HAILING A TAXI IN HAMAMATSU, AND OTHERS
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

and

WHEN IT HAPPENS
A NOVEL EXCERPT

by
Natalie Matheny

A thesis submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing.

Baltimore, Maryland
May 2024

© 2024 Natalie Matheny
All Rights Reserved
Abstract

“Hailing a Taxi in Hamamatsu, and Others” is a collection of short stories centered around the macabre, and the notion that there truly is something lurking in the shadows. In this collection, author Natalie Matheny explores the world of literal and figurative ghosts. Each of the stories in this collection present a protagonist struggling with their own inner demons, while simultaneously trying to make sense of unexplainable and supernatural events. The second piece of this collection, “When It Happens”, is an excerpt from a larger work of fiction. Four strangers from vastly different walks of life are brought together by a sudden catastrophic event that sends the world into havoc, and forces the strangers to acknowledge the creatures that lie within the folds of our perceived understanding.

Both parts of this thesis aim to interweave supernatural elements while challenging the boundaries of what it means to be human.

Thesis Advisor:

Dave Housley
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....................................................................................................................1
2. Hailing a Taxi in Hamamatsu .......................................................................................3
3. See You Soon ..................................................................................................................12
4. To Be So Lonely .............................................................................................................21
5. When It Happens, a novel excerpt .............................................................................39
6. Biography ......................................................................................................................53
Introduction

The inspiration for my selection of short stories, entitled “Hailing a Taxi in Hamamatsu, and others”, first came from an innate fascination with ghosts. Admittedly, I’m conveniently superstitious and quick to write off anything unexplainable that happens in my daily life as a “ghost” in a completely unserious manner. However, there have been certain events or occurrences that I can’t totally disprove, and those kernels of the unknown fuel my curiosity. What began to emerge more prominently as I wrote this collection are the presence of more subversive ghosts—the emotional ones, that haunt all of us.

The collection’s namesake, “Hailing a Taxi in Hamamatsu” follows a lonely, elderly taxi driver named Mr. Hirata, who encounters a mysterious passenger following a major natural disaster. In “See You Soon”, a woman named Rachel grapples with grief after the recent death of her husband, and the notion that Ryan’s presence may still remain in their newly constructed home. “To Be So Lonely” follows June, an emotionally neglected young girl growing up in a haunted house. One day, she meets a demon named Loneliness, and June must decide whether she will become another ghost in the house, or vanquish Loneliness for good. Each of the stories in this collection aims to bridge the protagonists’ real-world feelings of sadness, grief, and estrangement with the supernatural.

The second portion of my thesis is an excerpt of my science fiction horror novel, When It Happens. The story follows four alternating points of view: Jeongmin, Hara, Soojin, and Yongsik, all from vastly different walks of life, on their morning commute. A sudden apocalyptic event occurs and the four must band together to survive, and what they discover changes everything they thought they knew about what it means to be human.
The overarching themes of my thesis include solitude, loss, the desire for connection, and the willpower of the human spirit.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dave Housley, for his encouraging words and thorough feedback that has helped this collection fully blossom. I would also like to thank my husband for pushing me to apply to this program—I would’ve kept my stories hidden if it weren’t for his endless support and love.

All of this work has been written since 2021 in the Johns Hopkins University Master of Arts in Writing Program.

Natalie Matheny

Busan, South Korea

Spring 2024
Hailing a Taxi in Hamamatsu

Mr. Hirata had been a taxi driver for over twenty years, and seen all kinds of people get into his backseat. He was the kind of driver to ask the strangers that frequented his presence how their day was going, or what they were doing in Hamamatsu, whether they lived here or not, and, more recently, if they were doing okay after the tsunami. Most of his customers obliged him, albeit hesitantly—people don’t particularly like being talked to by some old taxi driver. Others just ignored him, their eyes and hands glued to their colorful, glowing devices. Mr. Hirata never took it personally if they paid him no mind. He knew that if the strangers behaved poorly toward him, then there must be something going on in their personal lives that made them act that way. It was certainly understandable after what happened.

Mr. Hirata was fortunate that neither of his daughters, who lived with their families close to the seaside in neighboring towns were harmed, but he had watched the news at night, and the wailing from mothers still in search and pleading for their children to be found was heart-wrenching. Mr. Hirata certainly didn’t ask his patrons about things like that.

It was shaping up to be a beautiful, sunny day, and the sun was just beginning to peek out over the other side of the mountain to his left. The car was toasty warm from running all morning, and the sweet and pungent smell of the diesel engine filled the air as he grunted and bent into the shape of the driver’s seat. The tires crunched along the gravel as he drove carefully past the little stone shrines near the shoulder. They were dedicated to Hamamatsu’s lost loved ones, which still had candles burning in them from the night before. In the early morning light, they dotted the thick, green pine forest like flickering orange stars.
At around six in the morning, Mr. Hirata made it to the city of Hamamatsu proper. Already, swaths of elderly ladies were emerging from the tattered awnings of the open-air markets with their aluminum pull carts full of fish and vegetables, their backs and heads stooped in determination. There were still bits of broken concrete and waterlogged wood in little piles against the side of the road. As he drove past, a gust of wind roared against the car, serving as a reminder.

As Mr. Hirata pulled the car around the concrete median at the edge of the city center, a young woman in an oversized black raincoat appeared on the road, with just the tips of her pale fingers outstretched beyond the jacket’s sleeve.

A customer.

The woman looked at Mr. Hirata, her eyes big and dark, her lips downturned. She was barely an adult, her face unmarred by time and life.

She reminded Mr. Hirata of one of his daughters when she was young. Lost, but defiant.

Mr. Hirata pulled the cab over to the side of the road, and the woman opened the door and got in the back seat. Her knee-length black raincoat was slicked with water; it rolled off of her in rivulets that went every which way, like a wet dog after a bath. She was soaked, even though it had been a perfectly clear morning. Mr. Hirata wondered silently if she had been to the ocean and fallen in accidentally. That would be an improbability, though. Plus, it was just barely above freezing, and nobody walked along the beach these days. The woman should be cold, but she showed no signs of distress. Not even a shiver.

“Where to, miss?” Mr. Hirata asked.
“Home,” the woman said. She didn’t specify an address, and as Mr. Hirata looked at her through the rearview mirror, he felt a deep sadness radiating from her that he couldn’t explain.

Mr. Hirata tried again. “Where is your home?”

