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The Preservation of Identity: A Narrative Examination of National Parks in Kentucky

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THE PRESERVATION OF IDENTITY: A NARRATIVE EXAMINATION OF
NATIONAL PARKS IN KENTUCKY

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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Western Kentucky University
2016

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2016

ABSTRACT

National parks are symbols of national identity. They tell the history of places—personal legacies and natural phenomena. My Capstone Experience/Thesis (CE/T) project for the Honors College at WKU features two stories that fuse fiction and non-fiction conventions to share the experiences of national parks in Kentucky. Currently, the National Park Service is celebrating its centennial anniversary at parks across the nation. First established in 1916 by President Woodrow Wilson, the national parks have become symbols of the quintessential American experience: serving as memorials to nature, to history, and to culture. As such, these stories that take place at Mammoth Cave National Park and Abraham Lincoln’s Birthplace, respectively, tell stories that take place in greater pictures. These characters visit the parks, learn from them and embrace them, and carry those lessons into their everyday lives: collective moments in a greater story. In sharing these stories of the parks themselves and the visitors crossing their threshold, American culture continues to move forward—growing and evolving—to paint a greater overarching depiction of our society.

Keywords: National Parks, Mammoth Cave National Park, Abraham Lincoln’s Birthplace, Creative Fiction, NPS, Identity

Dedicated to my friends and family, but also to my co-workers in the Eastern National Bookstore at Mammoth Cave National Park: you were the inspiration—and the heart—of this project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has experienced a number of bumps and bruises along the way—more than I care to admit. However, it was through the support of Dr. Judith Szerdahelyi and Dr. Leslie North that this project endured—that this project soared.

Dr. Szerdahelyi is among the busiest individuals imaginable. I cannot thank her enough for having faith in my words to add another responsibility to her already packed plate. Since my very first class with her during my sophomore year, Advanced Composition, Dr. Szerdahelyi has continued to inspire my writing. She has also taught me a few things about avoiding parenthetical asides and communicative purposes. This is your acknowledgement, Dr. S, but let's see how many more we can get.

Dr. North took, perhaps, the biggest leap of faith on this project, especially considering that she had never had me as a student before. Throughout this process, she has consistently remained a voice of reason and encouragement. She has been deeply honest about this project's scope and scale from the very beginning when it was nothing more than a fledging idea. Her faith in its completion has been one of the greatest assets imaginable.

Also, thank you, Mr. Logsdon, for being the most valiant of third readers.

Thank you all for everything. Your guidance means the world to me.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends who consistently reminded me to keep working. This project is for you, too.

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PREFACE

The national parks are a wonder to behold.

The national parks are visions of sight and sound.

The national parks are the embodiment of culture, history, and nature.

The national parks are quintessentially *human*.

People come from far and wide to visit the national parks on a daily basis. They come for a variety of reasons: sometimes to immerse themselves in culture and the worlds of the parks, and sometimes to stretch their legs on a long road-trip. For whatever reason, though, people are coming and that, ultimately, is significant.

This project is a unique blend of creative nonfiction and fiction merged to tell one cohesive story of identity—frame-worked by America’s National Park Service, particularly the parks in Kentucky: Mammoth Cave and Abraham Lincoln’s Birthplace.

On a fundamental level, the concept of “identity” is abstract and vague. It encompasses anything and everything, varying for each unique individual. Ultimately, identity is an embodiment of an individual’s historical, cultural, and natural presence. While people are primarily associated with this concept, *places* have their own identities, too—as do national parks. By putting these two identities in conversation with one another, the people’s identities work together to tell the identity and story of the national parks. The opposite is true, as well: the national parks’ identities and stories channel the stories of the people. This is because places and people exist independently from one

another, but sometimes their paths cross and merge and separate again. These stories are no less significant than the milestones of life that appear on the same map.

In this novella, an 18-year-old girl serves as the primary narrator. She is facing the ramifications of her parents' recent divorce and her mother's subsequent depression. In a spur of the moment trip, mother and daughter find themselves at Mammoth Cave National Park facing adventure, terror, and satisfaction—all in equal parts. Their tour in the Star Chamber, lit by antique lanterns, serves as the focal point of their journey: it is their light in their darkness. Meanwhile, in the latter portion of the tale, our narrator's missing father takes the words of the story for himself. He is in Hodgenville, Kentucky, at Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace with his newfound family. He is torn between relishing in his new world and all its complexities and mourning the separation of the life he has always known.

These people and their stories are complex—but so are the national parks.

For the past three summers, I have worked in the bookstore at Mammoth Cave National Park. Over time, I experienced a first-hand account of the people who visited the park. I talked to them, watched them interact, and lent an empathetic ear to them when they simply needed to vent. I learned a number of things about these people and their everyday lives, but I also learned about how they interacted with the park and their relationships with it. They were there on fleeting visits, yes, but they carried their problems with them to the park and then, at the end of the day, carried their day's experiences at the park back home.

Furthermore, the parks do not exist in singular moments. Rather, they are enduring presences throughout literature and the human memory. As Dean MacCannell

notes in his article “The Eco Factor in Tourism,” published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 2001, “Tourists may visit [tourist attractions], but they cannot buy them or take them home or resell them. [...] They remain in place and continuously available for other tourists to visit” (147). Ultimately, they allow visitors to preserve a small aspect of the park for when they return home at the conclusion of their trip while leaving it still intact for their fellow travelers. Preservation, like identity, comes in various forms, such as environmental, historical, and social, but the fact remains that the national parks are largely the embodiment of these preservative instincts.

Originally, this project was supposed to be grounded solely in creative nonfiction: to tell people’s stories in a series of vignettes. It’s the genre I prefer to write in, if I’m being honest, and it’s an invigorating process to find the truth and heart in a particular scene. Over time, however, the narrative arch began to shift. I wanted to tell a particular story of life in America and the struggles of multifaceted families. Subsequently, the characters grew and developed until they had their own voices—their own individual identities. It is a notion that I thought was appropriate for a work exploring the identity of parks. Why, then, couldn’t the characters become symbols for the parks themselves?

The situations that these characters find themselves in during their time at Mammoth Cave and Abraham Lincoln’s Birthplace, respectively, are situations that I, as a tourist, have also found myself in. Alternatively, some of the situations are ones that I have heard about in great detail from the guests that cross over the bookstore’s threshold and then re-created for myself. It was an ever-evolving process in characterization and scene-setting.

Currently, the National Park Service is celebrating its centennial anniversary at parks across the nation. First established in 1916 by President Woodrow Wilson, the national parks have become a symbol of the prototypical American experience. They are memorials to nature, to history, and to culture—sometimes incorporating all three in a balanced equilibrium. And still, in this time of excessive commercial tourism, the national parks remain an untapped and sometimes underutilized resource for the American and global public.

Kentucky, too, has a rich cultural relationship with the parks. Mammoth Cave, for instance, is a place that was carved from sandstone and rock all via the slow and steady drip of water over time. Rushing water isn't the only factor that helped shape Mammoth Cave, though. Countless groups of people have passed through the Historic Entrance: Native Americans, hunters, slaves, miners, patients, explorers, scientists, and tourists. These people all had stories of their own and many were never given a platform to share them. This project is an effort at continuing them in the present.

The cave itself is currently 400 miles and counting with more mileage still being discovered annually. Additionally, it is a place that is celebrating a multitude of anniversaries in 2016: 75 years as a national park, 200 years of guided tours, and the NPS's centennial anniversary. The park, which is located just outside the small towns of Cave City, Park City, Brownsville, and Horse Cave, Kentucky, consists of a number of differing tourist attracts. Most notable, of course, is the cave itself. Tours run underground throughout the day, entering via the Historic Entrance for a more historical approach to the underground behemoth or the New Entrance, which prioritizes the formations in the wet section of the cave. For the latter tours, guests must take one of the

park's iconic green buses to a location a few miles from the Visitors Center. The historic tour factors into this novella as the characters take a unique tour only offered in the summer time: the Star Chamber Tour. In addition to the cave tours, guests can visit the park's museum and bookstore, have lunch or lodge in the park's nearby hotel (owned by a third-party concessionaire), hike or bike the combined 95 miles of back and front-country trails, or glide down the Green River.

Similarly, the state of Kentucky likes to claim Abraham Lincoln as its own. After all, he was *born* here—surely that's what really counts. The fact, however, remains that Lincoln *did* leave Kentucky to take up residence elsewhere several times over: Illinois, Indiana, Washington D.C., etc. Subsequently, the section of the novella that highlights his birthplace home, which has since been transformed into a National Historic Site, focuses on the idea of home and what it's like to leave it behind—perhaps, in this instance, to assume a new identity with a different family.

Because the park itself is smaller, the corresponding section is smaller, too. Visitors of the park have the opportunity to walk through the Visitors Center's museum, watch a 15-minute video, and then proceed to the cabin itself. Sitting at the top of 56 stairs that represent the 56 years of Lincoln's life, visitors are faced with a monument that is reminiscent of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., omitting, of course, the statue of Lincoln. The cabin is located inside the one-roomed memorial building. While most guests assume, not unjustly, that the cabin is Lincoln's cabin, the opposite is actually true. Rather, it is an impersonator that is too young to be Lincoln's true home. The history and the idea of it remains, yes, but it introduces some interesting arguments pertaining to artificial history and re-creations—what does that mean for overall identity?

There is no simple answer but one could argue that symbols are just as important as the idea, or the places, they are working to represent.

No one story is ever identical to its predecessor, nor is it fully comparable to the story of an individual standing a few mere yards away. Stories are the compositions of humanity for both the good and the bad: the happy moments that bring breathless smiles to our lips and the tragic ones that cause tears to well in our eyes. Each of these stories, both large and small, plays a role in shaping people's greater sense of self. Parks are no exception. The rangers and tour guides at these places devote their lives to telling the stories of the past while also embracing the stories of the people who visit in the present.

In sharing these stories, we continue moving forward—growing and evolving—to paint a greater overarching picture. And that is, ultimately, what both literature *and* the national parks are all about.

CHAPTER 1

OVERLOOKING STARS AT MAMMOTH CAVE NATIONAL PARK

“The sights and scenery of the cave had the same dignity that belongs to all natural objects, and which shames the fine things to which we foppishly compare them. I remarked, especially, the mimetic habit, with which nature, on new instruments, hums her old tunes, making night to mimic day, and chemistry to ape vegetation.”

— **Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Illusions”**

Part I:

The line seems as though it will never reach an end.

People wind between columns of stacked sandstone, each with restless feet stamping out rhythmic patterns of nonsense. A frenzied voice with a devastatingly thick accent, curling consonants and disappearing endings, clicks onto the intercom, urging people to separate from one another to make the line move faster. The reality, however, is that though the appearance of the line may shrink, the subsequent seconds of waiting will ultimately remain unchanged even as a handful of people break away from the line and feet shuffle forward.

Laura knows all about waiting. She has stopped trying to read too much into it.

She fishes her phone from her pocket, sliding into life, as she and her mother take a singular step forward. The bars at the top of the top of the phone’s screen remain lifeless, accompanied only by a slow, desperately spinning wheel. It is, yet again, unsuccessful at capturing any sort of signal. She sighs, dropping the phone back into her pocket.

Earlier in the week, Laura had sent her father a message about her upcoming move-in day. She'd been accepted into Belmont University in downtown Nashville—it wasn't her first-choice school, but she still smiles whenever it crosses her mind—and wanted her father to help her move in. Since he moved out, nearly six months ago, she hasn't seen much of him. He's definitively moved on without looking back, but she refuses to accept that from the man who raised her. With each passing day, though, it feels more like a lost cause. There is only so much disappointment that one can take before it ultimately becomes all-consuming, after all.

The loudspeaker clicks on again, the accented voice returning, and the line shuffles forward one more step.

“Mom,” Laura says. “Mom, can I go look in the gift shop?”

Laura's mother, Caroline, is flipping through a handful of pamphlets, her eyes flying from left to right and back again as they wait in line. She had been the one to spark the spur-of-the-moment trip to Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, earlier in the morning. Citing a need for fresh air and space—a thinly veiled distraction—Laura's mother had loaded their aging family mini-van with more sack lunches than the pair could possibly eat and pulled Laura from the warm comfort of her bed. She had only given a brief explanation about “exploration” and “self-discovery.” Laura had grumbled as she'd stumbled through the motions of climbing out of bed and dressing for the day: stepping under the shower's warm spray, pulling on a threadbare t-shirt and shorts, and running a brush through her thick, unmanageable curls.

The subsequent car ride from Louisville was long and arduous.

Their mini-van traveled through the rolling hills of the Bluegrass State, passing tobacco farms and dairy cows, as pop music from the early portion of the century played on tinny speakers. Caroline drummed relentlessly against the steering wheel, her eyes darting to the rear-view mirror that was held up by a pair of pink, fluffy dice that had found their way up there as a silly joke months ago and never disappeared.

Every conversation that started between the pair fizzled within seconds of its conception.

Caroline and Laura have never been inseparable or stunning conversationalists, but their words have grown to assume double meanings and their silences have become stilted.

The last few months have been especially difficult.

In the weeks preceding Laura's high school graduation, Laura's father had slammed a suitcase against the hardwood floor. He stood in the doorway of their small, aging townhouse and looked at Laura with leaking, sympathetic eyes. A duffle bag hung over his left shoulder as he gripped car keys in his right hand.

"I'm sorry, Lore," he'd said. There were deep crescent moons hanging in the sky beneath his gaze and his hair, typically so shiny and clean, hung in limp, greasy strands around his normally handsome face.

Laura hadn't been able to form words or process what was unfolding before her eyes. Instead, she stayed silent, watching as he turned his back on the house, on his life, on *her*.

The silence has been haunting Laura ever since.

Her parents' divorce, though Laura might have liked to believe otherwise, was not entirely unmerited. Caroline, a defense attorney in the city, had been working more hours than ever in the weeks preceding the signed papers and half-empty closet. The youngest partner in her firm—the only mother, the only African American—Caroline constantly felt as though she needed to prove herself to anyone who could ever doubt her. She adopted the most strenuous and complicated cases, spending unending hours at the office and an eternity in the courthouse. Caroline spent her days jumping from one trial to another, only ever taking a moment to breath in the research library downtown.

She never breathed in the quiet—in the silence—of her own home.

Laura, who turned eighteen the previous spring, did not necessarily begrudge her mother her success. After all, Caroline had sacrificed *everything* to accommodate Laura's sheer existence. Laura understood her mother's need to prove herself, just as Laura's father once did, too. The difference, however, was that Laura's father could never emulate Caroline's success and that silence between them ultimately transformed into resentment.

