

-:: Journals from the River's Edge ::-

Draft Three

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-:: Chapter 1: The Proverbial Paradise ::-

Peter Boyd had come to the Tatonka Hydrosports Center for the same reason as everyone else – he wanted to earn money, but he wanted to have fun doing it. Anyone would admit that the perfect job is one that pays well, and makes a guy feel fulfilled while doing it. People were always telling Peter that the key to happiness was making work feel like a hobby, and now that he was fresh out of high school, a graduate of the class of 2015, Peter actively pursued a life of purpose. The Tatonka Hydrosports Center was an outdoor recreation Mecca tucked away in the Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina. Perhaps here, Peter could find that which he sought, that proverbial paradise.

Ever since he could remember, Peter's father, a prominent minister named Matthew Boyd whom Peter liked to call the Reverend, had been taking him along on river expeditions. The Reverend found that time spent on any body of water to be calming, meditative even. Sometimes it would be fly-fishing, other times canoeing.

“Jesus was a fisherman,” his father would say. “The savior stuff came later.”

As Peter entered his teenaged years, he became more interested in whitewater kayaking. His father bought boats for the both of them, and they spent their weekends trying to learn the sport together. He sent Peter to the Tatonka Hydrosports Center every summer for private kayaking lessons which allowed him to harness his river navigating skills and cultivate a personal relationship with whitewater. He grew to understand and respect rivers everywhere, so naturally, coming to the Tatonka Hydrosports Center to work as a river guide brought Peter's life skills around full circle.

But so far, it wasn't nearly as glamorous as Peter expected it to be. He sat in his bungalow on the edge of an inflatable camping mattress that lay on a wooden bunk bed frame. He had been given a shoddily constructed room in a cabin called Garden House which had been partitioned into four equal rooms, each only accessible through a door on the outside, like a motel. Boxes littered the floor, full of

belongings that he had brought along with him from home back in Charlotte, North Carolina. He picked a box up, and rummaged through its contents.

He pulled out a picture frame that held a photo of the Boyd family. There were only three of them now – Peter, his father, and his little brother William. Just three guys standing on the top of a snow-capped mountain, skis on their feet, and smiles on their faces. The picture was taken only a year before while Peter had still been in high school.

His mother, Sarah Boyd, died many years ago during complications of childbirth when William was born prematurely. Peter was only four years old at the time. The memories of his mother were now hazy at best, but he vividly remembered the fear in his father's eyes on the day of his little brother's birth, worrying for the safety of his wife and son, and the strange mix of grief and joy in the following months after William was born healthy, but at the cost of his mother.

“Your little brother was a blessing,” his father explained to Peter. “I can't pretend to understand why these things happen the way they do, but I believe God has a plan.” The Reverend's words greatly comforted Peter at the time. Although he might have his doubts, Peter liked to believe that God did, in fact, have a plan. Sometimes it was just hard for him to understand.

Peter sat the picture frame down on a nearby table, and reached back into the box. He pulled out a yellow manila envelope, and opened it to find a stack of his old drawings and paintings inside. He spread them out over his bed, and considered which ones might be good enough to put on his walls. He wasn't shy about sharing his art. In fact, he aspired to make more of it now that he lived in such a beautiful location. Watercolor landscapes were of a particular interest to him.

Peter examined a painting he had made of the famous Tatonka Falls, the mighty class IV rapid that made the Tatonka River a popular destination for whitewater rafting. Peter recalled sitting on the edge of the river for hours with his tiny, travel-sized paint kit. Each stroke had been deliberate, careful

to retain the exact motion of the water flow from the top of the waterfall to the bottom. Peter was proud of that one. It would go on the wall, for sure.

A knock on his door brought him out of his own head. He opened the door to find a young woman on the other side. She wore pink Chacos on her feet – the kind without the loop around the toe, a purple Bohemian gypsy skirt around her waist, and a sky blue tank top. A tie-dyed hairband held her coconut shell colored hair together in a ponytail.

“Um. Hi,” he greeted her. “Can I help you?”

The girl smiled, and extended her right hand for a handshake. In her other hand, she held a small green cotton bag with writing on it, a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

“My name's Jasmine,” she pointed to a skinny, tan shed only a few yards away. “I live right over there in the Barn. We're neighbors.”

“I'm Peter,” he replied. “You live in a barn? That sounds... nice?”

“It's not a real barn.” Jasmine stepped into Peter's room, and glanced around. “I don't keep bails of hay in there or anything. It's actually a lot nicer than your room.” She quickly noticed that all of Peter's things were still in boxes and bags. “When did you get here? You've hardly unpacked anything.”

Her gaze then turned towards the many paintings laid out across his bed. A smile lit her face.

“Do you paint?”

“I try,” Peter answered. “And just so you know, I moved in an hour ago. I haven't had any time to settle in.”

“I respect that.” Jasmine continued her examinations of the paintings. “These are pretty good. I like that one of the Tatonka Falls. You should hang that one up.”

“I think I will.” Peter collected the paintings from his bed and slid them back into the manila

envelope. He moved the envelope to his bedside table and sat down on the bed. “So... what do you do here?”

Jasmine joined him on the bed and began rummaging through her bag, the contents of which clinked and clanked against each other. “I’m a raft guide, of course! Why the hell would I want to do or be anything else?” She closed her eyes in concentration. “Well, I do wait tables at the Riverside Diner on the occasional weekend. There’s much more money in tips that way. Not that any of us have come here for money.” Jasmine’s green eyes fluttered open and met his. “What about you? What do you do?”

“I’m a guide, too.”

“And why wouldn’t you be?” Jasmine asked rhetorically. She then found what she had been searching for within her bag and pulled out a colorful glass smoking pipe. It was slender and clear, a spiral of orange and blue twisted around the length of the piece. “You know why they call this place THC, right?”

“Isn’t it just the abbreviation for Tatonka Hydrosports Center?” Peter asked.

“Well yeah, in part,” Jasmine answered, “which is actually somewhat of a sad story.”

“Why’s that?”

“Tatonka is the Native American word for buffalo,” Jasmine explained. “There used to be as many American Bison from California to New York and all the way South down to Florida. But then America slaughtered them all in the 19th century.”

“That’s sad – and here I always thought Tatonka was the Cherokee word for water.”

“I know that one. Their word for water is *ama*,” Jasmine handed Peter the pipe. “But the funny thing about the THC is that it’s also the active chemical in weed that makes you high. Have you ever smoked before?”

Peter had smoked before, but only just once at a high school Halloween party. He recalled

sitting in a camping chair, in the backyard of one of his friend's houses, a bottle of cheap beer in hand. A campfire burned in a makeshift fire-pit made from a pile of stray bricks. Peter dressed up that year as a dog – a dalmatian to be exact, but he tried his best to make it edgy. He wore a black zip-up hoodie over a white v-neck T-shirt which he had plastered with black circles of sharpie. He used eye shadow to create a round, black spot around his left eye. His ears were made out of cardboard, and superglued to a headband.

A clown sat across the fire from Peter who had just rolled a spliff – a mix of both tobacco and marijuana, Peter soon learned. The clown passed it around the campfire. “Out of courtesy,” he had told everyone around the fire-pit. “It's funnier to share the laughs.” When the joint reached Peter, he wasn't sure what to do with it. He stared at the small, rolled up piece of paper in complete and utter confusion. The spliff looked like a cigarette, and Peter watched people smoke in movies all the time, but he had never tried it himself.

“Look, Pongo,” the clown said. “You just put the unlit end in your mouth and inhale. Easy.” He took the spliff from Peter, inhaled a puff, and gave it back.

Peter tried his best to follow the clown's instructions, but the smoke ended in a hacking fit. “Are you sure,” Peter asked between coughs, “that I'm – hack! – doing it right? – hack!”

“You should feel like a penis and the whole world is a vagina.”

“Are you calling me a – ?” Peter's world began to spin. His mind was working much faster than his body. Time had slowed to a crawl. “Are you calling me – calling me a dick?”

The clown released a howl of a laugh, causing Peter's paranoia to grow. Was he laughing at him? It was his costume, wasn't it? Nobody ever dressed up as a dalmatian for Halloween anymore. What had he been thinking? He should have showed up as something cooler. He'd quietly dismissed himself from the campfire and left the Halloween party early.

The pipe felt cold in Peter's hands, but its colors were captivating, as if painted specifically to hypnotize. Jasmine fumbled around in her bag again and pulled out a pink lighter. "Here," she handed it to Peter. "You are an artist, right?" Jasmine asked. "Don't you like to open your mind?"

"My dad always called it the Devil's lettuce," Peter muttered. "He's a minister."

She held the pipe up to his face, "Well, that's the thing about lettuce. It's good for you." Peter gave Jasmine a look of apprehension. "It's a veggie. You put it on sandwiches!" Jasmine protested.

"You don't put marijuana on sandwiches," Peter replied dryly.

"Not even in the name of creativity?" Jasmine batted her eyelashes.

"This is called peer pressure," Peter said, taking the pipe from her hands.

"Oh, come on," Jasmine laughed, jumping up from the bed. She spun around the room, the bells on her skirt jingled as she twirled. "There's no pressure here. Just pleasure."

Peter put the pipe to his lips with one hand and struck the lighter with the other. He inhaled, carefully tilting the flame to the side in order to light the pipe. He could feel his lungs expanding, taking in the smoke. Oddly enough, this reminded him of playing the trumpet in his high school's marching band. The pipe was not dissimilar from his trumpet mouthpiece, but instead of producing 'brass' music, Peter exhaled the 'grass.' Peter supposed it was like his band director had always told him, "There's not much difference between a G and a B. They're thirds, the foundation of an arpeggio – part of the same scale, part of a team." Yet Peter recalled playing a G with no valves pressed, while he always gave B the middle finger.

Jasmine smiled, sat back down on the inflatable mattress, slipped off her Chacos, and crossed her legs underneath her skirt. "Welcome to the THC, Peter."