The woman pointed a finger in the direction of town, her raincoat’s sleeves getting in the way of her hands again. Perhaps it was a boyfriend’s jacket, but it perplexed Mr. Hirata why anyone would be wearing something for the rain today, as it wasn’t in the forecast.

“It’s that way. I don’t know the house number, but I think I know the directions,” she said.

Mr. Hirata began driving. The woman looked out the window at the city with wide eyes like she’d never seen anything like it before.

“Are you new to Hamamatsu?” Mr. Hirata asked.

The woman shifted her big, round eyes to him. The melancholy feeling that shrouded her seemed to change slightly. “No. I grew up here, but I’m visiting my family for the holidays.”

The New Year was almost a month ago, and nobody in Hamamatsu celebrated because of the tsunami, which occurred the day before New Year’s Eve. Mr. Hirata found her answer odd, but he decided not to dwell on it. Plenty of people said odd things to him as a taxi driver.

“Ah, I see,” he said.

“I live in Tokyo now. I’m a student,” the young woman continued.

“Your parents must be proud. What are you studying, then?” Mr. Hirata said.
“Pharmacology. I have one year left.”

“Oh, good for you! That’s a tough field.” He said, smiling at her in the rearview mirror.

“My daughter is also a pharmacist. She used to live in Tokyo too.”

His daughter studied for a long time. She never wanted to tell him the details of her studies, though. She and his other daughter, who worked as a bank teller in Osaka, were just like their mother—stubbornly secretive and difficult to get to know on the outside, but soft when one cracked their tough exterior.

It was silent for a minute, and the woman hadn’t given him any more instruction other than to go straight. They passed Hamamatsu Castle on the right, and she suddenly perked up and said, “Oh, I know where we are! Please, turn right on the next road.”

Mr. Hirata did as he was instructed. They drove deeper into the city, past the main road’s large buildings and into a more residential area with low rise apartment buildings and the occasional house-lined street. Mr. Hirata knew these roads well, but went slowly in case the young woman told him to turn suddenly.

He continued asking her questions, like he always did with his passengers. “So, has your day been well so far, miss?”

“I think it’s been a good day,” the woman said. “What time is it, sir? I can’t seem to remember, and my watch stopped working.” She pointed to the thin, silver bracelet-style watch on her wrist peeking out from the raincoat. When she raised her arm, Mr. Hirata noticed its face was clouded with brown, silty water.
“It’s just after eight in the morning.” Mr. Hirata said it like a question. This was an oddity that Mr. Hirata couldn’t ignore. She was definitely confused by something. Maybe she hit her head. Or worse, maybe she had been hurt by someone strange.

Mr. Hirata detested to think anything bad could have happened to this sweet-looking young girl, but he remained calm and patient as he talked to her. “I see you got a bit wet. Did you take a walk on the beach?”

The woman took a breath and looked down at her clothes in surprise, as if she didn’t realize she was drenched until he pointed it out. “Oh. I must have been hit by a wave.” Her voice sounded far away now. She looked out the window, and again, suddenly, a light of recollection shone in her eyes. “Here, sir! Turn left here, please!”

Mr. Hirata did as he was instructed.

They continued on down another residential street, heading northwest. This area was on the outskirts of Hamamatsu, slightly in the direction of the house Mr. Hirata lived in, where houses dominated, and plots of unpurchased and overgrown land began outnumbering the concrete structures of the city.

The woman began speaking unprompted. Her hands went to her hair, and she began self-consciously tucking unruly pieces behind her ears and smoothing it down, muttering, “My mom and dad must be mad at me. I hope they’re not, but I think I’ve been gone for a very long time. I hope I haven’t let them down.”

“Why do you think that?” Mr. Hirata asked. He figured she meant her parents might be upset that she didn’t visit them often, so he decided to give her some words of comfort. “You’re
a student, a pharmacology student at that, so I’m sure your parents understand that you haven’t had the time.”

“Yes, you’re right,” the woman stopped fixing her hair and clasped her hands together on her lap. The water in her small watch jostled. “I just think I should have visited them before the New Year. I should have visited them on Christmas. Or every once in a while on the weekend. That way, I could’ve spent more time with them.”

Mr. Hirata looked at the small paper calendar that sat, screwed atop his dashboard. The date was February 24th. Long past Christmas, and long past the New Year.

Mr. Hirata cleared his throat and looked at the woman closely in the rearview mirror. Her gaze was heavy as she stared ahead at nothing in particular. “Well, you’re here now, which I’m sure they’re thankful for. You can always start making more trips to see them, if you think it’s wise. They will always miss you, but they also want the best for you, to see you thriving.” He felt like he was talking to one of his own daughters, who were unceremoniously missing from his life, feigning busyness with work and living far away from Hamamatsu. Mr. Hirata knew his daughters’ excuses for their absence were partly true, but he also knew coming home to see him and their old town with their mother not in it brought up memories they’d rather forget.

He shouldn’t think about his daughters right now, though.

The woman looked to the right and into the distance again, her mind elsewhere, as she peered blankly out the window at the tree-lined brick sidewalks. Mr. Hirata wondered if he should do a follow up call with the police after she got to her destination. A simple welfare check would put his mind at ease; he had made a few of those calls in the past, on passengers who he felt needed it. Since Mr. Hirata began driving, he had encountered a few people on the brink of
doing something rash, who felt like they were a blight to society. He made those calls out of compassion, but he also tried actively to avoid the burden. He didn’t want to carry the affliction of potentially being the last person those passengers saw. It would be too much for him. He had made a few in the last month after the tsunami.

“Do you have any other plans for the day?” Mr. Hirata changed the subject as they continued down the roughly paved street. The newly emerging divots and potholes made it difficult to keep the steering wheel straight.

“My mother might have a meal that needs preparing for New Year’s. I will help her with that, and then I might go see my friends in town,” the woman said, and then mostly to herself, “But if it’s morning…that means I have a lot of time in the day. I could’ve sworn I left Tokyo in the morning, and now it’s morning again. That’s strange.”

Mr. Hirata couldn’t contain his concern any longer. “Miss, I think you may be confused about the date. It’s February 24th. The New Year has come and gone.”

“Oh,” the woman said, and looked down at her lap. Her tone was void of all emotion, as empty as her stare. Mr. Hirata’s stomach fluttered with nerves. It was abundantly clear that she was unwell, but he still wanted to be polite and not pry too much. Perhaps the stress of becoming a pharmacologist was too much for the poor girl. Or, what he feared most—that something terrible had been done to her to make her act this way. When she arrived home, her parents would hopefully take care of her.