Now, only a few months after the divorce, Laura can still see her mother struggling to maintain her composure in his absence. Laura doesn't know if she misses him or misses the *idea* of him. Perhaps it is simply because the void he left behind is in the shape of a parent—a role that for all Caroline's successes, she has never actually mastered. It's the case she just can't win.

“Hm?” Caroline says. She does not glance up from the pieces of paper clenched between her fingers. Her nails are smooth and perfectly rounded, boasting a fresh coat of soft, pink polish.

“Never mind,” Laura says. She folds her arms over her chest, her gaze falling back on the distant gift shop. It is nestled in a corner of the building near the front door. She had overlooked it entirely upon crossing over the Visitors Center’s threshold moments ago, though it has since caught her eye. The store is lit with bright fluorescent lights that are jarring in contrast to the dim natural light of the rest of the building. On a closer inspection, Laura can see rows and rows of books lining the cherry-tinted shelves, their covers a bright splash of color in the light. “Just... never mind.”

Caroline raises her gaze from the pamphlets, arching a perfectly threaded brow.

“Don’t do that,” she says. Her tone is sharp, cold.

“Do what?”

“You know what.”

Laura resists the urge to roll her eyes—barely. “Look,” she says instead, “the line is finally moving.”

And so it is.

Laura and Caroline inch forward a few feet as the projection of prospective tours finally enters their line of sight. The tours are displayed on a simple TV monitor that is illuminated by a blue background interspersed with white and black text. The tours in black are sold out, the placard says, but everything else is available. To Laura’s dismay, it doesn’t appear as though there are many tours remaining. Not that it matters, she thinks. After all, Laura knows next to nothing about any of the tours displayed on the screen: the “domes and dripstones” or the “gothic avenue” are just words without resonance. In fact, she knows *nothing* about this place other than the fact that it is the longest cave in the

world. It's cool, she supposes, but not enough to carry her interest through this enduring day.

And it has been never-ending, of that she is certain.

Despite Caroline knocking on her door, hollering about a trip when rays of pink and purple were only just beginning to bleed into the dark skyline, they did not actually leave their home until the sun was already well into the heart of the sky. Upon arriving at the park hours later, passing by a welcome sign cloaked in bright green leaves and twirling vines, the park had already been overrun with other visitors with the same idea. They had circled the parking lot for nearly half an hour with only a spot at the distant hotel across the way to show for it.

Laura had climbed from the mini-van, groaning as the muscles in her back popped and her shoulders rolled. She'd cringed at the sweat already pooling beneath her armpits and the way her shirt clung to her stomach. The temperature was well into the 90s, almost nearing 100 degrees—the air thick with dripping humidity.

Now, with over half the day's tours already sold out and the line still staggeringly slow, Laura does not see how their afternoon can fare any worse.

“Laura, if you're going to be a brat, go find a bench to sit on,” Caroline says. Her attention is once again resolutely devoted to the pamphlet in her hand, this one bearing information about horse rides just outside the park's boundaries, but her grip on the shiny paper is tight—her knuckles white. Laura thinks her mother should concentrate on the tours that are selling out by the second rather than a fleeting interest in cheap horse rides. She does not say this, though.

“No,” Laura says instead, “I'll stay with you.”

Her mother's grip on the pamphlets does not loosen, but the strain around her eyes does lighten just the slightest bit. Laura counts it as a victory.

“So,” Caroline says, “what tour do you want to take?”

Laura looks back up at the blinking blue screens, squinting as the numbers and letters come into focus before flashing to an advertisement for the nearby hotel—the very hotel where their car is parked.

They had passed through it earlier on their way to the Visitors Center. Strands of grass peaked out from beneath the sidewalk on the path to the entrance, cracks lining each slab of concrete. Clusters of people huddled together beneath the green awning, which stretched out several yards, boldly proclaiming in white caps lock that it was the “Mammoth Cave Hotel.” The door to the building squealed when Laura pulled on it, a sharp holler. The walls of the hotel's interior were lined with red and brown brick with bleached wooden surfaces framing the windows and doors. A group of tourists from India stood in the entryway to a gift shop on the right side of the hallway, holding gimmicky t-shirts and clutching books to their chests. The air inside the building was positively stifling, as though the air conditioner was struggling to catch its breath. Everything smelled like greasy French fries. They eventually found their way to the bridge connecting the hotel and the Visitors Center, breathing fresh air as they left the musty building behind without a second thought.

“We can do the Historic Tour... or the Domes and Dripstones...” Caroline is reading off the board. “Or something called the Star Chamber?”

When they reach the ticket window a lifetime later, they still have not decided on which tour to take. Laura smiles at the woman behind the counter, her cheeks stiff and

stilted, but the ranger at the ticket window doesn't seem to notice. She doesn't even look up from the computer screen her gaze is locked onto.

The ranger, who can't be much older than Laura herself, looks exhausted. There are deep purple bags scribbled beneath her eyes, while her frizzy, bleached blonde hair stands at attention thanks to her restless hands and insurmountable stress. Her ranger badge, pinned above a pocket on the right side of her gray polo, gleams in the soft light of the building—a golden sheen that creates a sharp contrast to the dull grays and greens of her uniform. It's the only pop of light, the only spark, in the girl's entire form.

After a few seconds pass, she finally lifts her eyes from the computer screen and plasters on a smile that Laura knows all too well from her brief stint working in fast food the summer before.

“Which tour will you all be taking today?” the ranger asks. Her accent is thick with a moderate southern twang, but it lacks the charm Laura expects to hear in South Central Kentucky. There are no inflections in her words, nor is there any enthusiasm.

Laura glances expectantly at her mother. Neither of them speaks.

The girl sighs, a long, weary exhale. “If you don't know which tour you'd like to take, I suggest you move over to the Information Desk so that we can keep the line moving,” she says not unkindly. The words sound rehearsed, as if she has been repeating them over and over to unsuspecting guests all day. In all likelihood, she has.

Laura looks back at the line that has grown even longer, horrified at the prospective of getting *back* into it and starting all over from scratch. She's done that enough times in her life—school, track, family—that she has no desire to do it again at Mammoth Cave National Park of all places. As the thought crosses her mind, a family of

ten walks through the doors making their way to the back of the line. They are dressed in bright, neon colors with white tennis shoes that squeak against the dark floor. They have heavy bags draped over their shoulders. One individual in the group, a middle-aged woman, even has a fanny-pack draped around her waist.

“We’ll take whatever you have available,” Laura says. She stands on her toes, leaning into the window as far as her short stature will allow. “*Please*, whatever you recommend.”

The girl looks at them thoughtfully, her lips pursed, before finally nodding her head.

“I think I have the perfect tour for you,” she says.

Ten minutes later, with tickets in hand, Laura and Caroline exit the line and move to the side. “The Star Chamber Tour,” their tickets read on individual pieces of green and gray paper. The tour does not depart for another four hours.

When the girl behind the counter first mentioned the tour, her tone flat, Laura and Caroline had nodded emphatically. Both were fans of stars—never really got to see them much in the city—and it was one of the few remaining tours that had not been sold out. At that point, *anything* was *everything*. They’d come all this way and refused, simply refused, to leave empty-handed.

“Don’t be late,” the girl had said after providing directions to their shelter for departure, “or they’re liable to leave without you.”

Laura had wanted to laugh—loud, uproarious, and disbelieving.

They had *four* hours before their tour. Surely they would be on time.

What would they even do at *Mammoth Cave* for four hours? Laura didn't love nature, didn't love history. She thought it was interesting in a fleeting sort of way, something to regurgitate in serious conversations with adults but not worth sacrificing a whole day for. She had other things on her mind, other things to worry about: like starting college, like her disappearing father, and like her crumbling mother. A day of history? There was little, if anything, that seemed appealing about it.

“Well,” Laura says, “now what?”

Caroline glances around the room, taking in the bright banners displaying green hiking trails and the mismatched rocks climbing to the building's open ceiling.

“There's a museum,” she says. She holds up a pamphlet, the *original* pamphlet for the park, and gestures to her right. “We can go through the museum.”

“For four hours?”

“It says there's a video.”

“*Well*, if there's a video.”

The museum entrance, which is located beside the bookstore Laura noticed earlier, is disguised as a mouth of a cave with a map lining its far wall. Arteries of tunnels line the map, circling each other and going deeper and deeper—different colors representing the different layers and levels of the terrain beneath the surface. Together, Laura and Caroline wind through the exhibit's narrow, interactive halls. The walls are painted a deep, dirt brown and the ceiling is angled and crooked, dimly lit. At one point within the overarching cave motif, there is a miniature route of tunnels nestled in a distant corner. Two children are climbing through it and over it, laughing and giggling as their parents watch on with exasperated grins on their faces.

Laura sometimes wishes that she could make her mother smile like that, but she's afraid she wouldn't even be able to fit through the tunnels if she tried.

Near the end of the exhibit, the pair arrives in an even wider imitation of a cavern where a narrator is rattling off the history of the cave in a raspy voice. Bright blue light bounces off the projector, illuminating the smattering of people who are sitting on benches and watching the documentary in an ethereal glow. Positioned above the screen are several pale dummies in caving gear—helmets and coveralls. They are holding lanterns above their heads, their soulless eyes staring down at the onlookers.

“There's your video, mom,” Laura whispers. She gestures towards the benches. There are still several spare seats on the glossy, laminate benches available. “Do you want to watch?”

Caroline nods her head, her beaded earrings clapping together at the frantic movement, and they take their seats in the back of the room, comfortably out of sight. The room is mercifully cool, a blast of air-conditioning tickling the dark hair at the back of Laura's neck. As her eyes adjust to the dim light, she takes a brief moment to pull out her cell phone. Maybe, just maybe, her dad has finally responded.

Still, though, there is no signal.

“Have you tried the WiFi?” Caroline asks, her voice no higher than a whisper. A woman in the front row turns her head in their direction at the noise, narrowing a pair of dark blue eyes. Caroline does not look in the woman's direction, nor does she glance at Laura—her eyes remain fixed on the film.

After re-entering the phone's passcode, Laura opens up the settings, searching for WiFi. “Huh,” she murmurs to herself. “Sure enough.” Indeed, there is WiFi available for

all guests within the Visitors Center. Now, too, seems like the perfect time to use it. She's sitting in a relatively comfortable seat with plenty of air-conditioning and no screaming children, but—

She glances over at her mother. Caroline sits enraptured as the documentary plays, the lights reflecting off her dark eyes—miners digging tunnels, people filing down into a deep, green hole—as the pamphlets from before rest lifelessly in her lap.

Laura slides her phone back into her pocket.

When the video finally concludes, Laura stands and stretches her arms over her head. She grimaces at the pops and snaps of muscles sliding into place after sitting perched on an uncomfortable plastic bench for so long.

“That was informative,” she says. She's not lying either.

Well, she's *mostly* not lying.

While the Visitors Center isn't exactly full of fluorescent bulbs and stunning glares, it feels positively blinding upon their subsequent exit from the museum. Laura blinks in rapid succession, clearing the dots and lines from her vision with little success. Caroline, meanwhile, is looking around the bustling building again. Whole new assortments of people now comprise the line for tickets.

“Do you want to go to the gift shop, Mom?”

Caroline smiles at her, reaching into her bag for even more pamphlets. Laura isn't even sure where she's getting them from at this point. “I'm going to run over to the Information Desk real quick, hon,” she says. “I'm going to see what all there is to do before our tour. Go ahead to the store—I'll catch up.”

With that, she disappears into a crowd of tie-dye t-shirts and khaki shorts.

Laura stands in place for a moment, rooted to the ground. People are swarming around her, pushing and shoving as they rush to their tour at the last possible second. Flustered voices snap on and off the intercom, reminding guests in weary tones that “the Historic Tour is departing from Shelter A in less than ten minutes.”

Three and a half more hours to go.

With another heavy sigh, Laura moves towards the gift store she saw earlier. It rests behind a large archway, bright fluorescent lights spilling out into the Visitors Center’s foyer. People are packed in thick clusters inside the store, families shuffling to share tokens with one another and children clutching stuffed animals between their chubby fingers. Laura watches as a store associate with long, black curls streaked with gray crouches to rest eye-level with two little girls. In her arms is a stuffed bunny rabbit that coos and hides its eyes from the children. Enraptured, the oldest of the pair reaches a hand out to pat the bunny’s back—

“Is that real?” Laura hears a man’s voice to her left ask in a hushed, reverent whisper. He is alone. He has a pair of rusting binoculars hanging from around his neck and his shirt is un-tucked in the back. Laura can’t look away from the speck of dirt gathered in the crevice of his nose.

As another child reaches a tentative hand out to pet the fur on the bunny’s back, the woman lifts her hand, laughing kindly, and displays the fact that the bunny is, indeed, a puppet. Laura glances over at the man, seeing his eyes crinkle in fleeting disappointment and his smile stretch into one of fond adoration.

“Lils,” he says, gesturing to one of the girls. “Did you pet the bunny rabbit?” One of the girls stumbles over, nearly tripping on a pair of untied shoelaces, and pulls on his arm.

“Daddy, Daddy,” she says, “we need to get a bunny rabbit for Mommy.”

Laura is not jealous of this little girl who has her father so clearly wrapped around her pinky finger, smirking up at him with satisfaction. No, she is not jealous, but something else boils uncomfortably in her stomach.

From her position in the store’s entryway, she can see her mother still deeply engaged in conversation with a young, attractive ranger. He towers over the short square counter of the information desk, a halo of light bouncing off his ginger curls from the building’s skylight. Caroline is nodding emphatically as he speaks, even more brochures and maps spread out on the counter before her.

“Can I help you find something, dear?”

A woman with short blonde hair approaches Laura, her hands clasped together in excitement. She is smiling, but there are exhausted creases lining the skin around her eyes. With amazement, Laura notes that her eyes do not match one another: one is a pale green and the other is a bright, vivid blue. She does not comment.

“Oh, no, I’m just looking,” Laura says. The woman nods her head, her gaze already flitting to the next couple entering the small gift store. “But thank you.” The woman does not seem to hear her.

The store is simple enough in design—small, cozy. She immediately gravitates towards the books, eager to find something to fill her time now that her phone no longer works. *Three and a half hours*. To her disappointment, however, all the books and their

spines indicate a proclivity towards the historic and scientific. There is not a single volume of romance or adventure in sight.