She allowed herself to fall backwards, her head landing on Peter's pillow. She took the glass pipe from Peter, who still sat upright next to her, brought it to her mouth, scorched the weed, inhaled,

and exhaled slowly – methodically, coolly – allowing a wisp of smoke to escape her lips in the shape of a ring. With a snap of her fingers, the top of the circle bent inwards, inverting into a heart-shape which floated up through the small wooden bungalow until breaking against the window screen, leaking away into the outside mountain air.

“Lie down with me,” Jasmine tugged on the sleeve of Peter's shirt. “Relax, Peter.”

“We just met...” Peter said, nervously lying down next to Jasmine. “I don't know anything about you and – ”

Jasmine laughed out loud, and ran a finger through Peter's light brown hair. “I said relax, Peter. All you need to know is that we are two young people smoking some weed in a quiet wooden bungalow, and enjoying each other's company. Doesn't that sound nice?”

“Yeah.” Peter closed his eyes, and let out a long, calm breath. “Yeah, it does.”

Silence replaced the lingering smoke. Jasmine nuzzled her face into Peter's chest. Although he was supposed to be as relaxed as he could be – what, with a pretty girl in his arms and a haze in his mind – Peter couldn't help but feel a little nervous. His breaths were short and quick. He always felt like this when he shared a bed with a beautiful woman.

It was the apprehension that got to him the most, the uncertainty of expectations. Although Peter hadn't personally subscribed to his father's beliefs that sex should be saved until after marriage, he wasn't completely liberal with who he shared his bed with. He believed that love should be involved at the least, and Jasmine had just laid down, no questions asked. Peter wondered if she was this forward with everyone she worked with. He hoped not. He wanted her to see something special in him.

Peter opened his eyes, and glanced around the room in an attempt to distract his nervousness. The drywalls provided a unique decor, even without any of Peter's watercolors to decorate them, plain and simple chip wood, boring if not for the fact that nearly every inch of the cabin was covered in

hidden marks, carved names, and secret scriptures. In the far corner, to the left of the door, a Crayon-colored chimpanzee prepared to eat a banana, except it wasn't quite a banana. It was much more hairy and veiny than a normal – oh, Peter realized it wasn't a banana.

He could scarcely read a sentence scribbled behind the cobwebs on the wall that touched the bunk beds. He sat up to examine it more closely. A brown and gray spider about the size of Peter's hand jumped out of the shadows, and onto the web. The spider snapped its pincers, telling Peter to back off or else, so he quickly jumped away from the arachnid.

Jasmine sat up to see what was going on. “Are you alright?”

“It's a spider!” Peter scrambled off the bed. “And it's really big!”

“What color is it?”

“Brown and gray,” Peter answered. He tore open a suitcase, and searched for a pair of shoes. “Is it a brown recluse?! Those are poisonous, aren't they?”

Jasmine reached out to the web, and grabbed the spider by the legs. She dangled it in midair while it kicked, and twisted in an effort to escape.

“Don't pick it up!” Peter held a black canvas tennis shoe in his hand like a battle axe.

“Chill,” Jasmine said, opening the screen door and stepping outside. She squatted down, and let the spider walk from her palm onto the ground. “It's not a brown recluse. It's just a wolf spider.”

Jasmine stepped back inside and returned to the bed. “They're harmless.”

“You can never be too careful.” Peter placed the tennis shoe back in his bags.

“But you can be more kind. No reason to kill the little guy when you can easily coexist.”

Jasmine investigated the graffiti behind the cobwebs that had captivated Peter's attention. She recognized it as a reinterpretation of the famous J.R.R. Tolkien quote, “Some wanderers are lost.” She chuckled and laid down on her side. Peter joined her, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

Jasmine purred in his embrace, and opened her eyes. “Are you alright? You seem tense.”

“Are you trying to sleep with me?” Peter asked, which surprisingly, dispelled most of his tension. Sometimes it was best to be honest, and up-front.

“I’m not trying to sleep with anybody,” Jasmine answered, “just somebody.” Peter watched her eyes trail off into deep thought, and a slight frown stole some of the color from her face. She rolled over, turned her back to him, and checked the watch on her wrist. “Besides,” she continued, “it’s still early. The day is young, and so are we. This is just a nap.”

Peter nodded, and returned to admiring his room’s graffiti. He had always appreciated graffiti as an art form, and considered it an injustice that tagging was illegal. Of course, it wouldn’t do to spray-paint each and every white wall in sight, but Peter believed that there should be a public art space available for artists who need to express themselves in this way.

The most interesting graffiti was drawn in magic marker on the underside of the top bunk bed. Lying underneath on the bottom bunk, Peter could easily examine the art, first noting a series of red dotted lines among other strange symbols. But his artist’s eye began to catch the subtleties, the flowing blues, sparkling greens, dotted reds, all of which conjoined to create a scene not unlike the landscapes Peter enjoyed. Streaks of thick brown lines formed a winding double helix around patches of olive-green. Sky-blue cascaded across the drawing – mixing with navy blues and whites, which suggested a series of waterfalls. Another brown scratch across the blue must be a bridge.

Further along the path, the face of a man, covered in a thick green, burly beard, was etched in various shades of green Crayon. Could it be the artist himself or a part of the scenery? Peter considered that, perhaps, it was the Tatonka River’s version of Mount Rushmore, but he had absolutely no idea. He was still very unfamiliar with any, and all aspects of the Tatonka National Forest.

Still following the progression of red dashes, three gray circles were stacked one on top of the

other, a diamond balanced on top with the words “Birth Canal” scratched within. Blue flowed over and under each individual shape. The red dashes continued only slightly further, up and out of the gray, until disappearing altogether at a series of ovals, each neatly drawn on top of the other, starting with the largest oval on bottom, decreasing in width with each progressive layer. A lone mysterious red X sat balanced at the top of the structure.

Although the red dashes stopped at the X, the blues and greens continued along until reaching a small etching of a brick-red house, the word “witch” scratched over the door, and a black cat drawn to be sitting on the doormat. Peter thought that was particularly interesting.

“Are you looking at that graffiti too?” Jasmine broke the silence. “I can't seem to look away, actually. It's captivating. To be honest with you, I think it might be a treasure map.”

“What makes you say that?”

“X marks the spot,” Jasmine whispered in his ear. “Duh – and I think I recognize some of the intended landmarks.” She left Peter's embrace, sat up once again on the mattress, and pointed at the brown double helix. “Just up the train-tracks nearby, there's a hiking trail called the Doldrums.”

“And what are doldrums exactly?”

“I actually learned about this one in science class,” Jasmine proudly explained. “Doldrums are a low-pressure ocean feature near the equator. They say that the prevailing winds are calmer there.” She sat up from the mattress, twisted to the edge of the bed, and slipped her Chacos back onto her feet.

“It sounds nice,” Peter said, sitting up as well, “but we're nowhere near an ocean. Why would this trail be named the Doldrums? That doesn't make any sense.”

“True,” she said. “I guess you'll just have to see it for yourself.” Jasmine reached into her cotton bag, returned her pipe, and pulled out a clear plastic water bottle, drinking the small remainder of its contents in a single gulp.

“Right now?” Peter asked.

“Why not? It'll be fun.” Jasmine put the water bottle aside, and pulled out a journal and colored markers from her bag. She opened the journal to a blank page, and began her forgery, careful to recreate the same colors as the graffiti as to retain their significance. A few of the landmarks were labeled, “Birth Canal” and “Witch” in particular. Jasmine sketched them out quickly and masterfully. When she was through, she handed the copy to Peter who compared it with the graffiti.

“Not bad,” he said. “You're a bit of an artist yourself, Jasmine.”

Peter considered the disorganized state of his bungalow, all messy and unpacked, not quite a home yet. He wanted to tidy it up. He enjoyed the luxury of returning to a clean space that he could call his own. The Reverend had purchased the family's current house in suburban Charlotte, North Carolina, when Peter was only five years old and William barely a year. For all intents and purposes, this was the house of Peter's childhood – the one in which he spent his formative years. Although the Boyd family had lived across town in a bigger house before, the death of Peter's mother drove them to leave. Peter couldn't imagine how the Reverend must have felt then, alone in the dream house that he had intended to share with his wife, now no more than a haunted house. The move across town was healthy, necessary even. Now that he had moved away, Peter missed the times spent in that small house with the other Boyd Boys, a nickname the Reverend had given them since Peter could remember.

“Peter?” Jasmine stood at the door to his cabin, holding it open for him. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah, I guess I will.” Peter slipped on his pair of tennis shoes and followed Jasmine outside. Unpacking and organization would have to wait. The air was warm with a temperature in the low 80s, but it felt strangely cool with the river mist that created such an illusion. Peter considered how ideal a day it was, especially for a summer in the South. He assumed that his home town of Charlotte was probably enduring heat in the triple digits right now – just another reason, Peter noted, to be thankful

for his job at the Tatonka River.

Jasmine held up her water bottle, and pointed towards the Barn, “Let me run over to my cabin real quick and fill this back up.”

“Take your time,” Peter replied. As Jasmine walked to the Barn, Peter took in the rest of the staff housing complex. He had wandered around earlier, searching for the Garden House, but it hadn't taken him very long to find it. The Human Resources office had given him an envelope with detailed directions to his room and a padlock combination. Each room was secured by a lock not unlike those used for high school lockers, but at the speed Jasmine had entered and left her room, Peter realized that hardly anyone actually used them. He assumed that his coworkers must really trust each other. Working alongside one another in such a fast-paced, adventurous environment had to go a long way with that, but perhaps, Peter considered, it was simply that no one owned anything worth stealing. Peter considered his most prized possessions: his cell phone and his art. One more easily replaced than the other.

Jasmine exited her room now equipped with a backpack. She tightened the shoulder straps, adjusting her pack to fit best, and walked across the open field of grass that grew around the Central building, naturally located in the center of the complex, highlighted by a dusty, dirt driveway which looped from the highway, across the train tracks, around the field, and back out to the ever busy I-15. She met Peter at the railroad, not far from Peter's bungalow since it was situated at the edge of the staff housing property line. Everything behind Peter's room belonged to the Tatonka National Forest, a fact Peter was proud of even though it meant sacrificing a potential backyard for a wild and scenic view.

