack of cigarettes that Leo had no doubt hidden from him... a hazy photograph of the three brothers, with smiles on their faces and arms wrapped over each other's shoulders, at the shore of Aunt Ruth's pond... an old Canadian coin Leo had found once... a newspaper clipping of Danny's missing person's case, that perhaps Leo had read a thousand times and stared deep into the black and white image of the lost brother who he could not remember ever truly knowing... and a stack of paper that Pete took out and flipped through. *They're...* Pete's eyes, red with sobbing, stared in disbelief at this stack of birthday cards... cards with crude stick figures: one with dark brown hair, one of such short stature, and one with dots for freckles... cards that Leo had drawn with crayon for years and saved... they had sat here in this lunchbox waiting... for the day that Danny came back home. And it was when Pete set the cards back into the lunchbox that he noticed the inscription carved in its lid: "Brothers no matter what."

The contents of this sacred artifact, this capsule of hope, made up Leo's living will. What he had to his name... all that he held most dear in the frightening world around him... These were the things he clung onto for hope... the things he would think about when he was scared... neatly packed in this cozy sanctuary where everything fit as it should. Where clothes were never too large... where kickball at recess never picked him last... where Danny was still out there somewhere, soon to climb back up to his top bunk... where the bullies knew he had such a great big heart... where he safely kept in waiting all of his love for his oldest brother and truest friend. All of this faith... all of this hope hidden beneath a tin lid, a rusted lock, and a promise that he would never forget these two boys that built in him the courage to venture out every morning to the bus stop a few blocks away. Those two boys that built in him a desire to explore... to go where no man had gone... Those two boys that built his lion heart... that built a fort called 'The Hovel'... that built his fondest memories... Those two boys that fortunately built an unfortunately small, young boy named Leo.

Pete took this all in, and it filled him up so quickly and completely that no room remained for tears. To say that they were cast out, forced from Pete's tough exterior, would not suffice. This was the first time in a long time where an indestructible Pete, now truly heartbroken, allowed himself to simply be. He set the lunchbox down.

"Leo, I..." but Pete's words were choked into silence as he found Leo's head had laid limply back... and he had become completely still. His eyes, the left one red and bloodshot, stared blankly upwards as blood trickled from his open mouth. Pete could not find his breath. His face skewed into an agonizing

grimace... his lips stretched back and curled over his teeth. And as he wailed in sorrow, Pete lifted Leo from the back of his head and lovingly pressed their foreheads together. As he cradled his limp body, he felt the warmth in his brother's brow and their noses mashed together, sharing Pete's tears on both of their cheeks as Leo's touch grew colder.

“Shhhh... shush.... Shh....” he whispered into Leo's mouth. “I'm here...” There was such love here. Love that shone through the darkest corners of Pete's heart... These two boys had lost themselves with the disappearance of their dear brother. To say *what* these two are would be a tricky task. While men that move mountains have been called the same... I will not shy from the truth as I believe it to be. In fact, I'll put it into Pete's earlier words: ‘There must be a limit.’ Under the heaviest burdens of curiosity and doomed ignorance, these two fell like me and countless others like us. In a world that allows and enables such terrible horrors to live comfortably, specifically those that can destroy a young, boy with freckles on his face... In a world where heroes are found in those that face these horrors and somehow manage to return to their feet... I will never shame from saying... These two are my kin.