It's just as well, she supposes. She certainly doesn't have the money to actually purchase anything. College tuition payments are looming in the months ahead with an overwhelming number of zeroes hanging above the dotted line. She doesn't even have her anticipated track scholarship to fall back—a side effect of the past six-month's succession of catastrophes.

Moving away from the bookshelves, Laura steps around an older woman who is flipping through a cookbook with wide, expressive eyes.

There are people in every corner of the small store. Laura can see a family of five gathered together, perusing a chapter book on monarch butterflies with happy giggles and whispered laughter. On the other side of the room, near where Laura is trying unsuccessfully to navigate away from, there is an older man thumbing through a thick tome about the region's geography. In the space between, a group of girl scouts rushes between various displays and shelves. Some are wearing brown hats proclaiming them to be "Junior Rangers" and clenching matching certificates in their tiny hands. Others are sharing stories and tall-tales to their companions with wholehearted enthusiasm.

A new assortment of children now surrounds the woman and her rabbit puppet. They are each staring at it in equal fascination, holding their breath as the bunny's chest moves up and down, up and down. Even some parents, like the man from before, look on with both wonder and skepticism in their eyes. Laura feels special, in a way, as she watches them: as though she knows some grand secret.

Turning away, she spots her mother finally breaking free of the information desk. Her shoulders are squared, her lips quirked upwards.

“Laura!” Caroline calls, waving her over. Laura picks up her pace, leaving the store in her wake, as she goes to meet her mother.

“Did you find something to do?” Laura asks.

“We have a few different options,” Caroline says. At Laura’s inquiring look, she continues: “There are hiking trails all throughout the park. You can go to the River Styx, the ranger said, or make a circle through the nearby area... Oh, Laura, don’t make that face. A little nature would do you some good. But, I think I’ve got an even better idea than hiking.”

Laura nods, distracted, as she waits for her mother to finish.

“How would you feel about taking a kayak on the river?”

Part II:

Laura’s arms *ache* and her lungs *burn*.

She looks ahead, momentarily holding a hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. Her mother is halfway up the river, her head thrown back and basking in the warm light. Laura, meanwhile, is hanging back: taking her time.

When Laura dressed for the day earlier in the morning, still half-asleep, she never anticipated kayaking in her future. She’d thought, maybe, that they might reluctantly hike some trails and see some caves. But kayaking? It wasn’t even a consideration.

And yet.

“Are you having fun, Lore?”

Caroline is yards ahead of Laura, her dark skin shining with a thin layer of sweat and a healthy glow. Laura can't recall ever seeing her mother exhibit such euphoric behavior—endorphins thrumming through her fingertips. Laura doesn't know where her mother learned to kayak like an expert, but the truth is certainly evident in the way she seamlessly glides through the murky, green water.

She doesn't even seem winded in the slightest bit.

Laura, meanwhile, is breathing heavy. She can feel the top layers of her complexion burning and peeling, a courtesy gift of her father's pale skin. The sunscreen she applied before sliding her boat into the aptly named Green River nearly an hour ago consisted of haphazard and sparse dabs from a more than empty bottle of lotion in the back of Caroline's van. At the time, Laura felt confident that it was enough.

She was wrong, though, and has the itching skin to show for it.

The Green River certainly lives up to its name, she can't help but note as a fish brushes against her paddle, startling her. The surface of the water is coated in a thick, filmy green layer. It is grimy and largely impermeable: Laura can't see a bottom, cannot even fathom it at this point. As her kayak rocks back and forth, moving in rhythmic patterns to the breeze's melody, she can feel her underlying anxiety spiking. She is not afraid of water, really, but she is petrified of the great unknown: the idea of something lurking just beneath the surface, something unidentifiable in its mystery and intrigue. She is not eager to test the water, to dip in a toe or a finger, for even a fraction of a second.

Caroline, on the other hand, has no such concerns. She skims her fingers over the surface, relishing in the cool water. Laura wants to warn her, to tell her to keep all her

limbs inside the boat at all times, but she can't bring herself to utter the words and share her weakness.

They're too far away from one another anyway.

And, really, Caroline is fully capable of making her own decisions for both the good and the bad without Laura's input. After all, *Caroline* made the decision to thrust her heart into work, ignoring her family. *Caroline* made the decision to sign a stack of papers left neatly on the kitchen table in full sight for any unsuspecting passersby. *Caroline* decided to move on like nothing ever happened, like a family didn't shatter down the middle leaving one dangling shard of glass torn in two different directions, dripping blood on the countertop in clenched fists. And *Caroline* made the decision to flee to Mammoth Cave of all the inane, inexplicable places to seek her escape.

Caroline has made a lot of decisions.

And Laura? Didn't have much of a say in a single one.

"It's great, Mom," she says. Laura moves her arms, pushing and pulling the paddle to the left and then to the right. She inhales, shakes her arms out, and repeats the motion.

The water isn't the only thing that is green on the river. Green completely immerses them: it is in the blooming trees, on the grassy riverbank, and on the leaves fluttering in the breeze. Laura, who has only ever lived within the city's confines, can barely fathom it all. She doesn't understand where it comes from—this undeniable sense of *life*—or how it thrives, but she desperately wants to know *more*.

From the safety of land, she concedes. Or air-conditioning.

She brushes sweaty strands of hair from her eyes and picks up her pace. She doesn't want to be left behind again. She spends too much time getting left behind as it is.

“Look, Lore, do you see the deer?”

With Caroline just floating along, her ore dragging behind her bright red kayak in the water, Laura eventually manages to match her pace. She lifts her eyes, shielding them again from the sun, and follows the direction of her mother's pointed finger. Indeed, there is a fawn standing on the river's edge. It is small, inquisitive, and peeks its head out from behind a gargantuan green bush.

“Isn't she beautiful?” Caroline asks.

Laura can only nod her head, her eyes fixed on the small, dainty creature. She can see the animal's bones protruding along its spine, the joints of its wobbly knees shaking. There are flecks of white polka-dots scattered across its back, captured in a ray of sunshine breaking through the leaves. Laura momentarily ceases her paddling, stilling, and doesn't even pause to think of the precarious lurch that stems from the base of the boat. Instead, she is transfixed on the tiny creature, separated from its family, and forging a path of its own right.

It hits, perhaps, a bit too close to home.

The sound of a twig snapping somewhere within the woods startles both Laura and the fawn. It jumps, jerking its head to the side, before darting off into the woods—leaving behind a spray of kicked grass and dirt. Just like that, the spell is lifted and reality, and the rocking boat, comes crashing back down around Laura's ears.

“Nature,” Caroline says simply, “is a wonderful thing.”

Laura can only nod. She pulls the paddle again, a few quick strokes, before stopping suddenly. Her breath stalls in her chest as her eyes lock onto something further down the river.

“Mom,” Laura says. Caroline doesn’t look over, too distracted by watching the trail the fawn darted down moments ago. “*Mom.*”

With a grumble that Laura can just barely hear over the rushing water—and it is beginning to rush now, sprinkles of water splashing Laura’s arms and cheeks—Caroline turns her head in Laura’s direction and raises an inquisitive brow. “Yes, Laura?”

This time, it is Laura who has no words. Just as her mother did moments before, she raises a singular shaking finger and points ahead. Caroline stares at the finger, not comprehending, before finally following its point to something down the river.

“Oh,” she says softly. “Oh, no.”

Up ahead is a fork in the river. There is a miniature island of land in the very center with scraggly bushes perched on the dirty sand. It is not large or necessarily obtrusive, but it does force them to make a decision: to go left, following a path lined with tall, dark branches, or to go right—the unknown. The left side of the island is curved and winding, with a fallen log blocking most of the path. The bark is split down the middle with sharp talons extending into the green water. On the right, the path seems mostly clear. A portion of the island, however, with a towering oak tree, blocks the bulk of the river’s continuation from sight.

They have a fraction of a second to decide as the current picks up. What had been a steady, even flow—feeling as though the river was still and stagnant—is now moving

in desperate thrusts. Laura's kayak is drifting on its own, heading straight for the island's center, and she *has* to make a decision.

“What do we do?” Laura asks. “What do we do?” Her pulse is pounding erratically and her grip on her paddle is beginning to slip as her palms sweat.

Caroline glances back and forth between the two potential routes, her head swiveling as if on a spigot, before finally nodding her head to the right.

“It seems safest,” she explains. “There doesn't seem to be as many trees down.”

She's right to an extent, but it's still a risk.

Laura is almost tempted to plant her kayak right in the middle of this sudden mound of a miniature mountain. She would be willing to drag her kayak through the sand and mud and dirt, up and over the mountaintop, if it meant she wouldn't have to make a decision.

Her parents have been making all the decisions in her life lately.

She can make *this* decision for herself—even if her decision is simply not to decide.

Laura does not climb the mountain, though; instead, she follows the path her mother takes. Again.

And it damns her. Again.

They haven't seen any other people on the river since their departure over an hour ago. They rode in relative silence in the back of the kayak company's van—a white, clunky mini-van with “Mammoth Cave Canoe and Kayak” painted in bright red letters along its side, a trail of equally bright red kayaks and canoes stacked on a silver, rusting trailer following behind them—as a large family of six chattered nonstop with one

another. Laura and Caroline exchanged irritated glances throughout the ride, particularly when one of the six, a young girl of about five, started babbling shrilly. Her volume rose and rose as her family members raised their own voices to be heard over her shrieks.

Laura and Caroline had exited the van with ringing ears, watching as the family seamlessly positioned the boats on the slide down the river and each pushed off the ledge without any hesitation. Laura and Caroline had moved much slower in comparison. Their driver helped them get the boats down to the riverbed, held the boats steady as they each climbed in, and shouted encouraging words as they pushed off—paddles dragging against the floor of the river. With the singular exception of the family, they have encountered no one else on the winding, murky, watery path.

They have no way of knowing which way their predecessors went upon arriving at this obstacle, but the lack of shipwrecked kayaks bodes well, at least.

“Let’s do it,” Laura says, grimacing. “It’s now or never.”

Laura doesn’t take risks. In fact, she goes out of her way to avoid them. But this risk? It’s unavoidable. And her mother’s confidence in their decision is the only thing grounding her outside a watery grave.

At first, their decision even seems like a sound one.

They move to the right, allowing their kayaks to move with the current in a kind, companionable flow. Everything is absolutely fine.

Until it’s not.

They round the corner and suddenly all Laura can see is a catastrophe of fallen tree branches. They are everywhere, clouding her vision and obscuring her thoughts. They twist and curl up from the water, arms reaching for her to drag her into the foggy

depths below. Dead leaves are sprinkled atop the water's surface around them—browns, reds, and dark golds. They couldn't hang on anymore. What makes Laura think that she can do the same? She doesn't know what to do, where to go, or how to escape the damn trees that are suddenly impenetrable.

“Laura, stay to the left,” Caroline shouts. Laura can see her mother from a distance. She has successfully navigated away from the groping branches—steering left. But for Laura, it's too late. For the first time since their departure, Laura has a clear line of sight of the river's floor. The water is unbelievably shallow, the boat just barely refraining from scraping along the bottom. There are rocks, gravel of sorts, everywhere in a mirage of grays and whites and blacks. The current, to match the suddenly shallow depths, is picking up, too: faster and faster. No matter how hard Laura tries to slow her pace and steer to the left--towards the mound, towards her mother—the kayak simply won't cooperate. It's a lost cause that's becoming progressively more hopeless.

“Laura, stay calm!” Caroline shouts from her safe position away from the current and away from the branches. She does not make a move towards Laura. “Laura, stay calm.”

But she's not calm.

The sound of the river is roaring in her ears. She can hear every slap and smack of water caressing the kayak. Her thighs are drenched and her shorts stick uncomfortably to her skin, smelling of musk and dirt. Her grip on the ore is so tight that she can feel the wood breaking apart beneath her grip, splinters of wood poking her skin. The skin around her nails is startlingly white.

Before she can even take a second to catch her breath and hold it, she's colliding with one of the tree branches. The water is sucking and pulling and sucking and pulling and she can't think can't move can't do anything but panic and holler.

She thinks she can hear her mother shouting her name, but she can't be sure.

The boat pushes back against the branches, but the force of the water continues to propel it forward. It will not be stopped. Gravity, not for the first time in Laura's eighteen years, has failed her. The branches scratch at her cheeks, snagging in her hair, and knocking her sunglasses from her nose. Her eyes fill with tears, burning.

"Get out of the boat, Laura!"

In a frantic, clumsy attempt at avoiding the next succession of branches, she moves too far to the left and is derailed from the boat entirely. Her upper body falls into the river and her head sinks below the surface for a fraction of a second, as her legs remain tangled in the boat. A flood of green, foul-tasting water rushes into her open mouth. As the boat continues to glide through the branches, her hands scrape along the gravel of the river floor as she scrambles for traction—for *anything* to hold onto. Her palms sting and her nose runs.

"LAURA!" The voice is distant; abstract, like a painting hanging in a museum millions of miles away with more security surrounding it than Laura can ever envision.

Finally, *finally*, the boat clears itself from the branches. There are twigs in Laura's hair—she can feel them pulling and scratching—but she is out. Rather than seeing a cacophony of spindly branches, she can see the sun streaming out from behind the clouds rolling in. She has never been more grateful for the burning of her skin under its watchful eye.

The force of the jarring release from her entrapment dislodges her completely from the boat.

Her bottom smacks against the river's floor with a force that knocks the remaining breath from her lungs. The boat itself flips over completely, a drowned man drenched in red plastic, and she sees her bag—a simple drawstring bag containing her wallet and phone in tight vacuum-sealed baggies—floating away in the still rushing current.

“No,” she mutters to herself, slurring as water leaks from her lips. She lunges, grappling desperately for it, and shouts in surprised satisfaction as her fingers curl around the scratchy straps. She tumbles back into the water after securing her bag, sliding on her knees this time, scraping them, and sits. She breathes in and out, her head spinning.

“Laura, stand up! Grab the boat!”

She is not fully cognizant as she does just that. She climbs to her feet on shaky legs—they buckle beneath her more than once, sending her staggering back into the water—and rises. Her shorts and t-shirt are plastered to her like a skin, an unrelenting hold that would, perhaps, trigger her claustrophobia if she weren't so distracted and light-headed.

She takes one step forward, then another, as her water-logged sneakers drag with each movement. When she reaches the kayak, she places one hand on it and wraps her opposite arm around its belly, pulling it close.

It stops moving with the current.

“Laura, are you okay?”

With a watery cough, Laura begins walking—the water tugging at her knees—as she pulls the kayak behind her. She feels something slimy brush against her ankle, but she doesn't dare to think on it for more than a fleeting second. She keeps going. It's just like paddling: one foot, then the next—right, then left.

