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“Sam, lend your lungs to me? Mine feel like they’re collapsing. I can barely breathe. How’d you let this happen, Sam? Sam... Sam... HOW COULD YOU LET THIS HAPPEN TO HIM?”

Sweat flung from Sam’s face as he shook himself awake from the nightmare, the weepy voice still echoed in his head as his eyes adjusted to the looming Oklahoma sun. He inhaled deeply and pulled out a cigarette from his back pocket and a folded letter. His eyes were drawn into a highway daze as he watched the dotted lines bleed into one straight line, where was he? How long had he been out for? The bus began to slow down and he heard the driver over the loudspeaker,

“This stop is Muskogee, repeat, this is Muskogee. Please watch your step when exiting the vehicle” Sam took a deep swig of the whiskey peeking out and carefully slipped the envelope into his bag as he made his out of the bus.

Sam felt the hot sun beat down on him as he gathered his bearings, taking in the vast and open area where he had been dropped. He began to air out his damp shirt and saw a bar across the way, “Baker’s Bar Stop”. The sign was sun bleached and the bar’s outside looked abandoned, he might have kept walking down the street if he didn’t see two cars directly in front of the place.

At twelve-noon, daylight poured through the heavy wooden doors. Sam squinted his eyes as they adjusted to the cavernous lighting of the bar and made out the petite figure of a young woman behind the bar. He quietly closed the door behind him as he took in the familiar sights and sounds. The jukebox flickered in the corner and he noticed the same flickering neon lights above the bar, albeit more signs and trashy décor to match.

As Sam grew closer to the bar, he noticed the young woman swaying back and forth, writing on a clipboard. Sam took silent strides up to the bar and heard the girl’s melodic hums wash over as he grew closer, a grin crept on his face. He abruptly dropped his duffel bag and watched her twitch, then spin around. He immediately noticed her smoky eyes and tan complexion. Flowing auburn hair draped down her back in a simple, but beautiful style. Her mouth hung slightly open for a moment before Sam sat down.

“Can I get a whiskey and a beer, please? Hell of a trip in.” The clipboard fell to the bar and a smile shot across her face,

“Sure thing, hun. Where you coming in from? First time here?” The drinks appeared in front of him quicker than he could respond. He recognized the shape of her eyes, the distinct shape of her face; the haunting shade of red lipstick she wore. This woman was no stranger; he felt it in his bones.

“Thanks, appreciate it. I’m... taking care of some business before heading home.” He took a look at his drinks and rubbed the scruff on his chin as the bartender poked him once again.

"We don't get too many folks from too far outta here. You got family here or something?" Sam was silent for a moment, his tongue danced along the bottom row of his teeth.

"Hmm," He shot back the whiskey and flipped the glass upside down, gave it a light tap toward the bartender.

"Yeah, I'm here visiting from up North. You familiar with Cleaveland?" She had already snatched the clipboard and crouched down to count liquor as she spoke.

"I am indeed, got a cousin who went up there with her piece of shit boyfriend after she got knocked up. Lot of factory work up there by them Lakes huh?" Sam scoffed and gulped his beer.

"I think you're thinking of Michigan there, sweetheart." Without skipping a beat or looking up at Sam, she quipped back.

"I was talking about Lake Erie. You smell like you might have forgotten, how long you been living there, huh?" Sam took another sip of his beer and smiled. This wasn't the first time she had been smart with him, it started to come back to him. Especially the way she emphasized that, "huh". Last they spoke she was far younger, just as sassy, but not quite the vivacious woman that stood in front of him. He was impressed, however, that she still maintained her penchant for rubbing his nose in shit.

"I do more than just take care of the bar, I got kids in school too. Dealing with all that fucking Geography homework, ya know?" She let out a giggle and Sam flashed a coy smile at her.

"Where do your kids go to school?"

"Local, not too far from here actually. It's Saddlebrook, Saddlebrook Elementary School. I'm sure you ain't heard of it." A bit of blood soaked onto his tongue and his eyes sunk to the etched in scribbles on the wooden bar. The bartender stood up and put away her clipboard, when she noticed Sam's finger pointed up for one more, she shot a look of disdain.

"Round number two? Coming up." His fingers began to dance in circles as she tended the bar. Sam faintly spoke.

"My boys go there—"

"Oh really? You sure got... boys, and not grown men?" She giggled to herself once again.

"Went, I'm sorry miss." She laughed and picked up a wet glass to polish.

"Ha, you seemed a little long in the tooth to be having boys in elementary. But you never know where people land in life, how they get there and the such." Sam's fingers continued to twirl.