After a few more minutes in silence, the woman looked up suddenly.

“Oh! This is it!” she said, and Mr. Hirata pulled off to the side of the road.
It was a nice house with a big yard and white brick fence, the only one for a hundred meters. The curtains to the big front window were closed. The ivy on the gate was a bit overgrown, but otherwise intact; however, even this far away from the shore, the effects of the tsunami on the house were evident. Bits of twigs and mud clung to the bottom half of the fence, as if the wave had slinked right along the threshold like a serpent, taunting them with its power.

The woman reached into her raincoat’s pockets, and Mr. Hirata could hear the water sloshing around as she searched for coins. She placed the wet, muddy coins into Mr. Hirata’s outstretched hand, and looked at him once again. Her eyes were so lost. They looked straight through him. Mr. Hirata could feel the color drain from his face, but he swallowed the uneasiness with a cough and a slight, placating smile.

“Thank you for driving me home, sir,” the woman said, and turned to open the back door and step out into the bright, late morning sun.

“Be safe,” he said, a goodbye he had been saying as of late.

Her raincoat and the glare of the sunlight transformed her into a black shadow in Mr. Hirata’s rearview mirror. Usually, he waited for a few seconds before driving away out of courtesy, in case the passengers forgot something in the back seat. So, he did. He watched as the woman walked to the front gate and paused, looking up at the house, before stepping out of sight.

As Mr. Hirata drove away, he pulled out his cellphone and began dialing the number for the police. When the operator answered, Mr. Hirata explained the reason for his call.

“We can send an officer over there to check on her and her family,” the operator said.

“Did you catch the address?”
“Not all of it,” Mr. Hirata admitted. “She was really out of it, and could only point me in the general direction before I dropped her off.” He shook his head at his foolishness—he didn’t even check the house number when he pulled up. “I do know that it’s the only house with a white brick fence on the road. She might still be wearing a big, black raincoat, if that helps.”

The operator on the other end of the line seemed to pause. “Is this the house on block eighteen with large windows in the front?”

“Yes, how did you know?” A chill went through Mr. Hirata as he turned back toward Hamamatsu, and another gust of wind smacked into the Toyota Comfort. He braced his hands on both sides of the wheel to keep the taxi from drifting too far to the right.

“We’ve…been getting calls about that house,” the operator continued. “We’ll send an officer over there anyway, just in case. Thank you for expressing your concern.”

A wave of understanding washed over him as he listened to the operator’s tired voice. “Oh dear,” Mr. Hirata managed.

He pulled the taxi over to a grassy curb, and hung up the phone. He turned off the engine and listened to the wind bludgeon the car for a moment to gather the sudden torrent of thoughts swirling around in his mind. He had overheard the hushed voices of the other taxi drivers at lunchtime, about the things that have been happening recently, but he had written their gossip off as simply that.

He fired up the car again, placed the phone in the passenger seat, and took a shaking breath to turn around and look in the backseat at the damp outline that the girl in the raincoat had made.
See You Soon

I pack the last of my husband’s things from our bedroom into the cardboard box we’ve somehow kept through all our moves. It felt fitting to put his stuff in there; he was always the one holding onto little things like this—old boxes, empty shampoo bottles, cables, cords, and bread ties—that I usually threw away without a second thought.

He kept things just in case. “You never know when you might need them,” he used to say while waggling a pink rubber band from a bunch of spinach in my face. I would bat his hand away laughing, and he would put the rubber bands in a designated kitchen cabinet that housed the other potentially reusable items: plastic bags, plastic spoons, plastic straws. We always had the “junk cabinet” as I deemed it, in every house we ever lived in. I had Jane clean it out because I couldn’t do it without crying.

The box has brown packing tape wrapped around all the corners, holding the integrity of the cardboard together. On top is the last thing I folded, a faded, blue flannel shirt with the top collar button broken in half. I grasp at the raggedy, zigzag edge of the button, feeling the coarseness under the pad of my thumb. The thoughts of what I should do pang through my head like table tennis balls bouncing on a concrete floor. I should cry, or start talking to myself like a crazy person, or play the hardcore rock music from my youth that I was always too embarrassed to listen to when I was around him. I should scream into each empty room of the house we never had the chance to furnish, to fill it with something, anything but the silence that comes with one person.

I do none of those things.
I put the lid on the box, weave my hands through the cut-out handles and stand up to take a look at our bedroom for the last time. I think about what Ryan would say at this moment, if it were me instead of him.

“Fuck,” I say. “I miss you.” I hear his voice in my head, but it’s my voice that speaks.

Behind me, a light in the hallway turns off.

*

I slide the box into the passenger seat of the SUV parked outside on the gravel driveway. We never had a chance to pave it. The chunky shards of rock dig into the worn soles of my old white sneakers. I can feel them with each step, reminding me of how little time we spent here. The house sits in the center of a pristine, freshly sodded lawn; the grass is so fresh, I can still see the lines where each individual roll was placed. I blink away what might be tears, and wrap the seatbelt around the box, buckling it in.

I walk around to the driver’s side door and get inside. I can feel the presence of the box next to me, like it’s Ryan sitting there, and I begin to back out of the winding driveway, through the clearing between the two large pecan trees, and toward the main road. I get about halfway, and stop to look once more.

The house was built only four months ago. Ryan designed it—he modeled it after the old Victorian houses we used to see while living in downtown Boston. It’s painted a bright white with black shutters and a sky-blue, rounded front door. He said it would be our forever home, the place we would raise our future kids.
We were in our early thirties, both burnt out from the city, and in need of a quiet place to escape to. I had found the patch of five acres on one of the land auction websites I loved to browse on my lunch break. It took some convincing, but Ryan eventually agreed that country living was our next chapter. Together, we entered what we thought would be the most important stage in our lives, moved forty-five miles north, and said goodbye to the city we met and got married in.

I look at the big, bay window next to the front door and imagine my husband standing there, looking out of it at me. Something in the box shifts. I look over to see that the cardboard lid has lifted slightly. I reach over and press the lid down to make sure nothing spills out.

*

It’s been three weeks, and I haven’t touched the box, or been outside at all. I didn’t bring it inside when I got to Jane’s, so it’s just been sitting out in the cold car in her duplex’s driveway since then.