She reaches the island a few moments later. There is an incline and a beach covered in pale, sticky sand. She drags the boat onto the surface, dropping her bag into its drenched seat, and then drags some more. When the boat feels secure after several moments of heavy breathing and desperate pushing, she drops into the sand beside it, wrapping her arms around her legs.

“Laura? Are you alright?”

She lifts her gaze, blinking water and sand from her eyes, and looks at her mother. Caroline is still in her own kayak, off to the side, but she has managed to plant an ore in the sandy surface at the base of the mound. Her eyes are wide and red-rimmed. Her breathing is labored.

“Yeah,” Laura mumbles more to herself than to her mother, “I'm fine.”

And she is, really. Mostly.

Her heart had stopped and her brain had stalled, but she feels confident that they have resumed their respective responsibilities now. She is fine. Terrified, but fine.

If she is lying to herself, then surely no one else needs to know.

Caroline rises from her boat, standing on sturdy legs, and drags her own kayak to the sand beside Laura's. She does not seem winded by the effort at all.

But doesn't that just figure, Laura can't help but think. Everything Caroline has done, every decision that she has ever made, comes easily to her. Meanwhile, Laura has had to struggle and work and waver on every obstacle or path in the road—*river*.

When the boats are finally side-by-side, she takes a seat beside Laura.

"You scared me," Caroline says. "Don't ever do that to me again." She wraps an arm around Laura, attempting to pull her close, but Laura shrugs her shoulder—sliding to the right, away. Caroline's arm drops, her fingers falling into the sand. It is silent for a moment. Laura can only hear her own erratic breathing, water-logged wheezes, and the flutter of birds rustling trees and branches.

Laura guffaws.

"I'm fine, Mom," she says. "Really."

It is a rehearsed and stilted remark. Laura is rarely fine, but she's gotten much better at shouldering her own grief and complexities. It's much easier to move through life if your exterior is nothing but smooth surfaces.

"So much for the right route being the safer one," Laura mumbles. Her shoulders slouch inwards. She has caught her breath, yes, but she feels something sinking deep within her: a rumbling storm cloud that flares every time her gaze lands on her parked kayak.

"You're damn right," Caroline says, laughing. "Next time, we're just going *over* the mountain."

Laura doesn't say anything.

Caroline climbs to her feet, making her way over to her kayak and the bag containing sandwiches and water.

“You need to eat something, Lore,” she says. “You don’t want to be dehydrated. You’re looking a little peaky.”

Perhaps because she just took a plunge in a river that’s greener than the ominous growth in the back of Laura’s shower. Despite her irritation at her mom’s aloofness, she takes the sandwich and pulls a quick sip from the water bottle. The water is warm and tastes like metal. She drinks it anyway. At least it isn’t green.

Eventually, Caroline grows restless.

She keeps glancing at her watch, glancing around their island, and glancing back at the kayak resting in the sand. Laura knows that their tour departs in a few hours and that, really, they should get a move on.

But getting back into the kayak? Now? After all of that?

Her palms still sting where they scraped along the riverbed’s surface and had splinters imbed themselves in her skin. Her knees have scratches all along the caps, and her head is *pounding* in the summer sun.

Laura has no desire to go anywhere.

They can damn well miss their tour and set up their lives on this island—call it home. Maybe then Caroline would be home. Maybe then Caroline would pay attention to her beyond a goldfish needing flakes to survive. Honestly, though, Laura doubts even that would work.

“Lore,” Caroline says. Her tone is still soft, but Laura can hear the sharper undertones.

Before her tumble into the water, kayaking had been almost fun. Though her arms ached with the strain of paddling, Laura would grudgingly admit that she’d been enjoying

herself to a certain extent. It was satisfying to be in control of her own destiny, even if she went a modicum slower than her mother.

The fall destabilized all of that: it reaffirmed that she, yet again, was inept at making her own choices, leading her own way.

She has already had her independence robbed of her as the branches scrambled to pull at her limbs. She doesn't need to lose her independence again.

“We have to go,” Caroline says. She has packed up all the remains of their lunch: a half-empty bottle of warm water and zip-lock bags of bread crusts. She shoves them into her own draw-string bag, tossing it into the back of her kayak and then securing it. She does the same to Laura's previously displaced bag as well. “We can't stay here all day, Laura.”

But Caroline gets to stay at the office all day. Why is this any different?

It is only when Caroline is settled in the bed of her kayak, oar beginning to push off, that Laura jumps into action.

As terrified as she is of going back on the water, the prospect of being left behind is decidedly more terrifying.

Her movements are clumsy as she climbs back into the kayak, first shaking it free of any excess water that had gathered in its belly. The red plastic has warmed in the sun, burning the bare skin of her thighs once she slides into the seat. She breathes deep—in, out—as she pushes off from the beach.

The boat sways as she acclimates to being on the water again, rocking back and forth. She holds her breath, squeezing her eyes shut. Laura desperately wants to be on land again—anywhere else in the world.

She can hear a frog croaking from nearby. She can hear birds chirping as they fly past, a rumble of fluttering feathers and squawks. She can hear her mother's kayak slithering through the water smoothly and surely. She can hear the world turning, the earth spinning and moving on.

In the grand scheme of things, her collision with the entanglement of branches is minor. In her eighteen years, she has endured so much more than scratches and wounded pride. She has endured her absent mother, has endured her vanishing father. She can do anything she sets her mind to, of that she is sure, so why should this riverbed in the middle of a national park in Kentucky be the thing that brings her vision of the world crashing down around her?

If she has learned anything from this day, it is that the people who once called this place home endured so much more. Native Americans were killed and robbed of their homes, slaves were forced into service, and settlers were displaced to make room for a national park. It is a place of turnover and change.

Laura's already turned over, so perhaps she can change, too? Can conquer her fear?

Debatable.

But she can try. At least, she amends, until she's back on land.

If she never touches a kayak for the rest of her life? Perfect. Ideal, even. Until then? She's got to keep pushing and pulling forward if she wants to leave the river behind her.

And so she does.

She never quite matches Caroline's stride, but over time she picks up her pace. They don't encounter any more forks in the river, a fact that Laura is immensely grateful for.

They must have already been near the end of the route when Laura was submerged in the water, because a mere twenty minutes passes before the end is in sight.

Before they left, pushing kayaks in the water, the man driving the van had told them that "when they saw the ferry, to steer towards the left and get out on the cement block that links to a concrete path."

Laura can see that very cement block and concrete path. She can also see the staggering hill that it follows. Her calves burn at the mere idea of climbing it, tugging a heavy kayak behind her.

"We're at the end, Mom," she shouts. "We've got to get off at that landing."

It seems entirely implausible from this direction.

There is a rusting metal pole for people to grab onto as they climb out of kayaks that aren't supported by anything sound. It's another test of fate, Laura fears—a test of faith. Up ahead, though, Laura can see the family from before, the family of six, climbing up the hill, dragging their boats behind them. A group of boy scouts, dressed in browns and greens, helps the younger ones carry the heavy plastic shapes.

If all six of them can exit the river gracefully, return to land with nothing but shaky legs and breathless smiles, then surely Laura can do the same...

Nearly a half an hour later, Laura sits in the squishy backseat of another nondescript white van on the way back to where they first started: Mammoth Cave Canoe and Kayak, a private vendor just outside the park's boundaries. The man operating the

van had helped them load their kayaks into the attached trailer with assistance from the chattering boy scouts. Her shorts are still damp in her seat, but her hair has dried in the sunshine and she can feel warmth deep in her bones, even as the van's rattling air conditioner blows puffs of chilly air from ventilation shafts.

"We're going to have to find a new parking spot," Caroline jokes. They had driven to the kayak vendor earlier in the afternoon to avoid the long walk through an area with no sidewalks—only trees, bushes, and a singular two-lane road. "Maybe there will be less people at the Visitors Center now that the day's almost over."

It is nearly five o'clock in the afternoon. Their trip down the river had stretched to fill over two and a half hours of stress and exhaustion. Now their tour is just around the corner.

Part III:

There are already a handful of people gathered under Shelter B when they arrive nearly half an hour after departing from the Mammoth Cave Canoe and Kayak shop. The parking lot was distinctly less crammed when they arrived. Most of the tours for the day had already finished, the ranger at the information desk informed them as they passed through the Visitors Center for a final time. Their tour, apparently, was the last of the day.

Now, perched in the shade of the staggering structure of Shelter B, Laura has a prolonged moment to rest her legs before departing on a two-hour tour. After the time in the river, she is more than grateful for extended breathing time. Honestly, though, she would be more grateful for an opportunity to sleep for several hours first.

That, however, is not an option.

The shelter itself is comprised of the same brick and sandstone combination that makes up the Visitors Center, which is located only a few yards away. Benches fill the area beneath its ceiling, each of them cast in the shadows of the sinking sun. Despite the fact that the tour doesn't leave for another fifteen minutes or so, several people have already made themselves comfortable—Laura and her mother included.

Right in the center of the pavilion sits a family of four. The mother looks bone-weary as she slouches against the sandstone wall. Her eyes are half-open, and her dirty-blond hair is plastered in thick, wet strands against her skull. She looks as though she hasn't slept in months, her gray sweatshirt hanging off her small frame. Her husband, meanwhile, is a bundle of enthusiasm. His grin is exuberant as he tosses their squealing baby in the air, sunlight bouncing off the gold band nestled on his left hand's ring finger. The pair's oldest child, a young boy with flaming red hair that does not match either of his parents, is immersed in a video game that is clutched between his chubby, freckled fingers.

Two older men, well beyond middle-aged, sit at the bench adjacent to the young family. The older of the two has thinning salt-and-pepper hair with a pair of wire-framed glasses sliding down his thin nose. Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with him is a slightly younger man with a dark complexion. He is attractive, his thick beard and dark curls speckled with strands of gray. His eyes are tightly shut, as though he is resting his eyes, but Laura can see his pupils darting back and forth beneath his closed lids. His companion, the older man, leans over and whispers something in his ear causing the younger man to grin a blindingly white smile. They're beautiful. They're happy. Laura

wishes her mother could have made her father smile like that. Or that her father listened to her mother when she tried to pry him out of his shell in response.

A few benches over, Laura can see a middle-aged woman sparing the two men loathing glances. She is dressed in a white t-shirt with an American flag painted across it in broad strokes. Her solid white sneakers had smacked against the pavement with each step she took towards the shelter only moments ago. She doesn't say anything to the two men, though her disapproval radiates off of her in thick, potent waves. She bites her lip, clucks her tongue, but otherwise stays silent.

A ranger stands at the front of the shelter.

She is an older woman with slumped shoulders and graying hair that is knotted in a tight bun at the back of her head. She is absorbed in a deep conversation with a teenage girl who is gesturing emphatically with eyes that are stretched open wide. There is a beaming grin splitting the skin of the girl's cheeks, dimples erupting, but Laura can still see a slight quiver in her clasped hands—nervousness. Perhaps due to her conversation with someone she obviously respects, or maybe due to an apprehension about spending the next couple hours below ground.

Laura can certainly empathize with both emotions.

Once upon a time, Laura thrived on running: the opportunity to feel the wind tugging at her hair and the breath rushing from her lungs. She still remembers the taste of sour Gatorade on her tongue, paired with sweat pooling beneath her knees or under her arms. Before every race, Laura would stand in position, knees bent and spine arched, and quiver in her sneakers.

Her stomach would rumble in discomfort.

Her eyes would well with unshed tears.

Her heart would shatter in her ribcage.

She loved every minute of it.

The adrenaline was rooted in her bones and coursed through her heart. Racing, running, was *everything*.

Her sneakers are too tight now.

She hasn't replaced them.

That's what happens when everything falls apart around you and no one cares to notice: *you* lose the ability to care, too. And by not caring, you lose everything else around you—like your track scholarship, she thinks.

Back when her life was still normal, still hanging together by a thread, Laura looked at her coach the way this girl is looking at the park ranger now: as though she holds all the answers to life's questions and beyond.

It is somewhat nauseating, Laura thinks, turning away.

On the edge of the horizon, framed by the shadows of the setting sun, is a man. He, too, is dressed in the greens and grays of the ranger uniform with a tan hat placed gracefully on his head. His gait is both confident and reserved. He commands attention. Behind this ranger are a handful of other rangers, younger rangers, carrying old-fashioned gas lanterns. The lanterns hanging from their hands are tall and silver, creating a great racket as they bang and crash together.

Laura hadn't realized lanterns would be involved in the tour.

She doesn't know how to feel now. Because, on one hand, lanterns don't give off much light in the darkness—but holding one does grant her control of her own vision.

Caroline perches on the bench's edges, checking the time displayed on her inoperable cell phone. Sleepy, Laura moves to rest her head on Caroline's shoulder. They're not leaving yet, a few minutes of sleep surely wouldn't hurt anyone...

"Don't fall asleep, my dear," her mother whispers, running her fingers through Laura's tangled curls. Laura's hair has since dried from her time in the river, but her curls still smell of mildew and fall under her face in frizzy chaos. "This is why we came here."

More and more people trickle into the shelter as the sun continues to sink. Before long, there are people entirely surrounding Laura—front, back, left, right—and once they have all settled, their collective voices beginning to rise, the female ranger opens her mouth to speak.

A restless hush falls over the crowd after she clears her throat. One time. Then two.

"Good evening," she says. Her shoulders, which had been slumping inwards only moments before, are now straight and narrow—perfectly aligned with one another. She is in her element here, standing before a crowd. She rubs her hands together, beaming. "Are you ready for the adventure of a lifetime?"

No, Laura thinks to herself. She would be far more comfortable at home wrapped in a nice, warm blanket than preparing to face irritating insects and the great unknown.

"My name is Carla, and I will be your guide on this grand, gloomy, and peculiar expedition," she says. "We'll be trekking through history and the great unknown tonight, folks, so I hope you're wearing comfortable shoes." There is a smattering of quiet laughter. Laura eyes her tattered and damp Chucks wearily. She'd taken her socks and shoes off upon climbing into her mother's car earlier, but they haven't had enough time

to fully dry. To make matters worse, Laura hadn't even paused to consider when preparing that morning that she *might* need a change of clothes or a change of shocks. Hindsight always knows how to deliver a swift kick in the ass.

“You’ll see the salt-peter mines, the tuberculosis huts, the gothic avenue, and the bridal altar while we’re down there—all lit by the glow of your own lanterns,” Carla is saying. She gestures to where the lanterns sit in a single-file formation to her left. “Does anyone have any questions before we get started?”