"What's your name, miss?" She put down the glass and reached behind the register to pull out a pack of Pall Mall's. She dropped one in front of Sam and pressed the other to her lips. She lit it and inhaled deep and gave Sam curious look.

"Tracey, Tracey Adams. Rather have you callin' me my God-given name instead of "miss." Sam's heart skipped and his eyes scoured every inch of her face as quickly as he could, he was right; he'd never forget that little girl's face.

Sam could see it now, the girl who used hang on his boy, Ray. She was the same girl who would bring over a pile of records that were taller than her. He felt his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth, his eyes moistened as he refused to blink; he couldn't stop staring. Tracey pulled a cigarette from behind her ear and lit it, staring right back at Sam.

“Tracey Adams, huh?” She took another drag and bellowed out smoke,
“Uh huh, something got your tongue there, eh mister?” Sam shot down the tiny glass of whiskey and tapped it back to her, a weary smile crept across his soaked lips.

“You knew my boy.”

“I know quite a few boys in my line of work, even got two little ones at home, gonna have to be a bit more specific.” Sam took another sip of his beer and smacked his lips.

“You... you knew my boy, quite well in fact.” There was no longer any tapping on the clipboard, no melodic hum, or even fake laughs— piercing silence.

“I used to watch you come over after school, you’d listen to every record you had; had our house stinking like skunk with my boy.”

The cigarette fell from her mouth and her eyes grew wide, he hadn’t seen that kind of frightened expression from her ever, even when he actually had a tiny bit of leverage over her.

“Sam? Sheriff Sullivan?” Tracey’s expression turned into one of childish bewilderment, the face of someone who finally believed in ghosts. The confidence that once laced her tone was suddenly lost, she began to sound like just another person who remembered who he was.

“You... ain’t as burly as I remember. Never seen you with scruff before. I... I heard you left a while ago. After Ray went... well, you know.” Sam took the lit cigarette that fell from her mouth and took a deep drag himself. He washed back the drag with cool beer. It drowned the lump that was slowly rising from the pit of his stomach.

“You’d be surprised what those cold, northern winters will do to ya.” His voice quiet, his eyes finally broke to one of the signs.

“I heard about Ray.” He let out another plume of smoke.

“I can see you did.” He reached over and grabbed an ashtray, Tracey lit another smoke and Sam noticed remnants of that detached teenage creep back into her expression.

“We got the news a few days ago, well, you know how those boys at the station talk.”

“I do, they didn’t do a ton of work for me when I was their boss either— for what it’s worth.” Her lips let loss a faint chuckle.

“Heh, they sure were lots nicer when you were sheriff. Surprised to see you back here though, I thought your wife would have had to go and deal with... that news.” Sam looked down at his duffel bag and scoffed.

“My ex-wife... She refused to go down, she—”

“I couldn’t have done it either.” Sam felt his lips halt; there had been enough time that had passed for him to sense that she wasn’t the same little stoner-girl who hung on his son’s every word.

“She know that you’re here?”

“I don’t think so, she might.”

“You got plans to see her?”

“I do.” Tracey nibbled her bottom lip nervously.

“I got two boys myself now and I pray everyday that the evil in them is no more than their daddy’s. I couldn’t imagine—”

“No—” Smoke bellowed through his nostrils.

“No you really couldn’t.”

There were moments of uncomfortable silence that passed between them after his second round. Sam ordered a third round, and as Tracey cleared away his glasses; he spoke.

"I've got to sign off for him, they need one of us down there to so see him so they can... cremate him." Tracey put her hand on top of his; the hairs on his back rose and his neck stiffened.

"Does she know you're back?" Sam pulled away and looked back down at the faded scribbles on the bar.

"I... I don't know. Maybe she knew when she refused to sign that I'd have to come back and do it, I don't know."

Another moment of silence shrouded over them when the creaked open once again, this time a strong, burly and bald man stood in the entranceway. The man had a sour expression to go along with his round face and double chin. Suddenly the door closed and Sam couldn't make out anything else from the man. Tracey waved energetically at the man.

"Hey Jimbo! Glad you're here; we just got our first customer of the day. I'm gonna need the company." His gruff chuckle resonated and he disappeared into the backroom, the silence once again rose to the surface.

"Sam, you going to the station?"

"I am."

"You plan on calling friends? Don't sound like you're calling the...missus."

"I might have to find a taxi, not a lot of friends in my little black book anymore."

Sam finished his beer and noticed Tracey shifting her lips back and forth; back and forth.

"Before the lunch rush starts, let me drive you. It's a ten-minute drive, I feel like—"
" Sam felt his head snap in surprise.

"Nah, you don't gotta do that or anything." Tracey once again put her hand on top of his, this time peering into him like she did as a teenager in trouble.