Jane says I can stay as long as I want until her realtor friend Mark calls for an appraisal. I’ve started looking for jobs in any city that’ll take me. I quit mine when Ryan and I officially moved into the house because I wanted to make perfecting the interior my personal project—I’d spent the last six years as an interior designer decorating other people’s houses, so it was meant to be my turn to do my own.

Now, I have nothing. I’m sleeping on the couch of my little sister’s apartment, and Ryan is dead.
This morning as I stare out the front window at the driveway, I can see the box staring at me from behind the SUV’s windshield, and I can’t take it anymore. I can hear his voice, pleading with me to bring him inside. He’s cold out there.

I put on a coat in the foyer, slip on a pair of my sister’s sandals, and walk outside. A thin layer of frost coats the exterior of the car, and I can barely make out its shape in the passenger window, but his voice in my head grows louder. Bring him inside.

I open the door, and unbuckle the box. It seems heavier since I last picked it up, or perhaps it was always this heavy, but I was too dazed with grief to notice before. I hoist the box on one hip to open and close the door to the house, and set it down gently next to the couch.

“Rach, is that you?” Jane calls from somewhere in the house.

Wordlessly, I walk into the kitchen where Jane is pouring coffee into a to-go mug.

She adjusts her suit jacket to grab another mug from the cabinet. She looks over at me and her eyes quickly go back to the coffee. “You’re up; did you go for a walk?”

I reach past her and grab the coffee pot to pour my own. “No. I was just—I had that box of Ryan’s stuff out in the car that I didn’t bring in,” I say. “It was time.”

“That’s a huge step, Rach.” Jane says. “Actually—I saw a place down the street with a For Rent sign in the front. Maybe if you’re feeling up for it later, we could go check it out?” She pauses, before saying, “Not that I want you to leave, of course. Fuck, that’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant, Jane,” I interrupt, and take a sip of coffee.
Jane squeezes my shoulder and smiles softly. Sometimes I feel like I’m the younger one when she looks at me like that. She grabs her car keys from the old oak table next to the fridge. It’s the common dumping place for all the odd bits of life that she collects: nail polish remover, water bills, tomatoes from the neighbor’s plant. It’s a trait that reminds me of Ryan.

“Mark is going to call me today.”

Oh, the realtor. She’s talking about the house now.

“I’ll call you when I find a time that’s good for all of us, and we’ll go out there together,” she says.

I nod because the words have dried up in my throat.

Once Jane leaves for work, I dump the half-full cup of coffee out into the sink and pad my way across the creaky wooden floorboards, back to my spot on the couch, and sink down until I’m lying on my side, facing the box.

Other people deserve to make memories in the house, I tell myself. All that life that house was supposed to see. It wasn’t fair.

I stare at the brown cardboard. The memories could only do so much. This is all I have left of him.

That last morning, we had gotten up early and snuggled up next to each other under a blanket on the newly stained front deck, watching the sunrise between the pecan trees with steaming cups of coffee to warm our cold hands. I remember feeling the streaky sunlight filtering through the trees, his big, warm arm around me, and it filled me with the immediate love I felt
when I first met him all those years ago. The birds chittered and chirped, but aside from that, all was quiet and as it should be.

Then he got up to get ready for work, like he always did. He had a long drive ahead, so I filled a thermos of coffee, zipped his jacket up for him, and gave him his lunch. He kissed me and then he left.

His boss called me later that day and told me about the accident.

My tear-filled gaze suddenly centers on something etched into the lid at my eye level. It looks like someone had once written a paper note on top of the cardboard, but this imprint was on the side of the lid, near the corner of the box, like they’d turned the box on its side to write, which would be inconvenient. I reach with one finger and feel the words. I can feel the imprint that something sharp—a ballpoint pen, maybe? —has made. I lift the lid off the box and look at the corner more closely, angling it in the dim morning sunlight coming through the front window. The shadow reads: *See you soon.*

* 

It’s the end of the day now. I’ve packed all my belongings and Ryan’s box back into the car, and I ignore Jane’s incessant phone calls as I white-knuckle the steering wheel and weave through the slower moving traffic on the highway. The box is buckled back into the passenger seat. I don’t know what to feel. I don’t know if I’m crazy, but I can hear Ryan’s voice reading the *see you soon,* rolling it over and over in my head like the tumble cycle on a washing machine. I have to get back home, back to our home. Jane calls for the eighth time and I finally put her on speaker.
“What,” I spit as I dodge another car’s bumper.

“Rachel, where are you?” She’s pissed, but I don’t care. I ignore her question.

“I know—I know how it’s going to sound, Jane, but I swear to God he’s sending me a sign,” I sound ragged, manic. I haven’t taken my anxiety medication in a week, so I probably am.

I hear Jane’s exasperated sigh over the phone. “Rachel. We went over this, and the therapist went over this: a lot of the stuff you say you’re seeing is purely coincidental. It’s how your brain is processing grief.”

“No. No. You said that the light in the hall outside the bedroom turning on and off was weird. Even Mark said it was weird, because the house was wired by Ryan, and he was a fucking electrician. Now, the box of Ryan’s stuff says see you soon on it and I really think he’s telling me something about the accident—”

“Oh, Rach, just come back. We’ll put on a movie. I can order Thai food. Take a breath. It’s not safe to be driving right now.” Her tone is patronizing, too sweet.

“I’ll come back in the morning,” I lie, and hang up.

All of it made sense now: the lights, the footsteps, the breath on the back of my neck I felt when I was alone.

Ryan never left me.

The sun is just beginning to set as I pull into the driveway, through the pecan trees and onto the crackling gravel. The house’s silhouette and black shutters are just visible through the glaring orange sunlight. Its shadow looms, alive, over the shiny green front lawn, but I feel more
at ease than I have been since Ryan died, and I know he’s in there, waiting for me. I grab the box from the seat and walk up to the front porch.

With shaking fingers, I put the key into the lock, hear the satisfying clunk of the mechanism turning, swing the door open, and step inside the empty house. It feels cavernous and far less-cozy without all of our stuff.

The front room and large, dark wooden staircase are still visible in the fading light. To the far right of the room are the large bay windows and gas fireplace hookups, the place we would’ve one day had a Christmas tree and stockings, with lots of presents for our gleeful children dressed in matching pajamas. I set the box down next to the open door and listen. A wave of grief washes over me, and I sob into the empty space.