Some people glance down at the concrete floor of the shelter, sitting completely still, while others spare fleeting looks at their companions. No one says anything.

“Alright, then,” Carla continues, “if no one has any questions, it’s time to talk logistics.”

Laura tries to catch her mother’s eye, but she is staring, enraptured, at the ranger.

“First things first, please be aware that you should not, under any circumstances, touch the bats in the cave,” the ranger says. “If one touches you, please let one of us know immediately. Before you worry, though, let me tell you one thing: they probably won’t even know you’re there—and vice versa. Bats are pretty solitary creatures and they like their space. You’ll also be carrying a giant light source, which is an even bigger turn-off in and of itself. The moral of this story, however, is that if you see a bat: don’t touch it. Period. There is always a chance that any one of the bats in this cave could be infected with rabies.” There are some concerned rumblings. “Now, we don’t say that to frighten or spook you, but it is a reality that you all deserve to be made aware of. If one of them happens to land on you or your clothing, please tell one of us as soon as possible. We’ll

get you sorted out in no time. Again, this is not a pressing reality, but, as they say, it's always better to be safe than sorry.

“Speaking of bats, though, Mammoth Cave has officially been reached by White Nose Syndrome. This is a disease that *only* impacts bats and cannot harm humans, but we do not want to risk it spreading any further. Subsequently, you'll be required to walk through sanitation mats at the conclusion of our tour this evening. You should have already crossed over them back at the Visitors Center without even realizing it earlier today. We only ask that you do this one more time. This is for the safety of our bats and the conservation of wildlife preserves. We really do sincerely appreciate your efforts to maintain this standard.”

She looks at them all, meeting people's eyes one-by-one, before continuing.

“Now, if you're at all claustrophobic or petrified of the dark, please be advised that the only light we'll have tonight is the lanterns behind me,” Carla says. “We won't be taking you through any tight crevices or passages, but if you're *at all* concerned, talk with one of us before going down. On that same note, if you're pregnant, have heart conditions, have asthma, or have any other pressing medical concerns, please note that performing emergency rescue operations from underground, especially this late in the day, can be risky and complicated. We'll do it for you in a heartbeat, but we want to put your health first and foremost to avoid any potential situations before they can happen.”

She pauses, glancing around at the group again. “Any questions?”

Again, no one says anything.

“Well, if anything comes to mind while we're down there, don't hesitate to ask,” she says. The other ranger steps forward, hands clasped behind his back. “This is Harry.

He'll be trailing our tour and making sure none of y'all get lost along the way." There are a few nervous chuckles. "Be sure to ask him some questions as we go, too. He's got some marvelous stories to tell if you're interested. And, I promise: you'll be interested.

She claps her hands together.

"With that being said, pair up and grab a lantern. We only have so many of them, so make sure you don't hoard them all within your party."

People shuffle forward, Laura among them, to grab their respective lanterns. Near the front of the group, Laura snatches one for her and her mother, grimacing at the surprisingly significant weight of it.

"Do you want me to carry it?" Caroline asks, as though she can sense Laura's discomfort. "I don't mind."

No, Laura does not want her mother to carry it. She may not be able to paddle down a river successfully, but she can damn well carry a lantern through a cave.

She shakes her head, "Nah, I'm fine. It's just all the kayaking today's done a number on my arms." She laughs a little, self-deprecating, and flexes the muscles on her free arm, watching in avid fascination as the guides go around the group pouring oil into the lanterns and lighting matches.

"Please do be careful with the lanterns," the male ranger, Harry, says. "The oil in here is hot. As tempting as it may be, refrain from swinging your lanterns as you walk. Keep them steady and even with your knees at all times."

With the added pressure in mind, the group moves forward, following in Carla's steps. Naturally, they all begin to fall into line with one another as they begin the steady track down to the entrance of the cave. As they descend the hill, they are surrounded on

all sides by staggeringly tall trees with blooming flowers and deep green leaves. The walk is steep and narrow, too, paved by concrete and equipped with well-placed benches for the individuals who need to pause and catch their breath—particularly on the way up, Laura imagines.

When they finally reach the mouth of the cave, the sky is streaked with finely painted orange and purple hues. The rocky structure hanging above the cave's entrance seems even more reminiscent of an abandoned ghost town than she had anticipated prior to their departure.

“Take a look at that sunlight, folks,” Carla says, as though she has been reading Laura's thoughts. “It's the last time you'll be seeing it for a while.”

And with that, they begin the steady hike down the stairs and into the mouth of the cave.

As they walk, Laura grasps tightly at the handrail. It is slick with condensation and cool to the touch. She wipes her hands on her shorts—now thankfully dry—when they reach the landing. She doesn't want to think about how many germs become acquainted with the slimy metal on a daily basis.

All around her, she can hear the calming sound of dripping water. To her left, a steady waterfall gushes from the ceiling and lands with quick splatters and steady drops against the rock. She hears a woman in front of her squeal, jumping to the side, only to see a tiny cricket with long, spindly legs in the place where her foot had almost landed.

“Relax,” Harry calls from the back of the line with a laugh, “it's probably just a cave cricket. They look like spiders, but they're harmless.”

Not appeased, the woman wraps her arms around her chest, squeezing, and continues onwards. Laura, who has no love lost for creepy-crawlies herself, continues forward without sparing a downward glance in the insect's direction. It certainly is reminiscent of a spider: just brighter, more translucent.

At the bottom of the stairs is a thick, iron door that seals off the cave from the outside world. Carla stops just before it and the procession comes to a halt.

“We can't have just anybody coming in at any time,” she explains. She pulls a key from her pocket and jams it into a hole in the door before pushing it ajar. The hinges shriek at the movement. “If you'll enter single file, please, that would be lovely.”

Upon entering the cave, the symphony of splashing water ceases almost immediately. They're inside, cocooned in brisk, cool air that is in stark contrast to the thick humidity outside. Laura, with her soggy shoes, shivers.

The walls are the color of light dirt, protruding at odd angles and sharp points. Laura thinks that if she were to run a hand across one of them, just the slightest bit, she would come away with a pricked finger and dollops of blood. She does not test this theory. Now, as the door closes behind them all, the only light stems from the cluster of lanterns gripped in their hands.

“It certainly lives up to the ‘gloomy’ reputation,” Caroline whispers from nearby.

“Here we go,” Carla says, holding her own lantern above her head so that she can properly see them all. “Nice and easy. Shall we begin the fun part?” Her words bounce off the walls, echoing in the darkness.

With that, they begin the march onwards. The group slowly inches forward, navigating over winding paths and hills. They are mere blobs of light immersed in impenetrable darkness.

Before too long, within mere minutes, they reach the saltpeter mines, crossing over a dangerous-looking set of wooden stairs, and stop for a moment to talk. Carla describes the history of the abandoned mines that are now covered in a fine layer of dust and dirt, before gesturing for the group to continue. Throughout the tour, they follow Carla's commanding lead and the glow of warm lantern light. They pass through the mines and see the Giant's Coffin. It is a thick slab of gray rock, larger than the living room in Caroline and Laura's small, cozy home. It is large enough to comfortably entomb several normal-sized men and certainly large enough for a giant.

Perhaps there *is* a giant, too. Laura can picture it all quite clearly: a lonely, forgotten giant of a child delegated to hiding in the shadows as tours pass through his home each and every day. He is never at ease to go about his life, can never seek an escape to the endless tunnels, for once those tourists leave—the bane of his existence—he is without light. Perhaps he sleeps in the coffin, then, for the enclosure it provides, like a womb. Carla spends little time at the coffin, however, and Laura is forced to leave her giant behind. Perhaps one day he, too, will find his escape. If the sealed door at the entrance doesn't stop him first.

Eventually, the group stumbles upon another ghost town in its own right. It is different from the mines and the coffin, however: these are *homes*.

“These are the tuberculosis huts,” Carla explains from the front of the group. “Back when tuberculosis was hitting the country hard, please got desperate and did some

desperate things. Some physicians at the time thought that the cave, with its lack of sunlight and ‘contaminated’ air, would make a world of difference for their patients. And it did make a difference—but not in the way that might have liked. Once they were down here, that desperation for a cure shifted into something else. They longed for sun, for air, and for companionship so much so that in some cases being in the cave may have actually sped up their already doomed fates.

“Ironically, they still allowed visitors to tour the cave while these folks were down here. The patients would wander out to the tourists, grasping at their hands for any sort of human contact—even if it was just a pinky nail grazing a hand. The doctors and guides, it seems, did not consider the reality of this contact spreading the disease and several tourists fell ill with tuberculosis themselves as a result,” Carla says. She holds the lantern closer to one of the huts, lighting up its innards. “Take a peak through the windows there if you like, but be careful not to touch. The residences are bit fragile with age.”

She steps back, gesturing the group forward.

Laura initially hangs back, unwilling to take a look at the residency of the doomed, but Caroline moves forward without thought, her eyes wide and inquisitive.

“It’s something else, isn’t it?”

Laura turns her head, surprised to see one of the men from earlier, the one with the glasses and salt-and-pepper hair, smiling softly at her. His companion is peering into the huts near where Laura’s mother is standing.

“I don’t much care for seeing villages of the damned,” he says. “I take it you’re the same way?” His voice is rough and gravelly in a way that she would not have

expected. He is dressed nicely, a scarf wrapped around his neck despite the summer heat, and a light t-shirt hanging from his chest.

“I’ve seen enough of them above ground,” she says.

“I’ll second that,” he says, nodding. “People love that kind of stuff, though. The more macabre it is, the more interesting.”

Laura laughs, “Yeah, that’s my mom for you. Give her a spooky or grim story and she’ll be a happy camper. I mean, just look at her now.” She gestures to where Caroline is peering through one of the hut’s entryways. Her brows are furrowed and her lips part in concentration. She seems to be attempting to read something that must be carved into the stone.

“Look, Lore!” Caroline calls. She gestures Laura over towards her and Laura spares a fleeting smile in the man’s direction. His attention has already snapped back to his own companion, though, and his eyes are lightening in the dim lamplight. Laura follows the path to meet her mother, quirked an eyebrow in her direction. Caroline points inside where there are only a handful of objects scattered around. There is a rocking chair in one corner and a crumbling, metal-framed bed. “Can you imagine being trapped in this ghost town?”

Laura doesn’t say it, but yes: she can imagine. Ever since her father left, all those months ago, their home has seemed eerily reminiscent of this lonely ghost town, this “village of the damned,” as the man from earlier had called it. Caroline has been moving through her days with delirious and unwavering drive, now more so than ever: to accomplish this, to accomplish that. She’s always felt the need to prove herself. After all, it is what formed the cracks in the lining that ultimately led to her divorce, the cave-in,

but this drive is something different, something chaotic. She has to prove to herself—to her coworkers, to her ex-husband, to the whole damn world—that she *can*, in fact, do anything she sets her mind to whether she has a ring on her finger or not. And she proves it, time and time again, but at what cost? Laura loves her mother more than anything else in the world, despite her admittedly sizable frustration with her, and thrives on her happiness. But sometimes Caroline’s happiness results in a gloom and loneliness that is not unlike what those individuals who once reached for thoughtless tourists in the darkness, desperate to achieve any form of prolonged contact, must have felt.

“It’s eerie, yeah,” Laura says. “Really eerie.”

The lantern in Laura’s hand creates a shadow on the hut, creating a vision of a ghostly imprint standing in the open doorway. They didn’t even have doors, Laura observes—didn’t have the luxury of privacy in their glorified tombs.

“Let’s move on, if you all are ready,” Carla says. Without waiting for a response, she is already continuing her progression through the narrow, dimly lit halls. “We’re almost to the Star Chamber: the main attraction of this tour—of this cave.”

The group moves forward, steadfast and unwavering, with the exception of a few stragglers near the back.

“Don’t worry,” Laura hears the trailing ranger, Harry, whisper to them. “We’re almost to the Chamber, folks. You’ll be able to stop and rest once we’re there.”

It has only been an hour since they started the tour, but Laura can empathize with the complaints. Her feet ache in her shoes, blisters forming where her skin has rubbed itself raw against the damp canvas, and her calves are cramping as she climbs each slope.

The idea of being able to sit and rest, even if it is only for a moment, is overwhelming in its appeal.

Harry's not wrong, too. In a few moments, Carla organizes them into a single-file line to enter what she boldly proclaims is the Star Chamber—the heart of the tour, of the cave. Up ahead, Laura can see a series of ancient wooden benches lining the cave's wall. She grimaces at the prospect of so much wood, all the splinters and cracks that undoubtedly line it. Still, though, it is an opportunity to sit. She'll take all the splinters in the world if it means getting to rest for a moment or two.

“Now, in just a second, y'all will be able to have a seat,” Carla says. “But first, I want you to leave your lanterns over here with me.”

Laura freezes, her grip on the lantern tightening. Leave it? Leave her lantern behind? Over the past hour, she has grown accustomed to its weighted presence and the comforting warmth—light—that it emits. To leave it behind without a second thought? To willingly plunge herself into darkness? Unfathomable.

“Lore, c'mon, leave it.”

Other people in the group seem hesitant to part from their lanterns, too. The young father of two that she had seen above ground is now eyeing his children as though without the light he will never see their faces again. Perhaps he is not wrong to do so.

“Lore, leave the lantern.”

Still, her grip does not slacken. At this point, most people have reluctantly dropped their pieces of tin and flame onto the dirt floor, eagerly making a break for the benches to rest their aching feet. Laura wants to join them, desperately, but she remains unrelenting. She can't do it. She is worried that she will blend into the darkness, lost

forever if she does. And, above all else, she can't bring herself to remove her control—not when she has only just managed to fully grasp it.

“Sweetheart.” She flinches as Harry appears by her side. “We promise that you’ll get it back. We won’t leave here without them. I promise you that, just as I promise that you’ll want to see this.”

She holds his gaze, brown eyes meeting brown eyes, before she finally places the lantern on the ground. She makes sure to put it off to the side, though, away from all the other lanterns so that she knows which one is *hers* when it’s time to pick them up again.

“Perfect,” Harry says. He smiles warmly at her, more light in the darkness. “Now go take a seat.”

Following her mother’s lead, Laura winds her way through the other departed lamps to take a seat on the front row, breathing a tremendous sigh of relief at finally having a moment to rest her feet. When expectant silence settles on the group, Carla resumes speaking.