"I... It would mean a lot to me to get you there. It ain't much, but maybe it'll save you a few bucks. That can't hurt ya, right?" The lump in his throat started making its way up again. Sam ran his other hand through his thick mane of hair and let out a weary sigh.

"Okay, Thanks Tracey." He put a crisp bill on the bar and Tracey began to make her way to the kitchen.

"Let me tell Jimbo to hold down the fort, I'll only be a minute." He was left alone in the dark and sullen bar, he looked down at his hands for another drag of the cigarette and noticed them trembling; they wouldn't stop.

Sam rested his feet on his bag and felt the wind brush against his scruff as they sped down the road. Sunlight blinded him as his eyes adjusted to the still-young day and the spring air felt like his flickers of ember on his skin. Sam pulled his head back into the car and looked over at the young woman next to him. Now that they were out of the damp and dank bar, he could see that Tracey had matured into a beautiful young woman. Her appearance and eyes looked softer in the day's light, Sam was actually able to picture her sitting across the table from her son's teacher, talking about the bigger things in life; more than what whiskey he wanted.

"Sam," Tracey spoke abruptly.

"Yea?"

"Did, did you ever see Ray after you left?"

"No, no I didn't." The wind whipped through Sam's hair, his eyes on the sun peeking through the verdant woods they passed.

"I... I loved your boy back then. I really did love Ray." Sam watched the shade creep up his arm and the words slipped from his lips.

"I did too Tracey, I loved him too." They came to a stop sign and Tracey pulled out the cigarette she kept behind her ear and lit it before continuing down the road.

“He was a smart boy, damn handsome too. Looked like his daddy.” Sam watched the smoke slither through her cherry-red lips and noticed a stream of tears rolling down her cheeks.

“You know, I just never knew what he would be up to, you know? I just loved being around him; he just asked questions that I never thought to even think about, ha. Loved to read, we’d get high and he’d wanna go to the library, the freakin’ library. I loved being around him, I wanted to do anything and everything with him...but he just wanted to read, talk about shit that I never even thought about. Just shit... that I never even cared about.” Sam nibbled his lip and choked back a little, his eyes focusing on the lines in the road.

“I... I guess I just never thought that he had that kind of violence in him, or that... kind of darkness.” Sam’s fingers dug into his jeans and his sharp nails dragged across his balmy skin.

“When you left, they said you knew, you were protecting him. But—” She inhaled deeply and sniffled a bit before speaking.

“I didn’t like you, shit, what teenage-girl likes her boyfriend’s cop dad? You hovered over us all the time, ha-ha. I never got enough time with Ray, but, would either of us been able to change what happened?” The wind began to whip through Tracey’s hair as she tossed her cigarette out of the window.

“Sam,” He didn’t make a noise.

“Sam, I’ve got know.” His tongue slithered in dismay behind his teeth.

“You didn’t know what he was doing to Tommy, did you?” The wind whipped throughout the car and Sam could see his familiar station in the distance, it had been years since he had to answer that terrible question.

“Did you, Sam?”

“No. No, I didn’t.” They pulled into a parking spot in front of the station and Tracey exhaled, a twinge of relief carried in her expression.

“I knew that you wouldn’t have protected him if you knew, I knew you cared for him—” Sam flung the door open and snatched his bag from the car. The door slammed shut and he poked his head in once, scowl painted on his face.

“I loved my boy, but I don’t protect murderers or child—”

“I know, Sam.” Tracey brushed her hand along Sam’s unkempt hair and he recognized that fragile smile.

“Thank you for the ride, and the drinks, Tracey. I hope you and your boys keep well. I’ll keep you in my prayers.” The car started and as it shifted into gear Tracey wiped her eye.

“I never kept your family outta mine. I pray you sleep well Sam you deserve it. I promise” He pulled back and watched the young woman drive off into the distance. The lump in his throat grew heavier as Sam’s eyes met the police station’s heavy wooden doors.

He stood in the hallway leading into the main area of the station for a moment. His eyes caught the swaying branches through the dingy window that lit the room. Sam took a moment and searched for the notice he got from the Sheriff's office about Ray's death; suicide by hanging. It reached him in official stationery, but it hadn't made the trip down in the same shape. The letter was crumpled, stained, and torn in a few places; a feeling of uncertainty crept through him. Sam dug further into his bag and found a tiny bottle that he had saved for the road. Sam looked once more at the branches dancing in the wind. He felt memories of his children and wife washed over him as the top of the bottle toppled to the ground; liquor harsh on its way down.