Jasmine didn't stop walking when she reached Peter, but motioned for him to follow her. She led the two of them to the train tracks, hopped onto a rail, and attempted to walk along it as if it were a tight rope and she a circus acrobat. “I'm going to join the circus one day,” Jasmine stated.

“You probably could,” Peter admitted. “You've got great balance. Did you ever do gymnastics?”

“No,” Jasmine replied. “Just yoga.”

She made walking on a rail seem like child's play. Peter found it extremely difficult to walk along the rails for more than a few seconds at a time, stepping between the wooden tracks instead, each step a chore. It was as if the railroad had been deliberately constructed with just enough space between the tracks so that a person could not possibly walk comfortably along them.

“I like you.” Jasmine jumped off the rail, and joined Peter on the tracks. “Not everyone wants to just drop what they are doing, and go on an adventure.”

“That's why I'm here,” Peter replied, as Jasmine unzipped her backpack, and began rummaging through it. She found her journal, and handed it to Peter.

“We need to follow the map.”

“Right,” Peter answered. He still wasn't sure that the magic marker bedroom graffiti was a treasure map at all, but Jasmine was insistent. At the least, it would be some afternoon fun. He flipped through the pages of the journal, careful not to pry at any of Jasmine's other entries as he continued walking down the tracks.

It was a little too difficult for Peter not to pry into Jasmine's private writings. He noticed an entry from the previous summer with drawings of wildflowers in the margins. As Peter scanned her drawings, a few keywords caught his eye: smile, neighbor, love, Mark, heart, music, Florida.

Jasmine snatched the journal away from Peter's prying hands. She narrowed her eyes at Peter and flipped back to her copied print of the alleged journal. “I think we're following those brown intertwining lines.” She pointed at the double-helices. “Those have to be railroad tracks.”

“It makes sense,” Peter agreed. “So now we're looking for a series of red dashes?”

“They probably won't be real red dashes,” Jasmine said. “Think of it like those maps in any

Indiana Jones movie. You know – the ones that show where Indy travels from stop to stop?”

“Yeah, I'm following you.”

“The red dashes are the trail,” she scanned the tracks ahead. “I swear, judging by the map, it leads right up to the entrance of the Doldrums and beyond.” Jasmine looked around for the trail head. “We must be nearly there.” The mouth of the trail had always been difficult to find, at least from what Jasmine remembered, but she assumed that it had become overgrown over the wintertime, making it all the more difficult to find now. Still, she was confident that the proportions of the graffiti inspired map were correct. They were nearly there.

Peter stopped walking when he heard what sounded like running water in the near distance.

“Do you hear that?”

Jasmine froze in step, and listened carefully in an attempt to pinpoint the origin of the sound. It was a hypnotizing sort of white noise, and it certainly sounded like water, but more like a running shower rather than a free-flowing waterfall. “I don't think it's coming from the woods,” she answered. “I'm not exactly –” Jasmine lost her breath as something moved beneath a wooden cross tie, no more than two yards ahead.

Peter was not so fast to recognize the immediate danger, so Jasmine grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him close. “Peter!” she hissed, darting her eyes around, keeping a close observation on their surroundings. “Promise me you'll keep calm, okay?”

“What's going on?” Peter asked.

“Just promise. Everything's fine.”

“Okay,” Peter agreed. “I'm calm. What's up?”

“There's a rattlesnake nearby.”

“A what?!” Peter jumped into the air, kicking up a dirt cloud behind him. He ran along the

tracks, wildly out of control, until reaching a clearing a few feet up the side of the railroad.

“Stay there!” Jasmine stepped back, tiptoeing away from the dust cloud that blurred her vision of the ground ahead. Her choice in shoe wear – those bright pink sandals – presented her as an easy target for a snakebite should she get too close. Rattlesnake bites are incredibly poisonous. Having taken a Wilderness First Aid course as part of her mandatory river training, Jasmine was already familiar with the symptoms she could expect from a bite. The swelling and pain set on nearly immediately – then sweat and a tingling sensation. A bitten person will grow progressively weaker, anxious, and could expect ensuing nausea, vomiting, and hemorrhaging. If the bite went untreated for more than a few hours: heart failure. Death.

The rattling grew in volume as the cloud of dust dissipated, revealing the snake only a few feet away from her, coiled but head raised, ready to strike if provoked. Jasmine breathed calmly and locked eyes with the snake. She noted the gray diamond pattern against its sandy back, as her training taught her so she could identify its species later on if needed. Jasmine recognized it as an Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake, the largest poisonous snake in North America. It slithered over to her, rattling all the way. She took a step towards it and crouched to her knees.

“Jasmine!” Peter called from the nearby clearing. “Get away from that thing!”

“Shhhh...” she whispered and held her hand out to the encroaching snake. “It’s okay.” The snake stopped inches away and straightened its back. Its neck raised to meet her palm.

Jasmine narrowed her eyes in apprehension – a warning to the serpent, who twisted its neck to the side, blinked once, twice, then extended a forked tongue.

The snake rubbed its head against her palm and licked Jasmine's fingertips one by one. It twisted its way in a figure eight pattern into her hand, so she raised her other, allowing the snake to crawl into her arms in its entirety. Jasmine stayed calm, keeping her breath regular and controlled as the

snake nuzzled against her.

The serpent rested and the rattling ceased. The snake turned to face Jasmine and curved its mouth in a sort of half smile. Its tongue flickered in a wave, and the snake dismounted, slithering away into the brush. Jasmine met Peter in the clearing. “See? I told you it was fine.”

“You're completely insane.” Peter shook his head, looked around the clearing, and noted a beaten dirt trail wound through it. It opened up to a round patch of grass, completely surrounded by trees of all sizes, the upper branches joined together with Rhododendron vines to form a canopy. Logs had been dragged into a circle for sitting. Evidence of a fire – ash scattered among a pile of rocks – suggested that the clearing had recently been used for camping, despite the “No Camping, Tatonka National Forest” sign on a nearby tree.

“Sorry I left you back there.” Peter scratched the back of his head. “I really don't like snakes...”

“It's understandable,” Jasmine took Peter's hand and guided ahead. She pointed towards the dirt trail. “But I think you found the entrance to the Doldrums in the process!”

“What? Really?!” he exclaimed. Sure enough, there was a path ahead. Evidence was starting to suggest that Jasmine was correct about the treasure map, but there were still other more concrete landmarks to find. The graffiti in the bedroom indicated that they would soon encounter a bridge. Peter walked along the path and examined the flora that grew alongside the trail.

On more than one occasion, Peter recoiled in fear of the various tree roots that stretched across the narrow trail. To be fair, these roots were all of similar shape, size, and color to that of the snake. Peter's fear of snakes and his vivid, attentive imagination would breed a handful of false alarms along the way. Jasmine was kind not to tease him too much about it.

“You know, humankind has often had an antagonistic history with serpents,” Jasmine tried to counsel Peter as she led them along the path. “Especially in Christianity, but I'm sure you know all

about that since your dad's a minister and all.”

“Yeah,” Peter replied. “Satan disguised himself as a snake when he entered the Garden of Eden. It's all there in the book of Genesis. Everyone knows that.”

“Exactly,” Jasmine said, not bothering to turn around to face Peter as she talked. “Associating with Satan did nothing to help the reputation of the snake. It was a bad call – just like Hitler and the toothbrush mustache.”

“How is it like Hitler's mustache?” Peter ducked under a vine.

“Do you ever see anyone wearing a toothbrush mustache anymore?” Jasmine explained. “Hitler ruined it for everybody.”

“Hmm... I guess so. I never really thought of that.”

“But I don't think the snake is without hope,” Jasmine continued. “Take Hinduism, for example. Do you know anything about Hinduism, Peter?”

Peter shook his head, “The first of the Ten Commandments says to never place any god before the one and only. I never bothered to check out my other options.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Jasmine answered. “The Hindu gods are fascinating. Take Shesha, for example. He is one of the primal beings of creation and a king of the Nāga, a race of serpent gods. It is said that when Shesha uncoils, he moves time forward and creation occurs, but when he returns to his coiled state, the universe is erased. Each time he awakens from a nap, the world is reborn anew.” Jasmine paused to take note of Peter's reaction. “What do you think of that?”

“Does his name mean anything?” Peter asked.

“Of course,” Jasmine answered. “Shesha means 'that which remains,' because each time the world is destroyed and remade, Shesha stays unchanged. It's kind of tragic in a way.”

Peter continued following Jasmine as she led them along the Doldrums trail. “It's been a year

since I've last been here," Jasmine explained. "I've been told that the entrance becomes overgrown by plants each spring. We must be the first to find it this year."

"So you worked here a year ago?" Peter asked. He took notice of a bush of bright red berries growing proudly near the edge of the trail.

"I did," Jasmine replied, not far behind. "This is my second year at the THC."

Peter picked a red fruit from the bush and held it closely to his face in examination, observing the round red bumps that made up the whole of the berry. "I think I found a raspberry bush." Peter popped the berry into his mouth and chewed.

Jasmine joined him at the bush and took a berry for herself. "Careful," she warned. "You never know what might be poisonous out here." Peter spit the berry out, choking a bit in the process. Jasmine bent down and took a closer look at the bush. "Although in this case, I think you are right. This is just a raspberry bush."

Peter sighed in relief, and took a handful of berries. Jasmine laughed, and did the same. They continued along the trail, munched on raspberries, and noted their surroundings. Peter wanted to stay attentive, not just because there was a real possibility of encountering more undesirable wildlife, but he also didn't want to miss a landmark. He wanted their treasure map quest to be real.