“Welcome to the Star Chamber,” she says. She opens her arms wide, encouraging them all to take in their surroundings, to be amazed. Laura suppresses a bone-wrenching yawn. This new cavern that they’re in seems no different than any of the other ones they have visited in the last hour. Shadows flicker along the high walls near where the lanterns rest, but the ceiling and walls seem average at best. More brown. More gray. That’s that. “Now, I know what you’re all thinking. I can see the skeptical looks in your eyes. You’re wondering, ‘Hm, what’s the big deal? It’s a giant cavern, I’ll give you that, but it’s not much else.’ But that, my friends, is where you’re wrong.

“See, once upon a time, this place inspired hope in people. It inspired creativity and free-thinking. In fact, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who I’m sure several of you have heard of, once visited this part of the cave. He reference the Star Chamber in his story ‘Illusions.’ He said, and I quote, ‘I saw or seemed to see the night heaven thick with stars glimmering more or less brightly over our heads, and even what seemed a comet flaming among them [...] Some crystal specks in the black ceiling high overhead, reflecting the light of a half-hid lamp, yielded this magnificent effect.’ End quote. To really understand what Emerson is saying—is seeing—we must recreate the scene. I do ask that you all remain calm. Harry, if you’d please remove the lanterns,” Carla says.

Harry steps forward, grabbing a handful of lanterns, as Carla does the same.

“I promise that we’ll be back in a handful of minutes,” she says. “In the meantime, look up. Look up and see the world.”

The pair leave the benches behind, lanterns clashing and clanking together, and in a second’s time, the cavern, which had seemed so mundane only moments before, is plunged into complete and total darkness.

Laura’s heart stops.

She takes her last breath...

... and then takes another.

She blinks and blinks and blinks and blinks, but her sight does not return to her. She gropes to her left, desperate for some form of contact like a tuberculosis patient cut off from everything in the world, and latches onto her mother’s hand.

“Laura, my darling, relax. Please.”

But her mother doesn't understand. She can't possibly see how utterly dark this place is.

"Laura, look up. Look up."

She shakes her head, tears in her eyes. She is not even concerned that no one can see the petulant movement. It doesn't matter anyway.

"Please, Laura."

She breathes. One. Two. Three.

She looks up.

The breath that had gathered in her chest rushes from her lungs as she takes in the scene before her eyes.

"Wow," she whispers to no one in particular.

She doesn't know how or why, but suddenly she is outside—she must be. The stars twinkle overhead, shining and sparkling. She thinks, if she looks close enough, she can even see the shadow of Orion blinking down at her.

"It's incredible," she says. "How is this even possible?"

Each of her traveling companions seem equally enraptured by the mirage displayed before their eyes, if their silence can be believed. For a brief second, Laura wishes she could see their faces and the visions of excitement that must surely be painted across them. Seeing them would mean sacrificing this vision, though, and Laura doesn't think she is willing to give up such a thing in this lifetime.

Seconds pass.

Then moments, too.

Still, she cannot break her gaze from the sky. She never gets to see the stars from her apartment in the city. And she never, not even in a million years, could have imagined finally seeing them for the first time below ground. Surely there is a crack in the cave, a grand opening, that allows them to have this vision of the world?

How long they remain in the dark, cast in the glow of the stars above, Laura cannot say.

Suddenly, just over the horizon, Laura can see a certain speck of light shining in the darkness. She hears the sound of feet against the dirt, the clatter of metal frames clashing. The light grows bigger—larger and larger and larger—as the sun rises in the sky in brilliant hues of orange and yellow. It is almost overpowering.

“Good morning, friends,” Carla repeats. She is closer now than ever.

In fact, Laura can see the top of her hat just over the horizon.

Ah.

It’s not morning, not really, and the sun is not even climbing higher in the sky, chasing the stars away. This, instead, is lanterns coming back to life.

As Carla and Harry continue forward, Laura can see the lanterns in their hands. They are coming back to the group and they are bringing bottled sunshine with them. There are trails of wetness down Laura’s cheeks.

She isn’t listening as the rangers continue to speak, sharing jovial stories of similar reactions from tourists or their first experience in the Star Chamber years and years ago. Instead, Laura is too enraptured by the world that was painted across the cave’s ceiling, which is now so dull and despondent again, to process any words or thoughts.

Eventually, they all rise from their seats. Laura goes to grab her lantern, but is dismayed to find that it has been lost in the amorphous crowd of other people's lanterns from where Harry and Carla carried them. It shouldn't matter, really: they're all the same. However, at the same time, she has grown inexplicably attached to the piece of scrap metal that has carried her this far through the cave's tight passages and magnificent caverns to reach a world beyond.

Helpless, she grabs one of the remaining lanterns that hasn't already been snatched up. She meets the gaze of the woman with the American flag across her chest, just beating her to one of the last lanterns. Laura feels a sense of satisfaction as the woman rolls her eyes and mutters under her breath.

"So, what'd you think?" Caroline asks Laura as their group begins climbing out of the Star Chamber and making their way to their next destination: the gothic avenue and the bridal altar.

"That was amazing," Laura says simply. "I... I don't even have words for that."

Caroline laughs. She puts her arm around Laura's shoulder and this time Laura doesn't shrug her off.

"I wish we could see stars like that at home," she says. "There's always too many other lights to really see them."

Caroline nods. "Maybe one day you'll get out of the city, go somewhere smaller—see the stars every night." Caroline doesn't say that she never will, but Laura knows it's true. Louisville is her mother's home, from birth until death, and nothing will ever separate her from it. Despite their differences, Laura is inclined to agree. Leaving Louisville is something she's never imagined before, never really contemplated. She

might be leaving for college in another new city but always, deep in her heart, she anticipated coming right back.

As they explore the gothic avenue, they pass beneath the signatures of thousands of people who came before them. They are burnt into the stone ceilings from the flames of torches gripped in steady hands. The idea of marking up the cave as it is now is unfathomable—not to mention illegal—but Laura can't help but trail her eyes over the curling trails of signatures. These people came from a variety of backgrounds from all over the world and left their mark behind.

Even if Laura can't physically draw the lines of her name in the sandstone, she can at least leave her impression on the world—one day. One day, she will do something great, something worthy, and that will be good enough: a lantern in the darkness leaving behind cursive in black ash.

Eventually, they make it back to the cave's entrance after having completed their two hours underground. Their rangers wish them well, thank them for being a good group, and lead them back up the stairs from which they descended earlier. With creaking knees and throbbing ankles, Laura climbs and climbs and climbs up and up and up. She can feel the exhaustion deep within her soul. Her throat is reminiscent of sandpaper—parched and dry. She does not think she has ever been this tired in her entire life.

But this moment of departing the cool confines of the cave and walking into a world with a mirage of stars scattered across it is more than worth it.

“Look at them all, mom,” she whispers, pointing upwards. “They're beautiful.”

She turns her head, only to find Caroline already staring at her with a gentle smile.

“What?” Laura asks. She laughs, running a hand across her face, “Is there dirt on my face or something?”

Caroline grabs her hand, pulling her into a tight hug. “Thank you,” she murmurs into Laura’s ear. “Thank you for letting today happen.”

Warmth blooms in Laura’s chest.

“No, Mom,” she says. “Thank you.” And she really means it. The day has been interesting to say the least. It has been both terrifying and magical, all in the same stroke, and Laura is grateful for it. Being with her mother has been especially nice, too, though she is hesitant to admit such a thing to the woman herself. She’ll take the victories and the baby steps where she can get them.

After they have crossed the disinfectant mats and returned their lamps to the shelter at the top of the hill under the cool moonlight, mother and daughter make their way to their car. The park is largely abandoned despite being only eight o’clock in the evening. The silence, after listening to the lullaby of ringing lanterns for so long, is refreshing.

“Did you have fun today?” Caroline asks, fishing the keys from her drawstring bag. She sounds hesitant, unsure.

Laura nods emphatically. She yanks the passenger door open as the car’s lights flash and the locks click. She slides into the seat, dropping her bag to the floor, and reclines her head against the cool windowpane.

“Yes,” she says, “but, man, am I tired.” She pauses. “And *really* hungry.” Caroline laughs, a full-bodied sound that makes Laura grin. That alone made everything

worth it: seeing her mother laugh—something she didn't do enough prior to the divorce *or* after it.

They are both thriving off the day's adrenaline.

"I think I saw a sign for a McDonald's when we got off at the Interstate," Caroline says. "How about we go plug our arteries?" Laura is surprised but doesn't remark on the fact that normally Caroline always watches what she eats, always counting her calories to the decimal.

"Chicken nuggets and a McFlurry sound incredible right now, I'm not going to lie," Laura says. "Let's do it."

Caroline puts the car in drive, navigating the noisy van back onto the park's winding road. As they turn in and out of the curves, their bright lights illuminating the road, Laura closes her eyes.

In her pocket, though she does not realize it at the time, a voicemail saves to her inbox. She will not see it until much later as she and her mother sit in the McDonald's parking lot, dipping French fries into vanilla ice cream cones, snorting and guffawing at bad jokes and exhausted rants. Even later, as their car rumbles down the Interstate towards home, she will ignore the flashing number at the bottom of her screen.

She is content to live in the movement—live in a world consisting of only her and her mother. She is sure, undoubtedly and assuredly, that it can wait.

CHAPTER 2

ARTIFICIAL CABINS AT ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S BIRTHPLACE

"I happen, temporarily, to occupy the White House. I am a living witness that any of your children may come here as my father's child has."

— Abraham Lincoln, "Speech to the One Hundred Sixty-sixth Ohio Regiment."

Part I:

The car is silent.

Isaac sits in the backseat, his headphones plugged securely into his phone with strands of bright blue chord wrapped around his neck and over his ears. William can hear him erratically tapping his fingers against the windowpane, moving his head up and down. Up and Down. Despite the flurry of subtle movements, the song lyrics bubbling on his tongue, no words have slipped from his lips—not even a stray lyric or whispered beat.

Elaina has remained silent, too.

She is sitting in the passenger's seat with her forehead resting against the cool windowpane, her hair flying in the air-conditioning unit's weak breeze. She is dressed in a tight sweater and low-cut jeans, with toes that are trapped inside a pair of tight, stylish ankle boots. Her arms are folded over her chest. She has already voiced her opinions of the day and no longer deems William worthy of hearing any more.

William possesses no desire to fuel her fury any further than he already has.

Elaina, despite being closer to 40 than 30, often acts like a teenager as mumbled complaints escape her breath and shape her pale, pointed features into a pout. Her son, Isaac, has always played the adult in their relationship even as his voice cracks. They prefer it that way, Elaina once confided in William, and it's a balance that works for them.

It's a balance that leaves William struggling to react and to comprehend. He never really knows where he stands with them: is he the adult, the resident step-father figure, or is he the cool friend? In the five months that he has been with Elaina and Isaac, he still has not mastered the equation.

He certainly feels as though he looks the part for either role: step-father or cool friend. Gifted with an effervescent "baby face," as his mother always said, William's stature is long and gangly with an obtrusive nose and a tangled mess of blond hair, always standing up in the back. His hair, thankfully, is only just beginning to recede deeper into his hairline. He looks young for his age, 37, but the lines around his eyes seem to grow more pronounced with each passing day as his shoulders slump in on themselves.

With a sigh of relief, he can see the sign for Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace just up and over the horizon. The trio made the decision to visit Hodgenville, Kentucky, late in the day—a split decision, a pit-stop on a greater journey. The subsequent hours have only seemed to drag on (and on and on and on).

Elaina had recently received a job offer in Louisville, a place William never anticipated returning to, and she had wanted to evaluate the location before committing to the decision to uproot her son. William, meanwhile, is more than content in Owensboro.

It is large enough to remind him of home—rush hour traffic, tall buildings—but far enough away to keep his head clear.

He needs a clear head.

But, at the same time, he *can't* risk being controlling. He won't be the one making decisions, laying down laws and barriers where the road should be free and clear. He's learned his lessons the hard way. If Elaina wants to stretch her wings, immerse herself in a new career in a new town, then William will be damned if he doesn't support her.

He just hopes it doesn't end in tragedy this time.

“We're almost there, guys,” he says. He is practically shouting over the thundering music that Elaina had insisted on listening to earlier. He can hear the bass rattling his eardrums as nameless pop singers belt out ballads with lyrics he doesn't know over artificial beats.

Isaac doesn't look up. Elaina doesn't look over.

William keeps his eyes on the road.

Elaina hadn't wanted to make any stops on their drive to Louisville, but William's palms sweat at the idea of crossing back into the concrete metropolis. She had asked him to drive, smiling earnestly at him and saying, “If we're going to make this real, make *us* real, Will, we have to be a team. I want you to come with me—you and Isaac.” He couldn't say no as her pale blue eyes, so unlike the dark eyes that used to stare at him with frustration and guilt, and so he had nodded enthusiastically, telling her, “Absolutely! We'll make a day of it!”

But when he slid behind the wheel of the car, pulling his seat belt over his lanky chest, he paused. He couldn't just waltz back into that city like he had never abandoned

it. He couldn't just stroll through streets that neighbor his former home address as though he's not looking to set up another new place of residence. He couldn't do it.

He was already committed, though, and trapped in place by a seat belt digging at the skin of his neck.

Elaina was an understanding sort—mostly—but he'd never told her that Louisville was once his home, hadn't shared that crumbling piece of his soul yet. Telling her as she prepared to take a momentous step in her life away from waiting tables and into clerical work would be a nail in the coffin of their relationship. Sure, he's already gathered a handful of nails in the time they've spent together, but the more nails you gather, the tighter—the more sealed—that coffin becomes.

So, he suggested a pit stop.

He argued that it would be “a good chance to stretch our legs,” and, hey, “Isaac can learn some more about American history,” and “I haven't been here since I was a little boy!”

Elaina had rolled her eyes, arching a skeptical brow, and put the decision in Isaac's pre-pubescent hands. If he wanted to go, she said, then we'll go.

Isaac, though, had simply shrugged, then nodded slowly, and ultimately turned his attention back to the outdated smart phone in his hands.

And so here they are.

The road into Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace is relatively non-descript. There is a turn or two—maybe three—and then William's cramped Buick is pulling into the park with no resistance. A handful of cars are already packed into the lot, wrapped in an elaborate circle around some rocks and spindly trees. To William's dismay, the building

up ahead that proudly declares itself the “Visitors Center” is less than welcoming.

Though it certainly isn’t in immediate danger of crumbling on its foundation, it is older—rustic, if such a word were ever more appropriate—and simple. The paint on the door is peeling, the blinds hanging in the windows are a faded amber rather than pristine white. It’s a place that has been around for a while and lost some of its charm along the way.