“Ryan? I’m back, baby. I came back. I’m sorry I left.”

The silence of the countryside presses into my ears like being underwater. I walk over to the fireplace’s mantle and run my hands across each nook of the wood, but feeling nothing but grains of fine dust under my palms. I walk through the arched alcove entryway into what was taking shape as the dining room, then to the left into the kitchen. I pass the cabinet that housed his trinkets, and I touch the cool marble countertops and imagine it’s the exposed skin of Ryan’s arm as he sleeps soundly under my grasp on a frigid morning in our old apartment in the city. We would’ve never gone cold in this house.

I hear nothing but my own sorrowful weeping as I walk back toward the front of the house, climb the staircase, and wander through the long hallway to the bedrooms. Two bedrooms for our children—one Ryan said would be my office until then, and the other a guest bedroom—and a bedroom for us. I take a look into the master bedroom through bleary eyes, and think I see
him standing there in the light of the window, his tall, opaque figure coming into my vision, but when I blink, he’s gone.

I walk back down the stairs and out the open door, and I sink down onto the steps of the front porch. I look out at the shadows dancing across the lawn, the pecan trees framing the driveway in the fading light, and somewhere from inside the house, a light turns on. Where my hand is placed on the wooden slats, there is another message carved, just like the one on the box, for me. The words look like they were made with a key or a knife. Big enough to read and clear as day:

Welcome home.
To Be So Lonely

I don’t remember which night I saw him first, but I can recall the railroad man standing in the middle of my bedroom one night when I was six. I opened my eyes, and there he was: blue and see-through, like he was being projected from some unseen light source.

With my child’s imagination, I pieced together what his real colors would’ve been, and I laid awake studying him for an hour, motionless, eyes peering over the edge of the top bunk, just soaking in every detail of him—his cartoonishly thick leather boots and denim bib workman’s overalls, the long sleeved shirt with buttons at the collar, the bandana tied around his neck, and the wool flat cap on his head. He was completely covered in mud, dripping with it, and I remember thinking my mother was going to be so mad at him for leaving a stain on the carpet. His face was tanned dark from the sun and just as dirty as his clothes, and his lips were cracked, bleeding and pulled down into a deep frown, like one of those paintings of sad clowns that you might see at a bowling alley. He didn’t look at me once. He just stared blankly down at nothing, his black eyes holding a sadness so deep I felt like crying for him.

Then I blinked, and it was morning.

My mother had made me Eggo waffles, and I watched cartoons on the little box TV we had set up in the dining room. There was this molded plastic picnic bench that I ate breakfast on. It used to be outside on the brick patio in the backyard, but now it was inside. It was a little dusty, and still had spiders living inside it. I remember watching them build their webs through the cracks in the table legs.
Somewhere in the house, my mother was grabbing her keys and her suitcase and packing it into the car while I wiped syrup all over the pages of the open picture book underneath my paper plate. She was going on a business trip. She was always going on a business trip. My mother grabbed the top of my blond head and kissed it, more as a formality than anything. Her gold wedding ring clacked painfully against my temple.

“June, don’t forget to lock the door before you leave. I’ll get you a stuffed animal at the airport,” she said.

I nodded as I peeled the book and paper plate apart where they had fused. Then she got in the car and left. My mother promised me things, like new toys or stuffed animals, but she would only sometimes remember.

I had deduced in the fifteen minutes it took me to eat that my father had also probably left for work already, since I couldn’t hear the jingling of his big key ring anywhere in the house, and my three sisters had all disappeared one by one for the day. At that time, all four of us girls were going to different schools around the city. It never made sense to go together, so I would be riding my purple Razor Scooter to school by myself.

I put the paper plate in the trash and my fork in the kitchen sink, and from the staircase, I heard footsteps. The wood creaked softly, and the sound of something creeping slowly on the plush carpet cut through the resounding silence. My heart leapt in my chest as the steps made it to the small landing next to the front door, then stopped. I took a shaky breath and tried not to be afraid.

“Goodbye,” I whispered.
It was the first time I’d actually said anything to them—in hindsight, I should’ve looked at the banister to see who I was talking to.

*

I felt frightened at times, but it was comforting to know I wasn’t alone. My family skirted around me like a current breaks around a stone in a river. I never became something that my parents or sisters wanted to adopt into their stream, so the ghosts in the house did.

There was an old, hunchbacked man dressed like a farmer who would watch over me in the brown wicker rocking chair in the corner of my room while I slept. There was a lady in a big poofy dress and a flowery hat that I would watch for hours from my open closet door as she floated up into the ceiling over and over again throughout the night like a skipping VCR tape. There was a wavering, wispy one with no distinguishable facial features that would drift over to my little blue stereo on the bookshelf and turn off my lullaby cassette for me when I was just about to drift off.

They all watched over me from their respective corners of the house in attentive and stoic silence as I sat alone and read the extensive library that adorned my bedroom shelves and invented new realities for myself. Most of the books were far too advanced for a young child: smutty romances half-read and abandoned by my teenage sisters, literary gold like *The Bell Jar* and *Little Women*, and cliché murder-mystery stories that my mother brought home from airport convenience stores with the price tags still on them.

I met Loneliness when I was eight on one of the rare, noisy days, when my sisters were home at a normal hour after school, and my mother was home, working tucked away from every possible me-shaped distraction in a remodeled portion of the basement. I arrived home from
school, and the Lite Brite that I exclusively and obsessively played with was missing from its usual place in my bedroom. With a frustrated sigh, I made my way back down the stairs.

Toni was listening to a Radiohead CD on her Walkman at full volume at the dining room table.

“Did you take my Lite Brite?” I asked—too quietly, because she didn’t even look up from the page.

I knew it would be useless to ask my mother, but I went to the basement anyway. She was on a conference call. I wavered in the doorway and watched her for a minute while she shuffled a stack of papers and jotted down whatever the garbled voice on the other end of the corded landline was saying, until she looked up. She was startled and put a hand to her chest and closed her eyes. I never made any noise.

Then her lips moved in a silent, “Go away, June.”

I climbed all the way back to the second floor, and found Wendy in her bedroom in the dark watching a movie with her boyfriend, which I knew from the times I’d heard my father screaming at them in the middle of the night was not allowed, and they shot out from under the covers when they noticed my silhouette in the doorway.

“Did you take my Lite Brite?” I asked.