The station hadn't changed much since his time away; its prolific yet rickety infrastructure somehow managed to stand the test of time. There was a young uniformed man sitting at a small desk facing the entrance. Sam cautiously walked up to the young man, basking in the familiar aroma of coffee and cigarettes.

"Excuse me..." The fresh-shaven officer had the dapper demeanor of a new recruit; flashing Sam an earnest yet humble smile.

"Hello sir, can I help you? Are you looking to make a report—"

"I need to see Sheriff James Harris. Now, please and thank you." Sam was curt, the fresh-shaven youth perplexed.

"Excuse me?"

"James, James Harris. I need to see him, now. He should be in the Sheriff's office, down the hall; the last door on the left."

"Um—"

"Tell him Sam Sullivan is here." The youth's face lost color, all but the cherry-red razor burn that glazed the bottom of his neck.

"Ah... he's not—"

"He's expecting me. Now, please, get Mr. Harris for me." His chair dragged against the cheap, its sound deafening and agitating; Sam stood still. The officer shot a look of contempt at him.

"Shame we let the homeless talk to us like that, better not catch you shaking a cup at me." Sam didn't break his stare until he saw the officer disappear down the hall and finally left out a scoff.

The awkward sounds of the station collided as a beautiful cacophony in his ears. It swelled within him, a darkly soothing sense of home. The station seemed to have been perfectly encased in a time machine, it was exactly as he had remembered. Desks lined up perfectly, the fragrant aroma of cheap cigars and cigarettes, even the slightly annoying tone of a secretary's voice in the background joyfully crept into the pit of his stomach; the warm feeling of familiarity.

The row of pictures, however, caught his eye. He noticed they had moved the pictures of former sheriffs next to the main desk in the lobby. Lined up were men that he had known as dearly as his own family, he knew their wives, their problems, even helped a few of their kids out of trouble when he caught them drinking on the town. Sam went through the photos and fondly recounted small stories with each face that his eyes touched. As he grazed past his predecessor, Dale Johnson, and his photo; he noticed the immediate next photo was James's. Sam felt his tongue rub against the bottom row of his teeth; bitter essence smoke and liquor lined his taste buds.

Suddenly, from behind him, a voice bellowed out.

"I look pretty good there huh? You'd be surprised what those fancy city-photographers can do with a mug like mine." Sam spun around, noticing the burly figure of his old partner, James, standing behind him. He stood cross-armed and with a sly grin plastered on his paper-thin lips. His scorching-red hair had dulled to the shade of autumn leaves, and he was attempting to grow a beard; to little avail it seemed. Life as sheriff had done James well, apparently. Back when Sam and James were partners, he was the lanky one; now James donned a homegrown potbelly, which hung heavy over his belt.

"I guess every dog has to get their yearbook photo taken, eh?" Sam watched James's face change from stern to jovial and he threw his arms out.

"Sam Sullivan, get over here ya son-of-a-bitch." James thudded over to him and wrapped his strong arms around him, pulled him tight. Sam's body tightened, and he quickly wormed out of his grip.

"Hey James, good to see you." Sam noticed the sheriff's gaze roll up and down his body. He almost felt the need to stand up straight, at attention.

"You... look a little sickly there bud, you doing okay?"

"Um, I've had a rough trip down here. Bus was—"

"Oh, you came by bus? That bus is a piece of shit Sam! You know that, I—" James continued to speak, but the words meant nothing.

The voices stopped for a moment, Sam could only hear fading voices in the background blending with the harsh clanking of the typewriters; his heart began to race. Sam felt the eyes of a few officers beat down on him; he was ready to leap from his skin. Sam's eyes went back to the large double-doors from whence he came, the next stop was apparent. A second trip, a second escape from Muskogee awaited after he finished his business. There was no time for catching up; after he walked out that door he would go back to be a bad memory the town would squash.

James continued to prattle on, "I can't tell you how many times I've had to send a few of the boys over there to help jumpstart the piece of shit! Waste of good men's time ya know what—"

"James—" Sam's voice cut through the clamor and prattle in an instant.

"I... I," He stopped himself, and took a deep breath.

"I got the letter. I'm here to see Ray. I'm here to see my boy." James immediately lost color in his face and promptly puckered in surprise.

"I'm here to see my boy. I'm here to send him away, for good." Sam stoic tone rang in the small lobby and James hastily fumbled through his pockets for his keys.

"Car's outside, the morgue is—"

"Down the street, I know James, not my first time seeing one of my boys there."

The coroner stepped outside of the room and lit a smoke; inhaled deep and rubbed his head. His wild, wavy, grey hair tucked behind his lofty ears. He adjusted his glasses and looked at Sam.

“James, you can go in with Sam. I’ll wait here. Take all the time you need.” James ushered Sam in, just as Sam moved past the old coroner he felt a frail touch grace his shoulder.