William is almost willing to argue that the cabin off to the Visitors Center’s side, Mary Lincoln’s Cabin, the sign proclaims, is the nicer of the two buildings. It is certainly more charming from the outside, if nothing else. The “closed” sign hanging haphazardly from the cabin’s door is more than a little off-putting, though, and certainly definitive in its own right. William tries not to read too much into it.

He puts the car in park after sliding into one of the many vacant parking spaces. He pulls the keys from the ignition and swings the car door open, rolling and stretching his shoulders with his newfound freedom. William is a large man—long limbs and a 6’4” frame—and Elaina’s little Buick leaves little room to stretch.

Off to the side in the vibrant green grass, a dog is running in circles around its companion, a young girl of about 15. William desperately misses having a dog in the house, a wagging tail and an excited face to come home to at the end of the day. He’d tried, once, to convince Elaina and Isaac to consider getting a dog, but it had been largely unsuccessful. Isaac, apparently, is allergic to them.

This girl is beaming at the dog, her laughter carrying over to the car, and Elaina’s sharp blue eyes narrow in their general direction.

“Do they need to be so loud?” she asks. “I can feel a migraine coming on—that’s not helping.”

William doesn't respond. His ears are still rattling from the car's stereo.

Instead, he slams the car door and moves forward. The Visitors Center isn't too far of a walk.

"Why are we here again?"

William glances down, surprised to see Isaac maintaining his stride.

He's a small kid, really, with dark messy curls and smooth, unblemished skin.

William has heard other kids picking on him for it. "That black kid with the white momma," they broadcast in hushed tones to anyone who will listen, "and a daddy that ran."

William tried to step in once before, only once, when the tears were welling in the 13-year-old's dark eyes and the laughter of the other children was ringing in William's ears. He watched as Isaac's shoulders had straightened in a fraction of a second, his spine perfectly aligning, and he had looked forward—unseeing. It wasn't healthy, William knew, to bottle such feelings. But William had already screwed up one kid's life in his 37 years: he wasn't going to do it to another one.

So he kept his distance—gave Isaac space.

Every man in the world had his own battles to fight, after all, so why should Isaac be any different? But each time William picks Isaac up from school and hears those hateful words being uttered without thought or regard or punishment, he questions the merit of his decision.

Still, though, he never steps forward.

Unfortunately, now things are stilted and awkward between them. It's as if William failed some sort of test without ever even realizing he was taking it. But the fact

that Isaac is willing to talk to him now? It's an opportunity that William won't turn away from.

"Don't you like American history?" William asks.

"Not really," Isaac says. He has a singular headphone dangling from one ear, the bright blue cord a sharp contrast against his dark curls.

"Oh."

They're silent for a few moments as they continue their trek into the building, and William feels as though, yet again, he has failed another test.

"But Abe's pretty cool."

His head snaps down, catching Isaac's eyes. There's a grudging smile tugging at Isaac's lips, an unspoken joke, but William will take it. He'll take it in a heartbeat.

"He did a lot of good things for our country," William agrees. "He freed—"

"Yeah, yeah, he freed the slaves, issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and supported the 13th Amendment," Isaac interrupts. "Just because I don't *like* history, it doesn't mean that I don't *know* about it."

William laughs, a surprised bark, and smiles down at the boy. Isaac bleeds utter confidence in the words he speaks and the way his spine straightens out the curves and kinks. William wishes that he would share that confidence with the whole world.

"What're you guys talking about?" Elaina asks, finally catching up with them. She had stalled at the car, adjusting her makeup—bright pink lips, blue lines around her equally blue eyes—and checking her hair. He loves her, or, at least, he thinks he could, but her endless beauty regimens are tiresome. His ex-wife could always roll out of bed, hair squished to her head and face clean of makeup, and manage to steal his breath every

time. She was a natural beauty, and she knew it, too. Elaina, meanwhile, goes to great lengths to paint up her features, straightening her thin, bleached blonde hair.

“We’re talking about *la historia*, Mom,” Isaac says, rolling his Rs. “You know, that thing you never paid attention to in high school.”

She laughs, loud and full-bellied—evidently having recovered from that “burgeoning migraine.” The snort that escapes from her lips is entirely at odds with her made-up, composed appearance. “That’s what you think,” she says, reaching down to run a hand through her son’s curls. Curls that are so reminiscent of William’s daughter—so similar that sometimes he feels a deep pang in his gut, one he dismisses rather than fixate on for his own sake. Isaac’s face contorts at her touch, as though he is considering pushing her away, but he ultimately concedes to her mothering. He closes his eyes, smiling softly, and leans closer to her. William is confident that Elaina doesn’t miss this reaction either judging by the satisfied gleam in her eyes.

Isaac’s at the age where it is “uncool” and “dorky” to tolerate his mother. In this moment, away from the world and the other children, he is unrestrained in his affection for her.

It’s nice.

“I bet I can show both you fools up,” she says, brimming with confidence. “I *am* the one who got the most answers to last night’s *Jeopardy*, if you’ll recall.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Isaac mutters. “No one likes a show off.”

Elaina, for all that she often likes to downplay her intelligence, is as smart as a whip. She didn’t go to college, didn’t have the money for it, but she feeds off education. It’s one of the reasons why she has worked so diligently to make Isaac’s educational

pursuits a reality—class trips, extracurricular visits to local businesses, student government conventions, and honors society gatherings. Money is sparse in a struggling economy on a job that pays little more than minimum wage, but Elaina makes it work every day for her son without batting an eye.

“You’re just jealous that y’all don’t have my genius, my friends,” she says with a hearty laugh. “*Jealous.*” William catches Isaac rolling his eyes and, charmed, he does the same. Isaac laughs.

“Alright, gang, let’s get this jaunt through history over with,” Elaina says. “We’ve got rubber to burn and a big city to catch.”

With a dramatic flourish, she pushes open the door to the building, cringing at the creaking noise. The inside is about what William expected. On the left side of the room, there is a tall bronze statue of a family of four dressed in thick wools and bonnets. An infant Lincoln, presumably, and his family? William leans closer, wishing that he had his reading glasses, and skims through the panel, nodding as he goes along.

Just past the statues is a mural of the man himself on the wall, metaphorically glancing down at several artifacts enclosed in glass boxes that are on display. In the backdrop of Lincoln’s painting, in bright white cursive, it reads, “I happen, temporarily, to occupy the White House. I am a living witness that any of your children may come here as my father’s child has.”

Something squirms in the pit of William’s stomach, but he quickly turns away.

Elaina is standing in the middle of a miniature gift store when he finally rights himself. She is holding a stuffed owl in one hand—white fabric feathers ruffled, gold inquisitive eyes unblinking—and a shot glass in the other with tacky print across the

glass. When she sees William looking in her direction, she brightens considerably and holds them up for his inspection. He shakes his head, thinks better of it, and shrugs. It's her money. She can do whatever she likes with it, he reasons.

She frowns but continues perusing through the minimal shelves at a leisurely pace. The owl is still clutched in her hand, but the shot glass has returned to its home on the shelf.

“William! Will, come look at this!”

Isaac is hovering at the vacant ranger station, peering down at a display. “Passport to Your National Parks,” a little blue book proclaims in gold print.

“Isaac, you're thirteen,” William says, grinning, “what do you need a passport for? Where are you going to go?”

“It's not an actual passport,” Isaac retorts. “*Duh.*” He folds his arms over his chest, rolling his eyes. “It's a passport to the *national parks*. What kind of idiots would sell actual passports here?”

“You'd be surprised by what people think to do with those things,” a woman's voice says. William and Isaac look up, surprised, and meet a young woman's eyes. She is tall with dishwater blonde hair and a stout figure. She looks uncomfortable in her green and gray uniform, a bulky sweater draped over her shoulders despite the stifling heat. “Some people have tried to stamp their actual passports at this station. They don't even think—just whip it out.”

“Whoa,” Isaac says. “That's dumb.”

“No one ever said that people were smart,” the woman says quietly, leaning forward as though she is revealing the Department of the Interior's greatest secret—and

to a 13-year-old no less. Perhaps she is. She gestures at the little blue books again, “But, in all seriousness, these are actually really handy to have. You can take them to any national park in the United States and get them stamped. Keep a collection! And after you buy the first book, the rest of the stamps are completely free.”

It sounds appealing, really, but the practicality of it is almost nonexistent. And if things don’t work out with—

“Yeah, we don’t go anywhere,” Isaac says dismissively before William can open his mouth. His shoulders are beginning to crumble inwards again and that enduring pang returns to William’s stomach. “This trip’s just a flook.”

William’s gaze instantly drops. *Oh*. It’s one thing to have a passing thought, and another thing altogether to have someone else voice it. There is power in thoughts and the immediate secrecy they entail. There is only discomfort when someone steals that thought for themselves and then turns it against you.

“Well, they are here if you change your mind later,” the woman says not unkindly. “For now, there’s a fifteen-minute movie that’s about to stay playing over in the theatre. There’s still time if you want to catch it. Just take the hallway on your right and you’ll be good.”

With a quick “thank you” to the ranger, William turns to Isaac.

“You up for it?”

The pair moves into the miniature theatre with Elaina on their heels. The stuffed owl is nowhere in sight. The movie theatre, when they enter the dimly lit room, is larger than William expected it to be with comfortable-looking chairs filling the space. It is

probably no larger than the room they just exited, really, but it feels so much more significant.

It's a quick film—if one could even call it that. With no one else in the theatre, William feels no guilt for pulling out his phone and checking his text messages. He has one unanswered message, one he's been avoiding looking at, but nothing else is new. After all, he has no one to text him silly memes or selfies anymore. That doesn't mean he doesn't miss it, though.

Elaina leans over, nudging his shoulder.

“Where is everyone?” she says. She does not bother whispering. “There were a lot of cars in the parking lot, but this place is practically deserted.”

She isn't wrong, William thinks.

“Maybe they're outside? I mean, there are a couple trails to hike here, right?”

She shrugs, leaning back in her seat. “You're the one who brought us here, Will,” she says. “Shouldn't you have known what you were getting us into?” There is no edge to her words, not that Will can blatantly spot, but he still grimaces. Sometimes, if he's being completely honest with himself, he finds Elaina to be quite exhausting. He only allows himself to think on it for a moment before dismissing it entirely. At least she's *here*, he thinks.

They first met five months ago when William was still licking his wounds in a bar just inside Owensboro. Being on his own and in a new city was still a new feeling, an especially unsettling one, and she had been so willing to listen to his story. She had sat there, nodding along as he regaled her with the generalities of his life's tragedies in

between increasingly frequent shots of tequila. By the end of the night, they were stumbling back to his empty apartment and trading cell phone numbers in the morning.

It wasn't the most eloquent of beginnings, as William's brother had said upon hearing the news of William's newest relationship. You don't go from seventeen years of marriage to a casual fling like that, man, he'd said. And William had listened, agreed, and prepared himself to confront Elaina about it later in the week. He didn't want to hurt her, but she was *so* different from his ex-wife. They were as opposite as opposite came, which was part of the initial appeal. He saw Elaina and didn't feel weighted down by responsibility: she could be fun, lighthearted, as she shared her own stories of quirky customers at her diner down the street. Elaina was simple, easy, and refreshing. Still, though, he resolved himself: his brother was right—the *relationship* wasn't right.

He'd had everything scheduled and coordinated down to the amount he'd leave for the waitresses' tip on the night he meant to leave her, he remembers. He and Elaina agreed to meet for dinner one night at a local Mexican restaurant. It was the perfect place to cut ties with her: he only had to make it through a dinner aided by margaritas and cheap beer, and his half-hearted apologies would be swallowed by the commotion of the mariachi band who played on the weekends.

And it worked—for a little while, at least.

They made it through drinks.

They made it through chips and salsa.

They made it through the meal.

But just as they were waiting for the check and the band was gearing up for their next set, the words on the tip of William's tongue, Elaina got the call. Her young son, it

seemed—a son William only vaguely knew she had—had left school with a blackened eye, the babysitter said, and was now refusing to leave his room. Elaina had been devastated. Her hands shook as she fumbled with her wallet and car keys, a gray cloud amidst walls painted pink and orange, stuttering frantic apologies as she went.

He could have left her, then and there, claiming it “was all too much,” but he wound up driving her home, intrigue pulling at his conscious. He needed to end things, he knew he did, but he also knew that it was not the time—even if it had taken nearly all his courage to get this far.

When he’d parked the car in the driveway of a small white house with blue shutters, he’d watched as Elaina staggered to the door in impractical heels and a dress that was creeping up the back of her thighs. And when she invited him inside, he accepted—if only to provide additional comfort in her distress. And when the little boy ultimately stumbled from his room at his mother’s call with bright red eyes and tear-stained cheeks, William knew, in that moment, that wasn’t going anywhere any time soon.

Now, looking at the boy and his mother, both laughing at some ridiculous joke that he hadn’t heard, William feels content with his decisions.

Well, most of them.

He’s screwed up a lot in his life, but he has made a promise to himself that this time will be different.

“Can we go outside now?” Isaac asks after the documentary’s credits roll. They are meandering through the miniscule museum, minimalistic as it may be, and he is bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Please, Will?”

Elaina looks at him, nodding. Her mood seems to have improved since they got out of the car.

“Sure, why not?” he says.

Part II:

Once they step back outside, the humidity thick, they're faced with several options that all lead to the monument at the top of the hill. If the Visitors Center is unextraordinary, the main attraction is something else entirely. It is a giant, stone building with columns lining its front. It is two stories wide and two stories tall, resting atop a seemingly never-ending set of stairs.

“We can take the handicap route,” William says, eyeing the stairs with apprehension, “or we can go the traditional route and, um, take the stairs. It's up to y'all.”

Isaac stands still for a moment, contemplating, before pointing upwards.

“Stairs,” he says. “Definitely the stairs. We've got to get ‘the whole experience.’” He glances at his mother and William as though daring either of them to defy his commands. Neither of them says a word. “So, shall we?”

The park in the height of summer is certainly a sight to behold. Pink and yellow flowers are blooming and behemoth trees cast great shadows around the lawn. Up ahead of them, framed by the flashes of orange and yellow sunshine filtering through a mirage of tree limbs, is the monument itself. It is eerily reminiscent of its companion in Washington D.C., at least as far as William can tell, though it is certainly somewhat smaller in scale.

“So many steps,” Elaina mutters under her breath. She is glancing back and forth between the steps of the monument and the shoes currently pinching her toes. “Why are there so many steps?”