“Why would I take your stupid toy?” Wendy said.

“I don’t know,” I muttered.

“Don’t tell Mom that Paul is here,” Wendy said.
I slowly turned toward the attic. It had built-in carpeted stairs with a flimsy single railing that shot almost straight up into the ceiling. Anyone who descended those stairs had slipped and fallen at least once. I had to climb on my hands and feet to go up, and slide down like a luge athlete to get down. There were two landings. The landing on the left was narrower, and housed my mother’s collection of suitcases alongside huge plastic tubs bursting with forgotten art projects, scathing wire-bound notebook diaries, forgotten Beanie Babies, and old yearbooks. I would sometimes rifle through the junk if I got bored of reading, and it was where I collected family lore in the form of all my sisters’ secrets, but I really didn’t like the attic; there was something about it that didn’t feel right.

The landing on the right opened up into a long, pointed room with a regular window facing the back, and a triangular window at the front that overlooked the driveway and the street below. There were the normal components of a bedroom: a futon bed, closets for storage, a small dresser and bookshelf, and a few of Nadine’s forgotten decorations: a lava lamp, a Slayer poster, and some old white roller skates that hung on a hook near the closet.

A heaviness pressed onto the top of my head and skittered along my skin as I ascended the stairs and turned to the right. Almost immediately, I saw the Lite Brite in the middle of the floor, and as I walked toward it, something hard dug into the heel of my foot; the pegs of the toy were scattered all over, and embedded in the carpet like rainbow sprinkles. Angry tears welled in the corners of my eyes: my sisters were obviously playing a trick on me or trying to get me in trouble for making a mess.

I began scooping the pegs into piles and putting them back into the drawers, but the resentment morphed into unease as the feeling in the attic grew so uncomfortable to the point
where I stopped to look over my shoulder into one of the two doorless, cavernous closets that were built into the side of the room, expecting to see someone staring back at me from the darkness. I was met with nothing but the sound of thin, crinkling plastic from my mother’s dry cleaned coats being blown around by the old AC unit. I quickened my clean-up.

As I stood, all at once, something atomized from the air itself, pushing into my back and causing me to stumble forward, before finally enclosing itself around me like a bubble. My initial thought was that I had stood up too fast and I was going to pass out, but then the whispering started.

It came from everywhere. Maybe Toni had turned on a radio downstairs, or Wendy’s movie was getting loud, and the noise was bleeding through the floor. I could feel air moving past me and blowing my eyelashes, as if whatever it was spoke to me from directly in front of my face, and I strained to listen for any discernible words underneath the din of static. I caught what I thought was a word, the voice submerged itself back into the lull of frantically fast whispers. Suddenly, the clamoring cleared, and I heard one sentence, spoken in a warbly voice:

_I am Loneliness, and you are mine._

There was a muffled _thunk_, and my eyes fell to the floor. A black velvet box with a rounded top, sat in front of my feet. I scooped the box up in my free hand, slid down the stairs, and ran to my bedroom.

I’d been in the attic dozens of times and had snooped through every storage tub and drawer up there, but I had never seen this before. I would’ve remembered it. It felt special. Like something I shouldn’t have. The box was smooth, small, and perfectly shaped, so when I closed my fingers around it, it disappeared satisfyingly into the palm of my hand. I noticed there was a
small, silver button latch holding the box closed, and I carefully popped it open with my fingernail.

The silver hinges creaked open, and inside was a glassy black crystal, slightly smaller than a marble, with a haphazardly faceted design. It looked like obsidian—I had just finished reading the entirety of Nadine’s high school geology textbook—but when I picked the tiny crystal up and held it to my sunny bedroom window, no light passed through it. I put my treasure back inside the box, closed the clasp securely, and stowed it underneath my pillow.

*

Wendy had a party. I was nine, and Toni and Wendy were supposed to be babysitting me with a couple of their friends while our parents were out all night at an employee dinner. Instead, Wendy invited boys, and the boys brought alcohol and thirty other people, and Toni had driven off with her boyfriend immediately after my parents left the house.

The house was big, but not nearly sturdy enough for the amount of people inside, and I could feel the force of their drunken footsteps jostling the uneven foundation. The party had ramped up and quickly devolved into chaos while I drifted aimlessly from room to room, climbing up and down the stairs, starting in the basement and then around the main floor and up to the second floor, then back down again. It fascinated me how the house would transform during my sisters’ parties: the obtrusive silence shattered by low, thumping bass and raucous laughter, and the tinny clattering of red plastic cups and watery clunks of glass bottles of liquor as they were finished and sloppily discarded in the kitchen sink or underneath the couch in the living room.

I gripped the velvet box in my hand, and continued my rounds.
Ever since I found Loneliness, I became entirely invisible from everyone around me, and traversed within liminal space, taking in what was around me without being perceived. Loneliness explained how long he had been waiting for me. I’d never seen Loneliness, but his presence was everywhere, all the time, skulking in every shadow. The others didn't watch over me at night anymore; Loneliness had told them to stay away. He was different from the others.

I observed from my dome of solitude as the partygoers became progressively more inebriated. Soon, the noise of the party had fallen away, and the insidious silence had returned.

Loneliness whispered to me in his gravelly voice as I ascended the stairs to the second floor, *come see me, June. Come see where I hide.*

I had no control, and despite what he said about protecting me, I was absolutely terrified of him, and that made him stronger. I looked up from the floor and Wendy was suddenly in front of me. She was wearing a green dress the same color as her eyes, and she swayed like a reed in the wind, arms crossed in front of her.

“You can’t be out here,” she slurred too close to my face, and the sweet smell of liquor on her breath blew over me.

“I think Toni’s gonna call the cops,” I said.

“No, she’s not. And if she does, I’ll tell Mom and Dad she went out with her boyfriend,” Wendy said. Toni and Wendy loathed each other, and whenever one of them had a party, the other would rat them out to either my parents, their friends’ parents, or the police every single time.

“Okay, but—” I started, but her eyes narrowed on me.
“Just go watch cartoons in my room like I told you to. Please.”

I looked over her shoulder at the shadowy entrance to the attic, and could feel Loneliness inspecting us from the darkness like a scientist studying a rat in a maze. The box vibrated uncomfortably in my hand. He didn’t like it when I talked to anyone but him. The staircase and the doorway to Wendy’s bedroom intersected each other at a ninety-degree angle, so I had to pass them—and him—in order to go in.