“Sam, I’m sorry.” Sam attempted to push the lump in his throat down, but his friend’s somber expression was too much to bear a second time; it locked the lump locked in place—he wasn’t going to make it.

“Ah...” Sam’s eyes struggled to adjust to the unique type of brightness the morgue had, to him at least. The light always pierced through his eyes, it killed him. Maybe it was his height, maybe it was something wrong with way his eyes were wired; he didn’t fucking know. He’d been fortunate to not have to grace the morgue as many times as some of his predecessors, but he never gone home without a headache after a visit under those piercing rays. His chest began to convulse as he grew closer to James, he could see it, the white sheet; the second time knowing one of his boys was going to be underneath it. It would be the third time seeing a white sheet over a body with James in the room.

The body on the table looked like a man, not the young boy he had last seen behind his jail’s familiar iron bars. He hadn’t seen his boy in fifteen years; he would have turned thirty-one that past April. Judging from the outline under the sheet, his boy had become long, muscular, and lean. Sam’s glance grazed the cuts and calicles on his boy’s manly hands, so much bigger than the last time he held it. A faint whimper escaped Sam’s chapped lips when he came across that familiar mane of jet-black hair, clean and full like his own; a ripple of his hair shot up along his neck at the sight. Sam had never gotten to see his youngest, Tommy, grow to be a man. Sam dreamt of Tommy so many nights, always with those beautiful, full, and youthful cheeks. The last time he held Ray, he went away a young man; he’d missed those other stages. Sam stumbled across the sudden and somber realization; there was so much time to tell with just one touch.

His eyes shot up when James began to speak.

“Hey, this can be as quick, or as long as you need. I can stay in the room, or I can go, that is completely up to you. Okay, bud?” Sam kept his hand out and halted him from moving. Sam and James stayed silent only the sounds of labored breathes accompanied by humming of the morgue freezers filled the room. James looked into Sam’s eyes and gave a weary nod; James then carefully pulled down the sheet to reveal a face that could have passed for Sam’s own.

Sam was silent at first, his eyes perusing the uncovered pale-face. It seemed Ray had finally grown into his nose, and it seemed that his face had thinned out quite well; boy might have been a dapper young man in another world. He had full, and pointed brows, which complimented his sharp jawline. Sam began to notice the scruff on along his jaw when he came across a gaudy, swollen and bruised neckline. The sheets must have been thick, Sam could see that Ray had struggled; he could see faint scratch marks along the bruises. For so many years Sam had dreamed, fantasized even, about wrapping his own hands around that gawky teenage neck of his and choking the disease out of him. Fifteen years later, he stood stupefied, as his boy had let his demons take him.

Tears pooled along Sam's chin as he cautiously put out his hand over his boy's face. He hovered there for a moment, almost hoping that Ray would move his head under his rough hand; both of his boys loved to have their heads stroked as children. An amalgam of rage, sorrow, and peculiar relief came over him. It washed over him suddenly and led to an exaggerated whimper, then to an expulsion. Sam collapsed to his knees on the cold ceramic floor; his sweat-soaked jeans gelid to the touch, he continually sobbed. His anguished wails reverberated like a bad echo in the tiny morgue. Sam began to rock slightly as his chest began to palpate when he felt the warm touch of a hand. He glanced up and saw the morose expression of his former partner, James looking back at him. Sam recalled the first time he saw him on the floor in this morgue, him and Sarah. Feeling the warmth of a human touch, Sam wailed until that frigid floor had .

"Sign here, please." A flick of the wrist, it could barely pass as scribble.

"And here, please." There came another flick of the wrist and then one squiggly line.

"And... finally, right here." Sam drew an extra scribble with one fanciful loop. The coroner re-racked the pages and closed the folder; his wrinkled hands massaged his equally wrinkly temple.

"I know this wasn't... easy, but Sarah wouldn't come down. We needed—"

"A last of kin." James hovered above Sam as he got up from the chair and made his way to the door. The coroner let loose a faint chuckle,

"Cleveland, huh? What's so special about the great, "Mistake on the lake?"

"Nothing, nothing but easy factory work." Sam quickly quipped.

"You heading back tonight? I'm sure you could spend the night here in town. I've got an open room, I know my ol' lady wouldn't mind the company." James cut in.

"My door's open too, Sam. You certainly aren't being run out of town."

"Not this time at least." He scoffed back. Both James and the coroner looked down at the ground.

"No, I'm not staying, but I... I have to see her." James let out a familiar sigh of disdain that Sam had grown accustomed to during their years together.