After identifying that first raspberry bush, Peter couldn't help but notice the many others that scattered the side of the path. He would be the first to admit that he didn't understand the nature of plants as well as he should, but he wondered, was it not unnatural for raspberry bushes to grow so prominently in the wild? Perhaps it was their redness that stood out to him and made him more aware of their presence. The raspberry bushes were distributed along the trail as if they were highlighting it, just like the red dashes on the map. Peter smiled and decided to interpret the raspberry bushes as such, whether they really were a landmark on the map or not. At the very least, it was a good omen.

As they followed the trail further into the woods, Jasmine explained that the Tatonka National Forest was, in fact, a rain forest, although not like the tropical sort that one would expect to find in the Amazon jungle. The Tatonka Forest was instead a temperate deciduous rain forest. It rained often there in the gorge, but never for very long. The rains would gather and pour from thin air, and then dissipate just as quickly as they'd arrived. The weather was always dubious, never predictable or reliable.

The path had joined a creek, winding around in accordance to the stream's own twists and turns. The sound of running water grabbed Jasmine's complete attention. "Listen!"

"It sounds like a waterfall this time," Peter said. The Doldrums were close.

Jasmine handed him the journal and pointed at the brown marks she made across the blue ones. "I think the creek we've been walking along has been this streak of blue," she said, sliding her finger along the blue waves of magic maker. "We should expect to find a bridge up ahead." Jasmine pulled her water bottle out from her pack, put it to her mouth, and drank. She released a heavy sigh and handed the bottle to Peter. "Would you like a sip?"

"Sure." Peter drank, but something stung his mouth as he pulled through the straw – something sharp and sterile. It didn't taste much like water at all. No, it was alcoholic, actually – a realization that caused Peter to gargle and spew the contents of Jasmine's water bottle. "I thought it was just water!"

Jasmine laughed, "I never said it was or wasn't. You just didn't bother to ask."

"So what is it?" Peter handed the water bottle back to Jasmine.

"Gin and tonic," Jasmine grinned. "With a little bit of Red Bull for the adrenaline."

"Just warn a guy next time." Peter shook his head, and took a deep breath. "For all you know, I could be a recovering alcoholic, and that one sip will lead to a relapse."

"You're not an alcoholic."

"No," Peter admitted. "No, I guess I'm not." Peter wondered if he should take her assumption as

a compliment. What did that say about his character. Was he too simple? Was he boring? How could he expect a girl like Jasmine to retain any sort of interest in him if he wasn't exciting? And on that note, what kind of girl was Jasmine anyway? Peter realized that he knew absolutely nothing at all about her.

Jasmine crouched at the edge of trail, which seemingly had come to a stop at a cliff. She muttered, "We should have brought a machete – or at least a river knife." She stood up and scanned the area for an alternate way down.

Peter carefully made his way to the edge of the steep mountain trail. It dropped off fast, a fifteen foot drop into a shallow rocky creek. It would hurt a considerable amount to try to land a jump like that. The brush had risen to the edge of the trail, blocking any progression around.

Jasmine recalled a tree that had been a prominent feature of the trail in previous years. "I bet a storm pushed it over during the winter." Sure enough, it had, only rolling a few feet down the cliff, now wedged diagonally in between two pieces of petrified wood. "This changes things..." Jasmine muttered. "We're going to have to figure out a way down there."

Peter looked around for some clues. He peeked over the edge, noting not the height, but the challenge climbing back up would present. His eyes darted left, then right; nothing but vines. Then Peter had an idea. He tugged on the vine closest to him, putting all of his weight into the pull to test its integrity. The vine fell, fast and quickly. Peter covered his head, jumped aside, and the vine landed in the creek below.

Peter tried another vine, threw his weight into a jump, and began to climb. He wiggled his way along the vine, now three feet off the ground, he stopped moving. Three seconds passed. Five. Ten. Peter was confident that this vine had strength enough to hold him, so he loosened his grip and lowered himself back to the cliff.

"You sure about this?" Jasmine asked.

“Umm,” whether Peter was ready or not, he could no longer question his decision. His hands gripped the vine as tightly as he could, swinging down towards the creek below. His feet touched the water, and Peter stumbled into the shallow pool. His foot scraped across a sharp edge of riverbed rock.

He released a battle cry for his success, “Woooo!”

“Send the vine back up,” Jasmine called from above. Peter swung the vine towards her, slinging it up where she snatched it out of the air. She planted her feet at the edge of the cliff, breathed in deeply, closed her eyes, and took a leap of faith. “Wheee!” Jasmine yelled as she slid down the vine and into the creek, landing on her butt in a splashy puddle, laughing all the while.

Peter collected himself and stepped out of the creek onto a boulder. His shorts were wet now, but that was to be expected. They were hiking a waterfall. He noticed the cut on his foot. It didn't look deep, maybe a little swollen. Peter sat just close enough to the creek to rinse his wound in its cold water.

“You alright?” Jasmine asked, wringing the water from her hair.

“Just scratched my foot.”

“Here,” Jasmine took a knee, and opened her backpack. She pulled out a small first-aid kit, opened it up, and selected gauze and a strip of surgical tape. “Hold still.”

“Can river water contaminate an open wound? Should I apply some Neosporin or something?”

“Those antibacterial creams don't really work.” Jasmine wrapped his foot with the gauze, over and around. “You're better off without it.” She taped the gauze together into a makeshift band-aid.

Peter's foot was doctored up as well as it could be.

Peter stood up and shook his injured foot, “All that playing doctor stuff probably wasn't necessary. I feel completely fine.”

“But it was fun.” Jasmine stuck her tongue out as she placed her first aid kit back into her

backpack. She took another swig from her water bottle. They had made it down to the creek. Jasmine turned to face the wall they had both just descended. It didn't look as tall when viewed from below. Jasmine's visual imagination began to get the best of her – or perhaps it was the gin – but she thought she saw a face in the mountainside. “Look!” she ahead. “I think it's the Green Man!”

“Who?”

“He's known by many names across many nations,” Jasmine explained. “Dionysus, the Burryman, Freyr – but none as famous as the Jack of the Green. He always retained the same characteristics though, a creature of the forest, and of the vineyard, merriment, and ecstasy.”

It seemed as if nearly every mythology possessed such a creature, and the rock face in the Doldrums was no different. Perhaps it was the Doldrums' own physical embodiment of its mythology. The face of the Green Man formed from a round boulder, perched perfectly against a series of roots that created the illusion of a nose. Vines and flora climbed around the rock, maneuvering among each other, twisting into a full green beard of brush. Two adjacent patches of rock were left exposed by the elements above – not for any reason in particular aside from random chance, but a face was born and the Green Man lived.

“Peter,” Jasmine whispered. “It's just like the map.” Peter hadn't noticed the face on the mountainside until Jasmine pointed it out. It was an abstract interpretation, but not entirely off-base. He could see how Jasmine could interpret it as a man with a green beard, but it still didn't quite convince him that the graffiti was a map of the trail they were on. It felt all too convenient.

“It does look like a face,” Peter reasoned, “but we should keep moving. If it really is the green face on the map, then we aren't too far from the X.”

“And X marks the spot,” Jasmine grinned. “Alright, let's go.” She adjusted her backpack, Peter checked on his foot, and the two of them carried on with their adventure.

They walked upstream, jumping from rock to rock, careful to dodge the creek water when at all possible, but even when it wasn't, the water never got much deeper than knee level, but it was still cold. Jasmine and Peter trudged along the rocks, pulling themselves up the steep ones, occasionally needing to resort to walking along all fours as if they were a pair of wild animals. Climbing the Doldrums was proving to be tricky. The flowing water made the rocks slightly slippery.

Jasmine led the way while Peter followed her up a series of waterfalls, one foot after the other. Both Peter and Jasmine were careful not to put all of their weight onto one foot for fear of slipping. Peter realized that the immediate trail was too treacherous to risk any sort of mishaps. He decided that it was now appropriate – if not too late – to take off his shoes. He could maneuver better barefoot and it would be more comfortable, especially since his feet were soaked from the time spent in wet socks.

They continued to hike along the waterfall of the Doldrums until reaching a tall rock wall. Peter took note of its peripherals – no way around the wall on either side. A series of fairly large sized rocks piled up against each other in front of the wall, almost perfectly proportionate to each other. There was absolutely no simple way around this obstacle, but perhaps there was a way to climb up it.

“No way,” Jasmine protested. “I've made this hike before, but I've never tried to climb up these rocks. Not many people do.”

“I don't think there's any other way,” Peter looked around, noting no other options. He stepped over towards the bottom rounded rock, completely level to Peter's eye-line. The rock was just high enough that Peter discovered it difficult to pull himself up. He turned his back to the rock, squared himself to its base, reached back, and pushed. With a bit of a jump, he reached the edge of the rock, and found a firm crevice in which to use as a handle. From there, it was not difficult to bring the rest of his body onto the first rock.

Jasmine stood below, watching all the while. Seeing Peter's success, she walked over, extended

her hand, and Peter pulled her up onto the rock. She held his arm and used her legs to balance herself on the rock, walking up the rock face. Once she had reached Peter's level, he released her, and the two of them planted their feet, and stood tall.

Now on the first rock, it wasn't difficult to reach the next, not dissimilar in size from the last, actually – just balanced a bit further up against the mouth of the cave. The wall had begun to fold between them into a cavern. The creek flowed down, between the rocks that Peter and Jasmine were using for footing. They were careful to step on the dry sections of rocks as to not risk losing their balance to the slippery rocks. The cavern only grew narrower as Peter and Jasmine climbed higher. Peter began to realize that there was no further path up than to follow the flowing stream of water.

As the cavern closed in, the light grew dimmer and Peter found it trickier to follow the path. It was now much too narrow to avoid the stream of water. He would have to push through the current in order to breach the cavern. Peter held his breath, closed his eyes, and swam into the flowing stream of creek water. He moved slowly, deliberately, until pushing his head through the waterfall flow and out into the mountain air again. Peter had found the mouth of the cavern, a small triangular section that the graffiti had referenced as a diamond called Birth Canal. On further reflection, Peter was not surprised that it had been given such a name. The trail was small, tight, and emerging from it felt like a rebirthing process.