_Come see me, June._

Wendy had stepped around me to go downstairs and rejoin the party, and I was alone again. My heart raced, but my feet began to move toward the attic unwillingly, like my ankles were tied with fishing twine and Loneliness was yanking at each leg. I crossed the landing and stopped. My side grew cold as a light breeze wafted down the stairs, and I shivered. My hand shook on the brass doorknob to Wendy’s room, and the box in my other hand burned like a hot coal. I wanted to run inside and slam the door, but I was frozen in place. I was prey.

_Look._

_Look at me, June._

My neck jerked to the right, and my eyes perceived a creature not of this Earth, suspended over the attic steps, peering down at me with two glinting, silvery eyes. Its body was darker than the darkness of the attic itself. Knobby black claws gripped the edge of the landing, and the shadow loomed down over the staircase, undulating like a serpent. It opened its mouth in a way a smile would, and rows of long, curved black teeth snapped within inches of my face.

_I’m here_, it snarled. _I’m always here._
Time slowed to an excruciating crawl, and I imagined Loneliness’s bony claws and horrible teeth raking the backs of my eyeballs. The black box’s hinges pinched the skin of my palm from how tightly I was holding it.

From somewhere on the first floor, glass broke, followed by a loud scream and fast-approaching footsteps. “Who called the fucking cops?” I heard someone shout.

Loneliness retreated with an inhuman quickness, winding itself back up into the darkened attic until the light from the window at the top of the stairs was visible again. I’m always here, Loneliness repeated from the alcoves of my mind. I scrambled to open Wendy’s door, ran inside, and threw the black box across the room. Breathing raggedly, I stared at the jewelry box’s outline in the dark as Loneliness pried into my mind and filled it with tar.

*

As the years went by, Loneliness stalked me every second I spent in the house. I had thrown the box out the window of the bus to school, down the street in the neighbor’s trash, even setting it on fire in the backyard; each time I thought I had finally been rid of it, the box would reappear at the foot of my bed, or on the bookshelf, or on the windowsill, still just as flawless as it had been the day I found it in the attic. It sang Loneliness’ distorted whispers to me while I attempted to sleep.

Suddenly, I was in high school, and everyone was different; Nadine moved two hours away to a hippie commune in the middle of nowhere. Toni flunked out of high school, so my father forced her to join the Army. Wendy got accepted to a college, joined a sorority, and never came home. My parents both got promotions and spent more time away than ever.
Meanwhile, I waged a solitary, worsening war with Loneliness.

When I had to be in the house, I played music at full blast in my earphones to drown out the stifling silence that accompanied Loneliness’ stealthy approach; but it only did so much, and it drove my parents, who hardly spoke to me anyway, even further away. The divide only seemed to widen as time went on and Loneliness’s power over me grew. I had become what Loneliness wanted: another ghost in the house. He spat darkness into my head, and forced me into silence.

You can never be what they want. No one will ever love you more than I do.

Miraculously, I had friends—well, more like acquaintances—that I had collected through the years. There was a girl named Penny. I’d met her in the public library the summer before middle school. We bonded over werewolf novels and punk rock, and that was all we needed. Penny’s parents were also busy, and she was also the youngest and most ignored. By some act of fate, we clung together throughout the years like barnacles on a tide-flooded rock, tortured by something indefinable and unspeakable that we were desperate to escape from.

We never talked about Loneliness. Instead, when Penny and I got our driver’s licenses, we sailed around our small town in busted up cars cast down from older siblings. We ate nearly all our meals in fast food parking lots, snuck into bars for rock shows that made our ears ring for days, and stayed up into the early morning hours until the sun rose over the train tracks. Spending time with Penny numbed Loneliness’s icy fingers prying into my brain, but it only made him angrier.

One night after an evening spent with Penny, Loneliness intercepted me at the attic stairs. His appearance was something I had grown used to the way one becomes accustomed to graphic
photographs of gaping wounds and missing limbs, and I stared blankly into his menacing, candescent eyes.

_You’ll always be with me, June. Everyone will leave you, just like your parents left you._

_Just like your sisters left you_, Loneliness roared, his maw of jagged teeth snapping the air around me.

I had heard it for years, and it hit me all at once: I felt nothing—*like* nothing. There was no fear, no sadness. It was as if a void had opened up inside my heart, and all of the black tar Loneliness had sowed began to seep out from the cracks. Loneliness smiled as if he knew, and his arm lashed out—one of his talons slashed me across the right forearm. I gasped wildly and jumped back, but it was too late. My flesh was laid open so easily down to the white of the bone, and I gawked at the blood, heard it pouring onto the floor like I was made of water.

_You do not realize what I’m capable of, you insolent speck_, he snarled.

I felt my balance slip and I crumpled, the blood soaking into my skin and clothes as I laid on the carpet, and my unfocused eyes found the small black box poised tauntingly on the first attic step. Loneliness came in close, and raked his claws through my hair.

Time stopped.

Then I heard heavy footsteps. “She’s still breathing!” A man’s voice. “Get me a tourniquet!”

*
The next time I opened my eyes, they were met with the unmistakable fluorescent glow of a hospital room. I immediately, stupidly, tried to move my arm; it throbbed agonizingly with a deep, burrowing pain, but I was alive.

A female nurse with a long curly ponytail and dressed in unicorn scrubs was across the room, writing something on a whiteboard. She turned around and saw me, and pressed a button on the wall next to the door.

“There she is,” she said, and her soothing voice calmed the ache blooming in my head from the bright lights. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“June,” I croaked. My throat was prickly and sharp, like I’d swallowed a box of nails.

The nurse walked over to the bed and took a seat on the black rolling stool. “Do you know your last name, June?”

“Saint-James,” I answered. I didn’t think I’d said my full name out loud to anyone, ever. If I had, I couldn’t remember. “What happened?”

“You slashed your arm open, sweetheart, and you’ve got about fifty staples holding you together,” the nurse said. “How old are you, June?”

“Sixteen.”

The nurse gave me a sympathetic look. “You’re so young,” she said, mostly to herself, and looked down at a clipboard I hadn’t noticed was in her lap. “So, for things like this, we require an evaluation and a mandatory hold until your parents get here.”
Oh. She thought I’d tried to kill myself. I opened my mouth to correct her, but there was movement at the door, and a lanky, tired-looking police officer now stood in the doorway.

“Hi there. Are you June?” he asked.