"Sam, you don't have to do anything. You've done more than just about any man I know. I don't know if seeing Sarah is gonna do either of you any good." A frown crept across his lips and he gave James a blank stare.

"James, I need to see Sarah. Can you please take me to her? Or am I gonna have to hitch a ride there?" A air of tension filled the room as the coroner let out a hacking cough.

"If you don't drive him James, I'll drive em'. Man ain't coming back after this." A brief moment of silence swelled in the office before it broke by the sound of James searching for his keys.

"If that's what you want, partner." Sam ran his hand through his moist mane and noticed his hand other hand quivering.

"Mind if we get a drink for the road?"

"I was getting one with or without you, bud." Sam shook the coroner's hand and found himself pulled in for a surprisingly strong hug.

"Get home safe Sam Sullivan. Try to get some sleep on the ride home." James put his arm around Sam as they made their way out in the bright spring afternoon.

The wind gently caressed his face as Sam stared out into the beautiful mid-afternoon day as they parked a few streets away from their location. He had forgotten about the beautiful spring days that were perfect for long drives. James handed Sam a miniature bottle of value vodka, Sam held the tiny bottle in his hand and began to force down the lump building back up in his throat, his third miniature shot. The cap spun open and he quickly gulped it down as his eyes found their way to another blossoming tree.

"I haven't seen her in a few years. She don't drive no more, generally stays within walking distance of your—I mean, the house. I know she's usually at the bar around this time, we can go—"

"No... no this is fine, James." James took a sip of his beer and let out an exasperated sigh. His hand found its way onto Sam's shoulder.

"You... sure you want to do this? There was silence; the wind gusted along the side of the pickup.

"This is my last stop, I ain't coming back again." James took another audacious slurp of his beer.

"I know, but it don't have to be though Sam."

"Yea, yea it does, James."

The car door shut, and James's voice carried in the wind.

"I'm coming back in two hours, alright bud?" Sam didn't respond. His eyes stayed fixated on the door, water slipped down his cheeks as his heart began to race. The sound of the pickup's engine sputtering in this distance made the pit in his stomach rock-hard. The house looked shoddy, unkempt, no one had put any maintenance into the outside for what seemed like years. Grass brushed against his tattered jeans and he noticed weeds protruding from every crack in the concrete. He could hear faint laughter in his head, and each part of the outside he laid eyes on brought upon another tear. He could hear their laughs, he could hear the sound of a fly ball plopping into his son's new glove— both boys had a penchant for sports, Sam thought so at least. His hands crept through his mane of hair and he began to catch his breath, he only needed to take a few more steps to be at their door—her door now.

His sweaty hand balled up into a fist and he made the motion to knock, but he couldn't follow through with it—again he tried, but it was no good. Gasps of breath scarcely escaped his lips. His hand froze mid-air. He swallowed again, tried to dry his hands on those ratty jeans, but they were too soaked with sweat to make a difference. He clenched his eyes shut and he made a fist once more and felt his knuckle connect; the door suddenly creaked open—there was only silence.

The house hadn't changed since the last day he shut the door behind, minus the scattered bottles, scattered trash, and clothes everywhere. Remnants of joy tugged at the pit in his stomach, he recalled the first day he brought Sarah into the house; he carried her in the same door—he kicked it so hard it almost fell off the hinges. He struggled to gather the air to speak, but he finally he called out,

"Sarah?" His voice echoed in the house, no response. He swallowed back the lump in his throat and called out once more,

"Sarah, I'm ho—I'm back in town for a little..." There was still no response. A gust of spring air danced along the back of neck, was she gone? James wouldn't lie to him about this, not about Sarah. He sighed and began to cautiously peruse the house, his eyes examining clues and taking in the scene as though he were back at a crime scene.

The pictures were all taken down, not a single one of her, the boys; there was nothing. He noticed dents, shards of glass, and dark spots along the wall as well, the familiar aroma of Sarah's favorite vodka crept burned in his nose—a burn, ethanol-like. The walls he painted all those years ago were stained yellow. The hair on his arms began to rise and goose bumps speed up his arm. He took a deep breath and felt his body give a sudden jitter,

“I... I have to go, I've got to go—” Words barely formed, tongue tied and his hands shaky as a drunk, what had he become? He turned and made his way to the door when he saw her, Sarah stood at the door with a paper bag of bottles in her hand. His eyes shot to garbage shrouded carpet as soon as the door closed. Sarah plopped the bag down on the table, the bottles clanked and almost tipped over—he could still feel her stare.

“Sarah,”

“Sam,” Another breeze blew past the house and rattled the screen door in front, it was the only sound that made came between them.