Peter stumbled out of the creek and over to a nearby patch of moss. He sat down and breathed deeply, regaining the oxygen that he had just lost in the swim. A moment later, Jasmine emerged from the Birth Canal, “Whew!” she yelled. “Nothing like a good afternoon rebirth to settle the soul.”

She stood up, swung her hair over her shoulder, grabbed it, and squeezed, ringing the water out onto the pathway. She bent her head and smiled at Peter. He placed his hand on her shoulder, “You made it. How did your backpack do? Everything stay dry?”

Jasmine reached into her pack, and removed her journal again. “The pages are still dry,” she explained. “Everything's cool. We still have our map” She turned the journal back to the copied graffiti. She pointed to a sequence of gray circles topped with a diamond. “We must have just climbed up that.”

“So what's next?”

“Judging by the map...” Jasmine twirled around, taking in a three hundred and sixty degree view of the new section of Doldrums above the Birth Canal that she had never explored before, “... we should pretty much be at the X.” She looked to her left, then to her right, finding no sign of an obvious X in either direction.

“Are you sure?” Peter asked as he also surveyed his surroundings.

“Positive,” Jasmine twirled around again, confused that there were no further clues to follow, and sat down onto a rock. “But I'll agree, it doesn't make sense.”

Peter threw his arms up in the air. “Finally!” he shouted. “But you could have said so before we scaled the super slippery section of rock!”

Jasmine folded her arms together and sat down, crossing her legs. “No, Peter.” She began to rock back and forth. “We need to be up here.” Jasmine shot Peter a glance uncertainty, as if she questioned why Peter was not completely attuned to her own thought pattern. She twisted her head, closed her eyes eyes, and smiled all the while. “I just don't know where our next lead is.”

“What makes you so sure we're even on the right track?” Peter asked. “Those drawings in my room could have just as easily been doodles, not a map. What if we're just on a wild goose chase?”

“We're not after multiple ones? This isn't a geese hunt?” Jasmine teased. “Just take it easy, doubting Thomas.”

“You know what I mean,” Peter sighed, and put his hand over his face. “It's an expression...”

Jasmine sat down next to him, and put her arm around him. “I just met you today, Peter, but I feel like I

already know you like a brother.”

Her comment startled Peter. He had never had a sister before, so this experience was new to him, and he wasn't sure that he liked it, especially in the sense that Jasmine was an unrelated female. As odd as that might sound, Peter found Jasmine attractive, exotic even. It would be a pity if she had permanently friend-zoned Peter already. Back in Charlotte, Peter could safely say that he had never encountered a girl quite like Jasmine. She was much more real than nearly any person he had ever met. She wasn't afraid to speak up and say what was on her mind. He couldn't help the way he felt about her.

“I don't know anything about you, Jasmine.”

Jasmine pecked Peter on the cheek with her lips. “You will,” she smiled. “Just keep your head up.” She turned her gaze upward, towards the Doldrums treeline. Even though it was still relatively early in the afternoon, the woods had begun to grow dark. The canopy above them had created the illusion that it was later than it was. They would have to leave soon if they wanted to make it back to the staff housing compound before nightfall.

“It's getting dark,” Peter noted. “You can tell by how shady the treeline is.”

“Yeah,” Jasmine agreed. She laid her head against Peter's shoulder. “We're so close though, Peter! We can't give up now!”

“I'm sorry we didn't find any buried treasure,” Peter rested his head against hers. “For a second there, I nearly thought that you might have been on to something about that treasure – ”

“Holy shit!” Jasmine interrupted, and ran across the narrow creek towards a low hanging tree line that rested above another steep, narrow cliff drop. “Look! Peter, look!”

“What is it?!” Peter called after her, stumbling to his feet.

Jasmine reached a particular tree and pointed up to its branches. Peter followed her pointer finger with his eyes. Two thick branches were tied together into the shape of an X by a long vine of

rhododendron, and hung from atop the tree. The branches were just distinguishable enough from the tree line that Peter could tell they didn't belong there. Yet they didn't look unnatural to him either, perhaps in part because the cross appeared to have been there for a long time, faded from its days in the gorge sunlight or battered and bruised from the rainy seasons it endured. "X marks the spot," Jasmine whispered.

"X marks the spot," Peter repeated. "I can't believe it. We found it!" Peter put his hands on his hips, and basked in the pride of the discovery. "I mean – we found something, a wooden cross. I'm not really sure what it means. Is it some kind of pagan thing? Or maybe the KKK?" Jasmine didn't reply. She stood below the tree, no longer staring at its branches but at the cliff instead.

"Jasmine?" Peter called to her, but then she did the unexpected, and jumped off the cliff ledge, disappearing into whatever ravine lay below.

"Jasmine!" Peter ran to the edge, just below the X, and looked down. She was completely fine, standing on both of her feet, without a scratch on her body. "Whew," Peter sighed. "I thought you fell!"

She laughed at his concern, "I'm fine. In fact, I found something." A stack of rocks about three feet tall stood next to her, just tucked away behind the trail edge that no one could find it unless they were searching for it. The rocks were piled together as a monument, but to what, Peter was not sure. It had been expertly crafted with four perfectly congruent stacks of stones which came together to form a small pillar like a chimney.

Jasmine removed the largest rock from the top of the stack, and opened the pillar so that she could glance inside. "Careful," Jasmine warned Peter as he approached her. "This would be a perfect hiding spot for a snake." Peter quickly took a step back, and Jasmine giggled. She peered into the center of the monument. Curiosity lit her face. She poked her head deep into the stack of rocks, bending so far into the pillar that Peter was sure she was going to knock it over – which would have

been tragic. It was actually quite expertly crafted, a piece of art even.

Peter had seen stacks of rocks like these before. During a hike with William and the Reverend a few years ago, he had encountered a man who was constructing such rock stacks completely in the nude at the edge of a creek. He was quite embarrassed when the Boyd boys had caught him in the act. Peter recalled how his father had waved to the man and boldly pronounced a verse of scripture, “For this I will lament and wail. I will go stripped and naked. I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches.” However, instead of staying to chat, the man ran to a nearby tree where he had disposed of his clothes, and threw on a pair of boxers. The Reverend chuckled, and turned to Peter, “Micah 1:8. Sometimes you just have to be naked.” He looked at the rock stack once more. “Especially when art is involved.”

Jasmine had spared the Doldrums' secret rock structure any potential destruction, and carefully removed herself from the construct, now holding something in her hands.

“What do you have there?” Peter asked.

She held it up to show him, a plastic Ziploc bag with a leather bound book inside it. “It's the treasure chest, Peter!” Jasmine exclaimed. “We found it! The graffiti was a map! I told you!”

Jasmine held the plastic bag flat across her hands so that they could easily examine the book inside. The bag had done a great job of keeping the elements away from the book – it was the large kind of bag typically used to store food in large freezers. Peter had no idea how long the stacked rock structure had stayed there and guarded its hidden secrets, but he figured it must have been at least a few years, if only because of the graffiti in his room.

Jasmine reached to unzip the bag, but Peter grabbed her wrist. “Wait! What if the air disintegrates the book? Maybe we shouldn't open it!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean – it’s like archaeologists who go to Egypt,” Peter explained. “Sometimes when they find a collection of old scrolls, the parchment disintegrates at first touch before they get a chance to study it.”

This caused Jasmine to laugh out loud. “Peter, come on.” She unzipped the bag and pulled the journal out. It did not disintegrate at her touch, but in fact, was still in excellent condition. The leather bound book was not rough for wear at all, even the corners of the cover were still sharp and acute. Peter watched as she opened the journal and scanned a few lines:

Monday, May 23, 2005.

I'm writing this journal because my therapist told me to. He said that I need to take the time to reflect on my life a little bit more. Apparently I'm just going through the motions of life, like a dead man walking, a ghost who haunts the living before he's really died. It's fucking depressing, I know, but my doctors are trying something new with me – a very hands off approach which I like very much – they are letting me spend the summer on my own. They trust me that much, at least.

I recall the first meeting I had with my doc. That first meeting is always the best. You've got your therapist over in his chair, notepad in hand, while you're on the couch, a blank slate. The doctor doesn't know what's wrong with you, but he holds on to every word trying to place the puzzle pieces of your life together in order to figure out what sort of Freudian mishap is fucking your mind over.

I like to think I was a step ahead of him. He asked me, “Seth, describe your relationship with your mother,” so I told him about how she'd make meatloaf for dinner when I was younger. She would drizzle a layer of ketchup on top of the pan. I always savored that first bite, and now I've developed a taste for pink meat in my burgers. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the doc write 'Cannibal?' in his notepad.

“What is it?” Peter asked. “I want to see.”

“It's a journal,” Jasmine sat down on a dry piece of rock and stretched her legs. “It's ten years old too, dated back to 2005.” Peter looked to the sky. There was probably enough sunlight to stay at the Doldrums for at least another hour. “Do you remember where you were in 2005?”

“Yeah. I was in second grade,” Peter laughed.

“I was in fifth. I became a woman that year,” she smiled proudly, but Peter only looked confused. “I had my first period,” she explained, laughed, and patted the rock next to her. “Sit down next to me. I'll read this thing out loud.” Peter did so, and Jasmine passed him the water bottle. He shot her a funny look and she rolled her eyes. “Trust me,” she said. “You're gonna want some. This journal looks like a doozy.”

“If you say so,” Peter took a large swig from the bottle. “Now where were we?”

“Right,” Jasmine pointed to the first page and began reading.

“Keep a journal, Seth,” my therapist told me. “We'll evaluate the next step of treatment from there.” Whatever cryptic shit the doc meant with that, I'm just glad they could get out of my business. Those sessions really get me down. I'm much happier here in the woods of the Tatonka National Forest.