“It’s good for you, Lane,” William says, dropping an arm over her shoulder just as she had done to her son earlier.

“Actually,” Isaac says, maneuvering between them, “it’s because Abe lived 56 years. Ergo, 56 steps.” Isaac shrugs at their skeptical expressions. “I read, you know,” he says with a shrug. “And, um, go to school. Unlike you heathens.” And with that, he moves forward, taking a running leap at the stairs. He jumps them two at a time, laughing as he goes, and leaves William and Elaina much further behind in his wake.

Isaac reaches the top in what feels like a fraction of an instance and stands there tapping his foot relentlessly. When Elaina and William finally reach the top, too, he grabs Elaina’s hand and tugs. “The entrance is in the back of the building,” he says. “There’s a sign and everything.”

The door to the building is wide open once they reach the back, and Isaac is the first to step inside. He is leading them through this journey.

The first thing that William notices upon entering the building and its singular room is the smell.

It smells of ancient days and forgotten memories.

Comprised entirely of splintering wooden beams and mismatched logs, the cabin—the infamous cabin, the reason why they’re all here—sits in the center. The room itself, the area surrounding the cabin, is arguably no bigger than their living room back in Owensboro. The walls are made of white marble with thick black smudges engrained into

the otherwise pristine surface. What the room's infrastructure lacks in perimeter, though, it compensates for in height. The walls climb, soaring a couple stories in one singular open skyline. If a spider were to begin climbing at the dirt-encrusted floorboards, moving one long, spindly leg at a time, it would surely take hours for it to confidently reach the top—looking down at the clusters of people intermittently crossing over the building's threshold.

It is a singular room within a building with an entire cabin within the room.

The cabin itself is nothing spectacular or unusual. It is roped off with crimson velvet and gold tassels.

William, who once spent a lifetime constructing Lincoln Log houses with his daughter—again, the pang returns—is instantly struck by a gut-curdling wave of nostalgia. Logs are stacked, one on top of the other, in a smattering of sizes and colors. It is altogether mundane, average, and no different than any other cabin from the 19th century.

When William rounds the corner, keeping his distance from the cabin, a lonely window and doorframe come into view. Suddenly, William can see inside the cabin—can see the singular room that comprises the heart of the aging structure. There is a solitary bed, a smattering of coats hanging from hooks, and a table positioned near the cabin's hearth. Adjacent to the window is a protruding fireplace that has undoubtedly been closed off for several years. If, of course, it ever even worked at all.

“This is a re-creation, right?” he asks the guide who is standing off to the side. It is a young man with a scraggly beard and a bored expression. His hands are folded

behind his back and he looks distracted, as though he'd rather be anywhere else than here.

“That’s right,” the man says. His voice is dry, as though he has told this story time and time again. The contrast between this man and the friendly woman in the Visitors Center is startling. “For a long time, folks thought this was the real deal. However, eventually, they found that the cabin was simply *too young* to be the home they thought it was.”

And yet the cabin remains.

The ranger does not offer any additional insights, checking his watch instead.

“That feels like a bit of a rip off,” Elaina mutters as they leave the building after three spins around the cabin. There are only so many times that they can circle the tiny cabin’s perimeter, inspecting the various cobwebs, before they have seen enough. “It’s not even the real thing.”

Isaac shoves his hands into his pockets, shrugging.

“You know, though, it kind of makes sense,” he says. “I mean, Lincoln was born here, yeah, but he didn’t really live here? It was just kind of like a tiny pit-stop in the grand scheme of things.”

William, who spent a significant portion of his undergraduate years diving into literary texts, does not miss the underlying symbolism. This park is ultimately just a pit-stop on a greater road trip. For them, they’re trying to reach Louisville. For Lincoln, he was trying to reach notoriety and justice. The pit-stops are not the ultimate end goal, true, but they still happened—they’re still a memory.

If he's being honest with himself, sometimes William wonders if he is on his own pit-stop right now. Perhaps he has a greater purpose—another life ahead of him—and his current reality is just a fleeting moment on the road to that final destination. Or, maybe, his old life was the pit-stop: important, undeniably, but not the story's climax. Not yet, at least.

How could Abraham Lincoln have known that this tiny splotch of land in Kentucky would be a pit-stop? How could he have known that it wasn't his destiny to remain rooted to this very soil for the rest of the days?

He couldn't have known.

But can you ever?

Part III:

When they ultimately return to the bottom of the stairs, having seen and experienced the cabin, William isn't sure what else there is to *do*. Stopping at the park had initially seemed like the perfect thing to do to subtract seconds from the day, but he is running out of options. They've seen the cabin, but now what?

Fortunately, somehow, Isaac remains attuned to his thoughts.

“We haven't seen the Sinking Spring yet, guys,” he says. “It's just down there!” He points a wobbly winger in the direction of what looks, at first glance, like nothing more than a rather obtrusive hole in the ground. “Abe took his first drink of water there!”

“How do you know these things?” William says, surprised. “You sure are a fountain of knowledge for someone who ‘doesn't like history all that much.’”

“It was on the video, Will,” Isaac says, rolling his eyes. “If you hadn’t spent the whole movie on your phone maybe you’d have learned something, huh?” A smirk is spreading across face, consuming his features. “So c’mon, let’s go down!”

“I think I’m going to pass on that,” Elaina says from behind them. William turns in surprise to see her perched on one of the many stairs with her feet sprawled out in front of her and her shoes dangling from her fingertips. “If I climb any more stairs, I think I might just die. You boys have fun with that.”

“You really don’t want to see the spring?” William asks.

“Not even a little bit,” she says simply. “I can hear it from here—that’s enough for me.”

And she’s right.

William hadn’t noticed it before, but he can faintly hear the gurgling and splashing of water slapping against rock. It’s a soothing sound, not unlike the noise the bathtub makes when it is filling with warm, soapy water after a long, miserable day. In another life, William would come home with aching feet after standing on them for hours at a time and pour himself a bath filled with bright, scented bubbles. It had been a joke with his ex-wife, something they’d always laugh about as she accused him of stealing her bubble bath and scented candles: “Just go buy your own, Will.” He’d worked retail once upon a time, but this was different: stationary. Despite earning a bachelor’s degree and then a master’s degree, William always struggled to achieve the same success of the others in his life. His wife achieved at everything she touched, and his siblings both found jobs in politics and Hollywood: glamour and notoriety in equal spades. William, meanwhile, found his calling in social work. The pay was lackluster, but he loved his job

and during the day often felt like he was making a difference for once in his life. But at night and in the bath, things were different: he had time to think. For each rescued child, he felt he deserved a bubble in the bath. For each decimated family, he needed a bubble in the bath as his own personal consolation.

When he left Louisville behind in his desperate flee, he left his job behind, too. It's been nice to take a break, nice to be shielded from the atrocities of the world, but he misses it—misses making a difference.

Perhaps he'll return to his job if he follows Elaina and Isaac back to Louisville.

Perhaps he'll...

Well, perhaps he'll decide at a later date.

"It's a baby cave, Will," Isaac says, tugging at his shirtsleeve, "c'mon!"

William follows in Isaac's lead as they descend the winding stone stairs into the Sinking Spring. Moss lines the surrounding stonewalls and the rushing water crescendos into a roar. William can hardly hear Isaac's footsteps before long. The area at the bottom of the stairs is dark, almost completely concealed from the sunshine, but William can still see shades of vibrant blue peaking out from above.

There is a railing surrounding the area where water drips and rushes. William wraps his fingers around it, leaning forward and looking down. It's simple, he thinks, but undeniably peaceful.

The pair are quiet for a moment. Then two.

"It's alright, you know," Isaac finally says after another few minutes have passed.

"Hm?"

"It's alright that you miss them."

Silence.

“Really. It’s all right. They were your family. They still are.”

Silence.

“Just because you miss them, it doesn’t mean that you don’t care about us. It’s different, but also kind of the same.”

“Isaac, I...”

“My dad left when I was real little, you know. I mean, of course you know. Everyone knows. But my dad left, and I never heard from him again except for a couple cards wishing me happy birthday. Did you know that they always come a month later than my actual birthday? I don’t think he even notices.

“But, I think, he does love me and Mom. On some level. He just doesn’t know how to show it? And so it’s always been me and her. We get by. We do our own thing. I’ve never needed a dad because I had Mom. And that was more than enough.

“And then you came along. And at first I was angry because Mom’s dated other guys before and they’ve never actually stuck around. They came, they went, they saw, and that was it. End of story. Sometimes I never even learned their names. But then you came along and something was... different.”

“Isaac, really, we...”

“I’m not stupid. I know you feel guilty about abandoning your other kid. I see it when you look at me, like you’re ready to fight all my battles ‘cause that’s what you’re used to doing: you’re the dad. You protect. But isn’t it weird that we’ve known you for so long and you’ve never even mentioned her name? Never brought her over? ‘Cause I know that my dad doesn’t mention me to people. Ever. Probably? But you’re not like my

dad. You're *good*. And just because you left, it doesn't mean you're *bad*; it doesn't mean you're like him. Life's hard. Real hard. And if your kid knows you and loves you, they'll get it. Because I get my dad, and I love him anyway. I'm betting your kid feels the same."

There are rivers of water on William's cheeks.

It is not because of the spring.

"I'm really glad you're here, Will. You make mom happy—real happy, happier than I've ever seen her. It's good. And," Isaac pauses, gathering his breath, keeping his gaze steady on the spring, "I don't want you to leave. Mom doesn't want to leave. But you can do both, Will. You can be a father and you can be a friend. You can be a stepfather. It's not a one or the other sort of deal."

For a second—or two or three—there is only silence between the pair. Isaac's breathing is calm, but William's heart feels as though it has just finished a marathon sprint, erratically carving a hole in his chest.

In a flurry of movement, William grabs Isaac by the shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug.

"Thank you," he murmurs. His voice is scratchy, wet. "Thank you, Isaac."

Isaac tolerates the embrace for a time before eventually laughing, shoving William away.

"Dude," he says, "I *know* that you're a great dad. Just because you've been my dad for a few months doesn't mean you're not someone else's dad, too. You can be both. I promise." William's cheeks ache with the force of his grin, but he can't seem to wipe it from his face. He doesn't really want to, though. "Even if you are a massive dork," Isaac murmurs under his breath, causing William to bark with laughter.

“Takes one to know one,” William says, reaching a hand out to ruffle Isaac’s curls. He can hear a group of people descending the stairs, an assortment of college students from the look of them, and he nods his head in their direction. “Let’s go find your mom, yeah? She’s gonna think we drowned down here.”

“If we managed to somehow drown in a tiny lil’ spring, I think she ought to be proud of us,” Isaac says, but he takes another running leap for the stairs. He is fast and agile—quick on his feet. Sometimes he reminds William so much of another little track star with dark curls that his chest threatens to cave in on itself. The thought has always caused him pain but maybe, just maybe, it doesn’t have to anymore.

“What took you so long?” he hears Isaac say as he eventually emerges from the sinkhole’s cover, breathing heavy from the climb. Isaac is leaning against the rail guard, his arms folded over his chest. “Mom’s talking to someone.”

Indeed she is, William notes.

Elaina has relocated from her initial spot on the stairs and is now running a hand through a dog’s fur. She is nodding along as another woman speaks, her face somber. Her new companion is an older woman with disheveled, oversized clothing hanging off her frame. There is a burgeoning bruise just beginning to form around her left eye. Her hands, the tips of her fingers painted with chipped black polish, shake from their position in her lap.

“I wonder what they’re talking about,” Isaac says. “It looks serious.”

And it probably is.

“Come on, kid, let’s go to the car,” William says. “I think we’ve spent enough time at the park today.”

Leaving now means that, in only a fraction of an hour, he'll be in the same city as his former home. It means that he'll be faced with his past, his decisions, and all the mistakes he has made. He's not ready for it, not by a long shot, but it's time.

It's time to face the music.

Or the slammed door. Whichever comes first.

Not too long after they have settled in the car, Isaac falls asleep. His head bobs against the window frame on his left, causing William to grin at the picture he makes in his rearview mirror. It was all the steps, he thinks.

Elaina arrives at the car just as clouds are beginning to rumble overhead. She hasn't been gone for too long, but she looks positively fatigued upon her arrival. She is missing her sweater and now only wears a simple yellow t-shirt.

"Everything okay?" he whispers to her as he shifts gear, putting the car in reverse.

She is quiet, contemplative. It is only when the Buick is pulling out of the parking lot, leaving the park behind, that she finally speaks: "Her husband beats her." She pauses. "Or, well, he did. She left him just the other day. She's making her way to her sister's place in Indiana, but she still has a ways to go. She wanted to stretch her legs and give her dog a chance to roam around a little."

Another pit-stop, then.

"Is she okay?"

"No, but she will be. One day."

Elaina has seen a number of her things in her time working at the diner, as she has told him in great detail before. She has seen happy friends crammed into booths, pitchers of cheap beer before them, just as often as she has seen women with bruised skin and red

eyes. She has even been one of those women herself, she once revealed to him after he caught her hanging up the phone with another domestic abuse survivor.

It's not something she's proud of, she'd said, and it happened with another man long before Isaac and long before Isaac's father. But it happened. In the time since, though, she has volunteered at local shelters, has helped in any ways that she could. Sometimes it's not enough and sometimes it's too late, but Elaina keeps pushing forward.

It's something he loves about her.

Because he does love her, he thinks. Not enough to say it, not yet, but one day.

As the car creeps closer and closer to Louisville, William can feel his stomach twisting in painful knots, but he keeps driving. Isaac is still asleep in the backseat, his neck tilted at an uncomfortable angle. Elaina, too, now has her head resting against her headrest in an almost a mirror image of her son. Her mouth is open and little sighs interspersed with soft snores occasionally pass through her lips.

Although his stomach still burns with the acid of anxiety, William can't ignore the warmth blooming in his chest. These two people are flawed, human, and absolutely breathtaking. But just because he sees a future with this family, his new family, it doesn't mean that he can forget his old one.

A few hours later, he is sitting behind the wheel, parked under the hotel portico as Isaac and Elaina go through the process of checking in, when he pulls out his phone.

With shaking hands, he enters the numbers he knows by heart, holds the phone to his ear, and waits.

It rings. And rings. And rings. And rings.

Finally, just as he is beginning to give up, he hears it: "Hi, you've reached Laura

Johnson. Leave your name, number, and a reason, and I'll probably get back to you.
Probably." BEEP.

He sighs, wiping his eyes, and begins to talk.

"Laura, I wanted to say that—"

fin.

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