Sam couldn't tell how much time had passed between them, minutes maybe—but it felt like hours. Could Sarah smell the sweat, could she taste the fear in his breath? Sam felt his chest cry out in pain, his heart bound to crack through his sternum in a desperate attempt to run away, but Sam decided to walk to the door instead. As he took his first stride, the silence broke.

“Did you, did you see him? Did you see—” Sarah's words came out slow and slightly slurred, it must have been an early start for her too.

“I did, I saw our boy.” Sam had yet to bring his eyes from the carpet, he could see the run-down pair of shoes she wore, falling apart at the seams. A weary breath filled the room; soon it was accompanied by scattered sniffing.

“And...?” Pangs of pain radiated from the pit in his stomach, he bit his lip and sucked on his teeth.

“He looked calm.” The words fell from his lips softly,

“He looked...what?” An air of contempt crept along her, causing those shriveled pencil-thin lips to contort into a face of derision.

“At peace Sarah, he looked at peace. I don't know whether the doctors helped him look that way, but there was no sign of pain on his face.” Sarah looked along the wall where the family had once hung their few, but treasured memories. Sam noticed her thin lips begin to quiver, they looked so chapped; a far cry from the full lips of lost love he'd gone mad dreaming of.

“FUCK!” Sarah howled as she grabbed the nearby chair and flung it against the wall, a leg snapped as it piled up next to the rest of the garbage in the house. Sam felt his body stiffen as Sarah's solemn screech resounded through the tiny house. Her wails turned to savage growls as she picked up anything in arms reach: the broken leg of the chair, random articles of clothing, empty bottles of booze; and flung them at the wall. Sweat furrowed on his lips and Sam felt his hands ball up in fear, suddenly her eyes turned to him; this time Sam couldn't look away.

“He looked at peace?! That piece of shit looked at peace? WHY? Why does he get to sleep soundly now?! WHAT ABOUT ME? WHAT ABOUT TOMMY?” Sarah's voice shrilled through his body, it caused his chest to convulse; like all those years ago.

“Doesn't he know how MANY NIGHTS?” She howled,

“How many nights I dreamt of what he did to my baby. What he did, he, he—” Sarah continued to gasp in between her cries.

“What he did to my baby-boy, what he did to his OWN brother.” She collapsed to her knees, brushing against the table and knocking the bottles onto the carpet, unbroken. Sam unclenched his hands and was only able to watch as Sarah dropped to her knees. Her skin had turned fire-red and she began to viciously shake, like a rabid animal. Sam felt air escape his lungs once more and his feet began to slowly guide him toward her. Sarah suddenly began to bellow, in a tone that had haunted Sam for years.

“And you,” Her neck snapped into place and her eyes locked onto Sam.

“You come back here, and for what, huh? Did you come back here to gloat, tell me to get over it? My very own fairy fucking godmother, huh? We all don’t get to run away, Sam. We don’t get to pick up and start over on the road.”

“Ahhh...” Sam couldn’t speak, his tongue and heart petrified by her stare.

“Did you think I wanted you back here, huh?”

“N,no.”

“DID YOU?” Her hand latched onto the bottle of beer that rolled out of the paper bag and she half-heartedly tossed it at Sam; it plopped down by his ankle—his eyes never broke from her.

“You let this,” Sarah stopped herself mid-sentence; Sam swallowed the frog that had been ready to leap from his throat.

“You’ve got nothing here, Sam, go back to Cleveland, or whatever shit-hole you crawled out from to pretend you care about life here.” Sam felt his face go flush and his heart began to race.

“I... had to see you, Sarah, I had to see you again.” His voice began to break,

“I see you, all of you, every time I close my eyes; don’t you know that?” He continued to creep closer to her as he continued talking.

“I remember seeing Daniel’s beautiful smile that day I left home, I remember both of them playing outside that day when I went to work, hotter than hell, you remember? Of course you do.” Sarah began to whimper again, her face puffy and bright; like an agitated scar.

“I kissed em’ both on the head, but I gave Tommy a kiss on the cheek that day. I whispered in his ear, we’re going fishin’ tomorrow, buddy. It’ll be just us, Ray can stay home and take care of himself.” Sam inched closer to Sarah as he began to wipe his cheeks.

“He told me how much he couldn’t wait, how much he had to tell me. There were big things goin’ on that I had to know about. I didn’t think—” He choked on his word, he stopped in his tracks.

“I didn’t think he needed Daddy to be Sheriff-Dad, you know baby? I couldn’t imagine what our little boy had to go—”

“You ran, you, fucking, ran. YOU KNEW what he had to go through. YOU PROTECTED HIM, as long as you could, I KNOW IT.”

“I didn’t know Sarah, I swear to you, I didn’t know that our boy was capable of, of something like that.”