My name is Seth Walters, and I've been working at the Tatonka Hydrosports Center for three years now. I really like the rafting gig – mostly, anyways. I get to play on the river all day and party with my fellow hellion raft guides all night. The only shitty part is having to talk to strangers for two-hours at a time. It would be the perfect job if no one was in the raft with me each and every day. Still, it's ideal for a twenty-something with no true ambitions – although I guess that's not entirely the truth of the matter.

I have a few goals in life. I want to own my own business, maybe a laundromat or a gas station

– something that would make money for me simply by existing. I could be a Slumlord and rent out a handful of shitty apartments to idiots who don't know any better. That would be pretty cool. I can see the business cards now: Seth Walters, Slumlord. Or perhaps if this journaling thing comes naturally to me, I could become a writer instead – because really, what's the difference between being a writer and a Slumlord? A book is a slum is a laundromat. Just think about it, man.

“Wow. This guy is an asshole,” Jasmine commented. “Is he serious?”

“Keep reading,” Peter said. “I think this is so cool.”

“Okay, but I don't know how much more of this guy I can take,” Jasmine took another drink and continued to read.

But right now, I'm not thinking about too much. I'm just taking it easy. I moved out to the Tatonka River to get away from it all, you know? I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, for years, and the city just wasn't doing it for me. Life was always just too damn busy, and it started to get to me. You have to catch MARTA at exactly that right time to go there to that one place to do that one thing or else some other thing is going to go wrong and basically, long story short, rent won't get paid – and God forbid that the rent go unpaid. There was absolutely no time for a guy to take a break and just breathe. If I wasn't out trying to do my best at some minimum wage paying job, I was asleep. I was living, but I wasn't alive.

Maybe I'm just old fashioned – I don't know – but I felt suffocated by that world. I had a nervous breakdown actually. I don't really want to get into the details of that – I don't like to think about it – but if you're reading this journal, you likely already know unless this shit has gone viral like a video on that new YouTube website thing or Anne Frank's diary – or is that comparison in bad taste?

Fuck it. Anyways, I began to realize that my life there in the city wasn't really a life at all. That guy wasn't me. I know I'm going to sound like I'm full of hippie bullshit, but it was society's fault, man! Society shaped me into the sort of person I never wanted to be – so I left it.

“Hippie bullshit,” Jasmine scoffed. “Whatever, man.” She rummaged through her backpack for her pipe and weed. “I hope you don't mind if I take a quick break from reading?”

“Not at all,” Peter said. “I can pick it back up, if you'd like.”

“Sure,” Jasmine handed the journal to Peter. “Knock yourself out.”

“I just think this window into history is really cool,” Peter said. “He just mentioned YouTube being new. I can't even imagine life without that now.”

“Get used to it here at the THC,” Jasmine flicked the lighter and scorched the bowl of the pipe. “I can't believe he made that Anne Frank joke. What a fucking asshole.” The smoke left her lips and floated above the clean, cold creek air.

“Anyways...” Peter cleared his throat and returned to reading the journal aloud.

I came to the Tatonka Hydrosports Center looking for some good old fashioned peace and solitude. Surprisingly, this was difficult to find. Two large mountains enclose the river in a gorge, one of the mountains even home to a section of the Appalachian Trail. In addition to the obviously huge rafting business, the Tatonka River is a damn busy place for the middle of nowhere. Hikers pass through often and consider the THC to be a major landmark on the trail where they often restock on supplies. The THC is located along the Tatonka River at the base of the section that is famous for its whitewater. This makes perfect sense. Guests can be shuttled up the river, have a great time, and arrive back at their vehicles at the end of the day, parked conveniently near changing rooms and showers.

The staff housing is located along the same section of river, next to a main highway road that twists and winds parallel to a railroad and the Tatonka River.

That's not to say that there aren't any secret gems in these mountains. I'm personally fond of a series of waterfalls that are only a short walk up the railroad from my bungalow. These waterfalls are called the Doldrums. When I have the time, I love nothing more than walking east along the railroad tracks to these waterfalls, away from housing and up-river from the Tatonka. Trains don't often operate so far up the tracks and usually turn around a few miles before. Occasionally a commercial locomotive will grace us with its presence, so I try to stay aware of my surroundings. I am careful to listen for the sound of approaching trains. I avoid the rattlesnakes that nest along the wooden tracks – spaced apart just enough to be extremely difficult to walk on. The tracks never seem to sync with the pace of my walking, but I suppose that's the point – railroads don't want people walking on the tracks as if they were sidewalks.

Once I'm at the Doldrums, I take off my shoes and climb barefoot along the rocks, slipping occasionally but never falling. When I want to challenge myself, I try to climb as far as I can. It's an easy hike if you stop at the foot of a cavern which is commonly called “Birth Canal.” I think that's kind of an awesome name. A person can climb into the cavern, careful not to slip on the stream of water that flows through the rocks, and emerge through a small hole at the top, just small enough to crawl through, hence the appropriate naming of the rock feature.

Usually I stop at the base of the largest waterfall. I haven't been able to find a way up it yet, but I haven't given up yet either. There's this one log stuck horizontally in the waterfall and I'm certain that if I could just reach it, I could finally scale the final cascade. I'm just waiting for a day where I can do it right, with ropes, carabiners, and someone to spot me. There's no way I am free-climbing that thing alone up there.

There is parking on the side of the highway for this beautiful piece of nature, but most people are unaware of its existence. I'll drive over to the parking lot if I think that I don't have enough time to take the railroad tracks but still want to enjoy the hike. The Doldrums' parking lot hides its true wonder behind a few picnic tables near a small creek that flows through a tunnel. In truth, this creek is comprised of the same water that flows through the Doldrums, but you would never know that – unless you already did.

Peter stopped reading. “I have a question,” he stated.

“Shoot,” Jasmine said, laid out across the rock, eyes closed, her head propped against her backpack as if it were a pillow. “I'm listening. I promise.”

“Okay, well,” Peter began, “I like this old perspective on the Tatonka National Forest and the THC. It's kind of awesome getting to read a first hand account of everything that I'm going to experience here.”

“I don't hear a question yet.”

“I'm getting to it,” Peter continued. “Do you think this guy's reliable? I mean, I get the Doldrums and the walk to them. I just lived that myself. We're there right now, but the rest of this stuff – I don't know. What do you think?”

“He's writing a journal for his therapist,” Jasmine said. “The guy must have had a screw or two loose. I mean – I don't know a Seth Walters. Never have. We didn't work at the THC last year while I was here, so whoever he is, he's long gone somewhere.”

River guides here are the next best thing to locales. Although they don't often find themselves living in the gorge for the entirety of the year, river guides are still privy to secret information such as

where the best swimming holes are located, which of the many hiking trails are the most pristine, the exact hours a convenience store will sell alcohol, whether they are closed on Sundays or not, in addition to the most important information of all: where to find the moonshine and the marijuana.

Unfortunately, being a river guide is another one of those low paying minimum wage jobs that I was trying to free myself from. It wasn't always easy to afford the pleasures that life in the gorge had to offer. Because of this, I did not want to spend the majority of my earnings on a fancy apartment in Burton City, the cute adjacent tourist trap of a town located only 20 miles away from the THC. My bosses lived there, as well as everyone else who was anyone in management with a paycheck a bit more generous than that of a guide's. We were the mere pawns of the business plan. Some of us held onto hopes of a promotion but they were few and far between. We did the grunt work, but that was part of the fun. As a self-proclaimed red shirt – you know, like one of the background guys on the Enterprise in Star Trek, I enjoyed the simple living that came with the cheapest option, staff housing.

“And now we know our journalist is a nerd,” Jasmine interrupted. “Ha. Alright.”

Although housing was not as private as I would have liked, it was decent enough to keep me coming back for three years now. It was basically what many would consider to be a commune – literally a handful of assorted dilapidated cabins. Mine is called the Light House and is located near the fringes of the property. There isn't much else past my cabin than a bunch of trees, leaves, and fallen branches – not to mention the rattlesnakes and copperheads – but I loved the name, the Light House. I was searching for a beam of light to show me the way.

One of the central cabins – simply called Central, actually – had a room that had been converted into a kitchen. We all shared this space since no one had an actual kitchen in their homes

and those sorts of utilities were outlawed by the housing contracts anyways. I'm not sure how long that kitchen had been around but it was complete with a sink, microwave, stovetop, and refrigerator. I can tell you for certain that the sink was installed last year in 2004 while the microwave was a gift from myself the year before. I bought the clunky piece of shit off of eBay for five dollars. It had dinosaurs drawn all over it, one particular 'terror-dactyl' even breathed fire.

“That microwave is totally still around,” Jasmine said, “and it is a clunky piece of shit.”

“THC hasn't bothered to replace it? It's been over ten years!” Peter protested.

Jasmine sat up and yawned, “THC doesn't care about that. If it ain't broken, don't fix it.”

Furthermore, there were three choices for bathrooms in the compound. The girl's bathroom was on the opposite end of Central in between the entrance to the kitchen and another bedroom, empty because it had been condemned due to a bat problem. Every evening at twilight as the sun begins to sink behind the mountain ridges, the bats all fly out of Central's rafters, one by one into the night to prey on the fruits of the trees and the unsuspecting prey of the surrounding woods.

Also found in Central, the men's bathroom was located on one side of the building in between a vending machine and a bedroom. Edmund currently lives in that room and often complains about the cockroaches that crawl in and out of the cracks in his room – but that's what you get for living next to the kitchen, dip shit. I give him crap, but Edmund's a good guy. He is way too tall for his own good. At 6 foot, four inches, Edmund is a giant of a man who cannot always control the operations of his lanky body. Depth perception can be tricky to gauge at such a height, so Edmund is extremely accident prone. Believe it or not, he attends an Ivy League school during the rafting off-season – either Harvard or Yale, I'm not actually sure, but Edmund is a smart fucking cookie. He started guiding the same year

as myself and has been a good friend. He was the one who bailed me out last year from ———

“The rest of the line has been crossed out,” Peter explained.

“Well, don't leave me in suspense.”

“I'm not sure what it says,” Peter replied. “It's been scratched out. Probably jail.”

“If it was something boring like jail, it probably wouldn't have been scratched out.”

“I don't think jail's boring!” Peter exclaimed.

“That's because you've never been there,” Jasmine said. “Trust me, Peter, the baloney sandwiches and stale vanilla cookies get old pretty quickly.”

“At least you get cookies,” Peter turned his attention back towards the journal. Jasmine kicked her feet back on a rock and took another smoke from her pipe.

The third bathroom option was the ground, of course. Although Central was often no more than a minute walk away from anywhere, it was much easier to piss outside – especially for guys. A dude could wake up, step out the door, and pee right there on the ground. Usually, I would be careful enough to first look around and make sure that no one was watching. If anyone was, I would make my way to the bathroom. If I had my privacy, I would see how many bees I could hit with my stream of piss before I was finished. This was a tricky game, of course, because of the element of danger involved with the possibility of being stung by one of the buzzing bugs. Insects are naturally attracted to the salt found in urine, so the spot where I would relieve myself in the mornings behind my cabin was usually packed full of bumblebees and butterflies. Although the butterflies would fly lower to the ground and take their showers without question, the bees had begun to grow tired of our games and began to use a very

strategic evasion technique. They would fly higher than my stream could reach, floating safely and dryly away. Well played, bees. Very well played.

“That's so gross,” Jasmine interrupted. “What did those poor bees do to get peed on?!”

“I think bees are just attracted to the salt,” Peter replied. “And if this guy pees in the same spot every morning, that would just keep attracting them there.”

“And it's fun to pee on some innocent bugs?”

“I don't know if 'fun' is the right word...”

“I will never understand men,” Jasmine said. She shook her head, and Peter continued reading.

The rooms themselves were quaint with four attaching walls usually made in part with screen wire instead of windows. The wire made for the mountain air to flow more freely in the bungalow. Unfortunately, this also left the homes open to the elements. Rainfall was rarely a problem though. I always welcomed the echo against the tin roof, it's sounds both hypnotizing and melodic to my ears. The pitter patter of the rain often put me to sleep. The pitter pattering of the rodents on the floor kept me awake.

A quick side-note: I caught the band Modest Mouse on tour in '04 after they released the album Good News for People Who Love Bad News. It was a big deal! Earlier that year, the hit single “Float On” quickly became adopted by river guides and used as a rock anthem analogous with the river life for reasons that I think are fairly obvious. I had driven all the way to Boston, Massachusetts, for a show at The Avalon where I purchased a t-shirt. I had to promptly return to the river the next day, so I drove all night to Burton City, arriving sleep deprived in the morning, leaving the shirt in a brown paper bag on the floor of my bungalow. Later that afternoon, I noticed tiny bite holes scattered all

throughout the shirt, which seemingly provided a modest amount of mice something to chew on that day and throughout the rest of that summer, to tell the truth. I let them keep the shirt, and it sat in a far corner of the room behind a plastic crate which held extra unneeded kitchen supplies. The mice wouldn't disturb me, and I wouldn't disturb them.

I suppose that was one of the many reasons why I'm in therapy this year. They are all trying to tell me that coexisting with a pack of wild mice is probably not normal but what the hell is normal anyways? The doctors told me that I should get a pet: a cat, dog, ferret, pig, anything. They said that a furry friend would help keep away the loneliness. "But Doc," I recall suggesting during my last visit, "don't Mickey, Minnie, and Chuck E. Cheese count as pets?" I hadn't really named the mice. I came up with that on the spot to fuck with the doctor. When people already think that you're crazy, sometimes it's fun to play it up. According to the housing contract, THC unfortunately doesn't allow any animals to stay in staff housing. I don't think the mice signed the housing contract though, and they are still here anyways.

This year, my living situation in the Light House is much more accommodating. Perhaps I'm just living in a newer unit, but wildlife has found it significantly more difficult to break into my home. The only downside is that I have found myself paired with a roommate who is kind of a fucking idiot. His name is Chase. He's from Tennessee. I would much prefer not to have a roommate at all, but there is not enough space in staff housing for that. I get that though.

"Wait," Peter interjected. "We have roommates? – but our rooms our so small!"

"There's not enough cabins for everyone to have their own," Jasmine explained. "It's just how it works. I'm living with a girl named Madeline in the Barn."

"What is she like?"

“Well,” Jasmine explained. “She's loud and tall – never shuts up for a minute. We're pretty friendly, but I get so sick of her sometimes. I guess we've kind of developed a sibling-like bond.”

Jasmine darted her eyes back and forth, then whispered again, “Whether we wanted to or not.”

I don't know Chase very well yet, and I'm not sure if I really want to. He only just moved in last Thursday, but I already know enough to judge him fairly accurately. He calls home to his parents every night, reads fantasy novels, and sleeps with a nightlight on. Just because we sleep in bunk beds doesn't mean this is fucking summer camp – and of course I've been making Chase sleep on the top bunk. I have to show him who's the boss here. I'm also afraid of rolling off the top during the middle of the night and falling on the floor. I tend to shift around the bed while I dream. Don't tell anybody, diary.

My therapist also told me that it's important to write down my dreams. Last night, I had a dream about Courtney Mathis, the most beautiful girl I've ever seen in my life. She's actually one of those people who regularly keeps a dream journal. I think that's pretty cool. I met her last week and I'm pretty sure I want to marry her – I mean, we should at least be dating already. In the dream, we sat on a bench at the river's edge. She reached for my hand and placed it into hers. I was completely and utterly enthralled with her, especially the way her blonde curls bounced against her shoulders as she laughs. Could this ever happen in real life?

“Seth,” *she stared into my eyes, her dark lashes blinked long and deliberately,* “can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” *I told her, secretly hoping she would ask for the moon. I think I could give it to her if she asked for it. I wished that she would.*

“If you had me in your boat, how wet would I get?”

The moon could stay in the sky for another night. It looked like I wouldn't need it, and it wasn't

going anywhere – yet. I watched Courtney shut her eyes and lean in slowly for a kiss. My eyes followed her lips as they moved ever closer to my own – but then, much to my surprise, her mouth parted widely. A noise not unlike the croak of a frog erupted from her mouth, and my eyes shot open as Chase exhaled another loud snore.

“Okay, that was weird,” Jasmine said.

“I hope it works out for him,” Peter replied. “He seems to really like her.”

“He hardly even knows her!” Jasmine protested. “That's not how you pick up girls, Peter.”

I have only seen Courtney four times now in real life, but I am very much looking forward to future encounters. She's one of the new servers at The Riverside Diner, the on-campus restaurant attached to and owned by the THC. I first met her when she was going through her new employee orientation last week. I had stopped by Lincoln Hall that morning to grab a cup of coffee on my way in to the rafting center. Orientation was usually a multi-day presentation in Lincoln Hall, one of the buildings on the THC campus used for superfluous activities, that explained the inner-workings of the Tatonka Hydrosports Center. This process usually involved many informational DVDs on how to treat people, both coworkers and customers, appropriately – like we really need fucking etiquette school! Courtney was engrossed with a film about sexual harassment at the time. “A co-worker approaches you and asks, 'Do you mix concrete for a living?'"

That particular orientation session was led by Drew, one of the the head operations managers of the rafting center. He eyed the crowd as if expecting an answer to the question posed in the video. “You don't mix concrete,” he told the room. “You work at the Tatonka Hydrosports Center. You work in recreation. Is that clear to everyone?” Drew is not that much older than me, actually, at only 28 years

old but he's supposed to be a rising star at THC. All of the higher ups love him. They are grooming him up to be the new boss, I think. I mean – yeah, he's a decent enough guide, but I think that son-of-a-bitch is probably sleeping with someone powerful.

“The question might confuse you,” *the video continued*, “especially if you don't work at a concrete mixing plant. What would you do if the co-worker expanded the question? 'Do you mix concrete for a living? Because you're making me hard.'” *The crowded room exploded into laughter. Even Drew laughed a little bit. The video was the definition of cheese ball and only got worse,* “Statements like these are called pick-up lines and are often a sign of sexual harassment. We leave you to make the call for yourself.”

The second time I saw Courtney Mathis was two days later. I had just clocked out of work and was sitting on a bench outside The Riverside Diner. Guests could often wait on these benches when the restaurant became too busy. I watched through a window as Courtney worked inside. Her body captivated and guided my complete attention. She was wearing a flowing green skirt and her black employee T-shirt with the THC logo emboldened across the back, the word 'Guide' was written in large letters on the shirt's front pocket.

I found it funny that THC liked to refer to all of their employees as guides, whether they worked on the river or in an office. I guess it boosted the egos of the employees who often found themselves off the water, working the less glorified, but just as important jobs. The waiters, waitresses, and kitchen folk at the diner all guided food to the customers. Guest relations operators who answered phones all day guided customers to their reservations, deciding which adventure would be right for them. The bus drivers, custodians, photographers, everyone was a guide – and therefore, perhaps no one was a guide.

When I don't have to open at the rafting center, I would come into the restaurant for breakfast with the hope of catching Courtney's eyes or blonde curls, bouncing in that way I love as she runs

around the diner, filling cups of coffee, jotting down orders on a notepad, carefully balancing trays of beer in hand, so careful not to spill a drop. This was how our third encounter played out on Friday morning.

We exchanged our first words on our fourth and most recent meeting. It was a full fledged conversation, and it happened here at housing. We both had Saturday off of work and Courtney was using it to do some housekeeping. I thought she would have been through unpacking her things after nearly a week living there already, but in fact, she was taking all of her things back to her car. I noticed this as I sat at the kitchen table, a rugged piece of furniture with graffiti etched all over its wooden surface, and finished eating a late breakfast of two fried eggs and a piece of buttered toast.

“Hey,” I approached her as she slid a suitcase into the trunk of her white Subaru Outback. “Going somewhere? Need any help?” As she turned to face me, I could tell how flustered she was. Her cheeks were a bright red that I had never seen before, but I won't lie – the shade complimented her blonde curls perfectly.