“He was you, Sam, looked just like you, acted just like you. How could you not see that evil in him? What kinda fucking cop were you huh?” Sam bumped against the table, as he inched closer to Sarah.

“He hurt our little boy so badly,” She choked on her tears, “So badly....”

“I know he did, I know.”

“I have nightmares about his pain, you know? I can see it so vividly, so fuckin’ vividly.” Sam was about arms-length from her, the closest he had been to anyone living

in his family in fifteen years. Heat radiated from Sarah like a car engine that had overheated, it felt as though she'd singe Sam's hand if he got any closer.

"I know Sarah, I know those dreams." She began to heave and writhe, back and forth; back and forth.

Sam dropped to his knees and rolled the bottle of vodka away from her, he was close enough to feel the humid breeze she emanated as she violently rocked. Sam's hands were shaking and eyes welled up, but he found himself suddenly wrapping himself around her once more. As he wrapped his shaky arms around her, a sensation of warmth flickered inside of him, and he felt the floodgates break; his eyes began to pour. Sam buried his face into Sarah's flowing auburn hair, he took a deep breath and could faintly smell the fruity aroma of her conditioner; his cries began to exacerbate. Her body was so hot to the touch, he felt as though he was hugging a raging inferno trying to extinguish it with apologies that would only fan its holocaust. Neither Sam nor Sarah moved. They rocked back and forth together on that shoddy carpet, veiled in velvet sun with their wails carried by the gusty evening.

Sarah placed a tall glass of water in front of Sam and sat across from him, taking a sip of the vodka she poured herself. Sam watched as she began to anxiously tap her glass, her eyes wouldn't meet his anymore after their temporary embrace. The sound of the kitchen clock ticked in the background and Sam's leg began to thump rapid as a rabbit; Sarah suddenly snapped.

"I hate when you do that." She took another gulp of her water and turned to the sink to get more.

"Sarah," Her hands froze in place.

"Sarah, I've got nothing here. I don't plan on coming back here, I promise you." She turned the faucet on and filled her glass once more, then took a seat in front of him.

"I... I can't go on, you know? I just can't go on like this. I don't know if I'll ever stop seeing our boys, but Sarah, I can't stop seeing you." There was silence, only the clock's labored ticks gave the room pulse.

"I'm sorry Sarah. I'm sorry I couldn't save Tommy, and I'm sorry that Ray... I'm sorry that he was—"

"A fucking monster." Sam let out a deep sigh,

"A monster..." Her eyes stared through her half-empty glass and she sucked her teeth and proceeded to finish it off.

"I need to know Sarah," Sam looked up to her eyes, but they were stuck on her empty glass, she wouldn't break her gaze.

"Can you forgive me Sarah? I've tried to give you all the air in my lungs; I've tried so hard. I ran away because I... I couldn't repair what had broke. But I promise you Sarah— my life ended that day. It ended the moment they pulled me into the station and told me what happened, it ended the moment I saw the love leave your eyes. I can't sleep anymore, you know that?" Sam could barely hear the ticking of the kitchen clock, he kept his attention of Sarah's gaze, she kept fixated on that empty glass. Her head stood still, her eyes darted from left to right, back and forth. As Sarah began to speak, Sam already knew what her response would.

"I know what you want Sam. I know what you want me to say" Sarah's eyes finally met his, the ticking of the clock becoming deafening to Sam. Her hand carefully locked into his, her touch warm, but stare cold.

"Sam, I—"

James shook Sam's hand after stepped out of the pickup truck. It was far firmer than Sam had last remembered.

"Hey, you did the right thing Sam. I know it doesn't feel like it, but I promise you bud, you did." Sam gave a firm shake and waved goodbye as he made his way onto the rickety bus. The night turned muggy and he broke a sweat in the short walk from the truck. He got lucky and found a double seater, which had been left unoccupied. He settled in and attempted to get comfortable, damping off the pouring sweat from his head. The bus moaned and creaked as it began humming down the dark road. Sam turned back to see the old pickup, but didn't notice James there. No one waves goodbye to a ghost, he'd learned that years ago.

The bus had only made it a few miles from the town when he began to feel his eyes leak again. Sam reached into his bag and found the fresh bottle of whiskey that he picked up at Baker's Basin before the ride, he could only pray that it would sooth him and cease Sarah's haunting weeping. The word, no, had never stung so badly. Sam knew that his dreams of Sarah wouldn't cease; they would be renewed with vigor and horror. Sam knew he very well would have to return a third time, to bury his wife and the heavy regrets she drowned herself with. Sleep would not come easy for Samuel Sullivan, but it hadn't for the past fifteen years.

~Fin