“I'm leaving actually,” Courtney shut the trunk door. “This place isn't exactly how I pictured it. Can you believe that I found a fucking snake living in a hole in the wall?!”

“That's crazy,” I said, “but you just got here. You're going to give up so quickly?”

“I hate snakes,” she said, slowly twirling a curl of hair. “Absolutely hate them.”

“That snake was probably just looking for shelter,” I told her.

“Probably, but he's an uninvited guest in my home,” Courtney sighed and took a look at her bungalow, an old ramshackle structure called Stilt House because it had been constructed on a slope and relied on stilts to stand up. “It can be him or me, but someone's gotta go.”

I took a step towards the Stilt House, “I'll see what I can do.”

“You know how to remove a snake from a wall?”

“No,” I opened the door to her cabin and called back, “but I can try.” I walked into her room, but the snake was nowhere to be seen. That wasn't good. I didn't want to be caught unprepared. I looked around for a weapon – a shovel, knife, anything.

“Oh my god!” Jasmine shrieked. “He's going to kill the snake!”

“No way,” Peter replied. “Why would he write about – ?”

“Why *wouldn't* he write about that?!”

Peter's stomach churned, yet he still turned the page.

Courtney's walls were decorated with pictures of friends and family she had left behind from wherever it was she was that she came from. The rest of her cabin consisted entirely of clothes. I swear, I'm not exaggerating. If I had that many different clothes, I wouldn't have to do laundry for a year.

I don't think Courtney had room for any other possessions in her room, even if she wanted to. I listened for the snake, but he was nowhere to be found. I left after a few minutes of no-success. I don't want to believe that the snake didn't exist, but I really don't know.

I walked back outside and caught Courtney's gaze. I shook my head in disappoint, and walked back to my cabin. She was left out on the grass, smoking a cigarette and calling her father, a doctor in Raleigh, to buy her a house in Burton City, “But it's so much closer to everything!” she whined.

“Please, dad?! Please?!”

And just like that, the conversation was over, but we had finally been formally introduced, so my heart was ecstatic for the rest of the day. Her partings words left me feeling confused, though I couldn't figure out exactly why.

“Because she's a fucking bimbo, you moron!” Jasmine yelled.

Peter closed the journal for a moment. “Hey, are you alright?”

Jasmine sat up and drank from her bottle bottle, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you alright?” Peter asked. “You've been getting strangely more and more combative as the afternoon has dragged along. Are you on anything or keeping me from something I should know about?”

Jasmine shot Peter a dirty glare, as if she couldn't believe the accusation. “No,” she said, simply. “I've smoked some weed with you. I've drunk a bit of gin – for hydration and all.” Jasmine tilted her head slightly to the side. “Not that you should even give a fuck. I'm going to do what I want.”

“You're just a little drunk,” Peter laughed.

“Yeah,” Jasmine replied. “Yeah, that's it.”

That night, I prayed that she wouldn't leave quite yet – and I never pray, but I also prayed for clarity. I knew that I found Courtney attractive but I wanted to know exactly why.

Over the rest of the weekend, Courtney stayed in a hotel in Burton City. Although the snake was removed from the room, her father came to her rescue earlier today with a small barn that he had bought from a nearby Wal-Mart. The barn needed a little bit of construction, of course, but the pieces were all there. He had carried it over on a trailer attached to his pick-up truck and with a little help from a few of the guides, constructed the barn pretty quickly. The housing resources office didn't approve its creation but they also didn't stop it. I think they sympathized with Courtney, or at least thought her to be princess with a pea. Pea or not, I did think she was a princess.

But more importantly than any of that, I think she likes me too. I really do, even from just one conversation – she's not just beautiful, but she's friendly and I think that's why I love her. She treats me

like another actual fucking human being and – you probably weren't aware, dear diary, since you are an inanimate object, but I've had my hammock tied to the rafters of a wooden pavilion near the Central kitchen. It looks like Courtney's walking over here from her barn to make dinner. I think I'm feeling pretty hungry now too.

Peter reached the end of the entry, and shut the leather bound journal closed. He looked at Jasmine, her back turned to him, eyes closed, feet propped up on a rock. Peter wouldn't have been surprised if she had fallen asleep. The sky above began to darken and it was apparent that they needed to leave. Otherwise, they might get stranded out in the Doldrums. It was nearly impossible to navigate in the shadows of the night.

Jasmine stirred and stretched her arms. “We should get going. You don't want to be late for your orientation in the morning.

Peter passed the journal over to Jasmine. She opened the plastic Ziploc bag, and placed the journal inside the bag. As she did so, a square white object floated out from among the pages, and fell on a rock. Jasmine zipped up the bag, and slipped it into her backpack. She took another swig from her water bottle, sighing in pleasure as she finished drinking its contents.

“Ahhh,” she wiped her lips. “Are we ready to head back?”

“Sure.” Peter bent down, and picked up the dropped object. It was a polaroid photograph of a man playing the guitar. He wore faded blue jeans and a flannel shirt. A prominent burly, brown beard covered his face. He was not skinny, nor fat, but average in weight, and to be honest, seemingly average in many other ways.

Peter flipped the photograph over to its backside. A sentence had been written in blue pen on the back of the photograph, “Seth Walters. June 6, 2005.”

“Hey, Jasmine!” Peter called after her. She had already begun to walk back down the Doldrums to the train tracks.

She paused and looked back at Peter, “What's up? Let's get going!”

Peter quickly scurried around a few rocks, and met Jasmine where she was waiting for him, above the rock sculpture and the cliff face that Jasmine had slid down earlier. He handed the photograph to Jasmine. “Check this out. It fell out of the journal.”

Jasmine looked at the photograph. She squinted at it through the dark, but then her eyes enlarged. A look of horror entered her face which quickly transitioned into fear. She thrust the photo back to Peter. “Who put you up to this?”

“What do you mean?”

“How the fuck do you have that?!”

“What – I don't know!” Peter replied. “It just fell out of that journal!” Jasmine sat down in silence. Peter joined her, and put an arm around her shoulders. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“I have.”

The two of them sat for a moment – but only a moment for the two river guides still had a long way to hike. Jasmine stayed quiet for most of the walk back. They crossed the Doldrums quickly, careful to make it back to the railroad tracks just as the sunset filled the sky. The bright orange and purple hues relit Jasmine's face, refueling the color that she had just lost. She spread her arms out and brought them into an arch above her head. She closed her eyes and bowed her head, muttering a series of words under her breath.

“What are you doing?” Peter asked.

Jasmine shot her eyes open. “Surely a minister's son would recognize praying when he sees it.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt.”

“It's okay.” Jasmine reached for Peter's hand, and took it into her own. The two of them walked like that, one foot after another, along the train-tracks until they arrived back at staff housing.

They reached the edge of Peter's cabin at sunset. Peter could hear the soft distant hiss of the Tatonka River in the background. The air was breezy, but quiet, while the sky was a splash of oranges and purples against the Appalachian mountain ridge.

Jasmine embraced Peter in a hug. He clutched a fist full of her brown hair in his hand as she buried her face into his chest. “Thanks for the adventure, Peter.” She disengaged, and dug into her backpack. “Here.” She handed Peter the Ziploc bag of the journal. “This is yours. We wouldn't have found it without your treasure map.”

“Thank you,” he took the journal. Jasmine smiled, both with her mouth and her bright doe eyes. “Will I see you tomorrow?” he asked her.

“Yes,” Jasmine said. “And the day after that, and the next.” She stepped away, twirled around, and laughed. “We're neighbors now, Peter!” She waved goodbye to him, and walked back to her barn.

Peter opened the door to his cabin, stepped inside, and set the journal down on his table. He could hear the thumping of loud music outside. The sounds of heavy bass rattled the floor of his cabin. It was like the entire nature of the housing complex had changed while he had been gone. Everyone must have left work in the time that it took Peter and Jasmine to go on their hike.

The other guides all seemed to enjoy starting the party as soon as they were off the clock. That way, by the time midnight rolled around, everyone was already very drunk, and ready to go to sleep, well rested for an early morning of work. Starting the party sooner meant getting more sleep when it was over, and that is precisely what Peter noticed was happening.

It usually took newbies a day or two to fully acclimate to their new habitats, and Peter was definitely still a new face. Still, he left his cabin again, and stood at the door. He could smell a campfire

nearby. He turned the corner of his cabin, and saw a party happening near the Central kitchen. A fire had been made in a fire pit there.

A group of people stood around the campfire with cans of beer in hand. "Let 'er rip!" someone yelled. Peter heard the sound of a sizzling fuse followed by harsh, fierce screaming. "My ass! My ass!"

Suddenly, a bottle rocket shot from the fire straight towards Peter. He dove onto the ground as it whizzed above his head. "Sorry, dude!" one of the guys shouted an apology to Peter.

"I told you it was a bad idea! I told you!" another said.

"Should we call an ambulance?" the first asked.

"I don't think so. He's just singed."

Peter sighed, and turned back to his cabin. He wasn't interested in joining the festivities anymore. He was disappointed at the state of his room. He was not yet finished unpacking all of his things since the day's events has led him elsewhere. Therefore, Peter's bed lacked the comforts of sheets, but all the same, he spread his sleeping bag out across the mattress, and propped a backpack behind his head to use as a makeshift pillow.

He took the Ziploc bag from his bedside table, and opened it up. The journal inside was a little damp, but it seemed to have endured its time spent buried and forgotten with great success. He wished that Jasmine hadn't said goodbye for the night. He would have liked to read more of the journal with her. Peter laid down, and began to doze off. He imagined what the next chapter of the journal could possibly be about. It interested him so much, but he couldn't pinpoint exactly why. It was probably the history of it, unless Peter felt a kinship towards Seth Walters.

"No," Peter told himself. "No, that can't possibly be right."

He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

-:: To Be Continued ::-