I nodded.

The officer had kind blue eyes, and sandy brown hair, and his badge said his last name was Carlsbad. The nurse left the room, and he took her place on the stool. He pulled out a small, yellow notepad and a pen and crossed his legs.

“Is it okay if I ask you a few questions about what happened, June?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I promise I’ll make it quick. You look like you need some rest,” Officer Carlsbad smiled gently. “Do you remember if there was anyone else home with you?”

“No. I was alone,” I said. My head spun, and I laid back on the pillow and closed my eyes. “My parents are on vacation.”

“Without you?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “I, uh, didn’t want to go.” I cast my eyes down to the thick bandage on my arm. Officer Carlsbad clicked his tongue, and scribbled my response onto the notepad.

“Were you expecting anyone? Maybe a boyfriend?”

I shook my head faintly. “No. I wasn’t expecting anybody. Well, I was with my friend earlier, but I watched her drive off.”
I wanted to tell him everything, but I also knew talking about Loneliness was a ticket to the psych ward. Officer Carlsbad hummed, and put the notepad down.

“Well, you had someone looking out for you, then, June—I don’t know. I had to break a window to get in. Everything was locked up, and the call came from your landline.”

“Then who called the ambulance, if—” I began, but shut my mouth.

“We’ll do an investigation. The important thing is that you’re safe now,” Officer Carlsbad said. “Weird circumstances, but really lucky.”

I slept on and off. Eventually the headache subsided, and I was able to muscle through a meal of instant mashed potatoes and scrambled eggs that the nurse, who later told me her name was Emily, brought to me on a plastic tray. I spent the day surrounded by doctors and nurses, and the day had dwindled to night before my parents burst through the hospital room door in a frantic commotion that shook me out of sleep.

They rushed over to the bed, and my father reached out and grabbed my good hand while my mother stood closely behind his back. As I stared up at them, I realized I hadn’t looked properly at their faces in years; my father’s normally thick, dark beard was now tinged with grey, and my mother had soft wrinkles lining her cheeks and forehead.

“Oh, thank God you’re okay,” my father said, squeezing my hand tightly, and my eyebrows knitted together in confusion. “We could’ve lost you. Oh, honey, is it because we’re so busy?”

There was a beat of silence, and they just stared at me like I meant something to them. Did I mean something to them?
“Why do you care?” I asked, not out of malice, but out of genuine disbelief.

“Because we love you,” my mother warbled from behind my father. “We’ve always loved you. We’re so sorry, June.”

She stepped forward and put her arms around me, and her tear-soaked cheeks pressed into my shoulder. I blinked away the initial discomfort of her holding me, and just felt. Something in my heart shifted, and the blackened, knobby fingers that gripped it loosened.

At the end of the third day, I was allowed to return home with a prescription for an antidepressant and a note to see a therapist. When my parents and I walked through the threshold, my sisters were all there, hugging and chittering excitedly to one another and to me. They all kept saying how they would never leave me alone again. It was like I’d lived two separate lives and I had walked into the other one.

We all sat down to eat dinner in a heap of bodies melded together on the living room couch. Nadine fussed with the knots in the back of my head—nurse Emily had washed my curly hair in the hospital shower, but they didn’t have any of the products I was used to, so it was extra tangled. Toni sat at my feet and silently held my hand and rubbed soothing circles into my palm. Wendy laid her head on my shoulder and wrapped her arm around my stomach like a seatbelt.

In the catacombs of the house, I could feel Loneliness stir. They’re just trying to trick you, he hissed. I’m the only one that keeps you safe, June.

But I was done listening.

After dinner, I disappeared upstairs to look for the black jewelry box, which had unsurprisingly materialized from the attic step to the corner of the bookshelf in my bedroom. All
the sounds faded away. Moonlight bathed the room in shadows, and I knew Loneliness was there, waiting for me. *How stupid you are, to think you could rid yourself of me.*

I didn’t turn around to look at him, and I could feel his anger grow.

I picked up the box from the shelf and held it closer to my face. Immediately, I noticed something: although it was nearly imperceptible, there was a small fissure in the velvet casing. I was stunned; it had never been marred before in all my efforts to destroy it. Loneliness lurked in the shadow cast behind my bedroom door, but he remained silent, and seething.

Where the jewelry box had been, an old copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* lay underneath. A line had been underlined:

*If by my life or death I can protect you, I will.*

The jewelry box quaked in my hand as I finally turned to face Loneliness. He peered out of the shadows, and his black talons clutched onto the doorframe like a bird caught in a windstorm. He didn’t scare me when his beady eyes narrowed in on me and his elongated teeth cracked in animalistic rage. He looked pathetic.

*You need me*, Loneliness sneered.

“I’m not afraid of you anymore,” I said.

I took out the black crystal from the box and held it out between us. Loneliness swiftly leapt to the shadow of the bookcase and loomed down over me so that we were eye to eye. I tipped my chin up in defiance, even as one of his claws slid down my cheek. I braced myself for the pain, but this time, I barely felt the scrape—it was as unpleasant as a snowflake melting on my skin.
*They lie to you,* he snarled.

“No, *you* lie to me,” I said, raising my voice. “You kept me locked away from them for years. And I’m done with you.”

There was a flash of some indiscernible emotion in Loneliness’s eyes as I pressed the crystal between my forefinger and thumb and squeezed.

The crystal’s structure gave way. Black sand fell to the floor, and Loneliness let out a deafening howl that shook the house and knocked the books off the bookshelf. I stepped back toward the window and stood in the moonlight as his form shredded apart like silk ribbons and evaporated into the air.

For the first time in years, I cried—huge, heartbroken, relieved tears that soaked into my sweatshirt collar and stung my face with salt.

I was free.

“June? You okay?” my mother called from downstairs. “There’s pie and ice cream and your dad’s making popcorn.”

I coughed a sob into my elbow. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I called back. “Be there in a second.”

I picked up the open book and closed it, sliding it back into place with the others. I took a deep breath, and the silence that settled around me felt like a hug.
Jeongmin: Car three, Friday, August 5th, 8:00AM

Jeongmin is headed to work, and so far, he’s having a good day: he woke up with his alarm at 6:30, took all his vitamins, filled up his water bottle with chocolate-flavored protein powder, and had a quick morning workout in the gym downstairs. After his military service, the methodical routine of each day was ingrained in him like a disease.

It’s good for him, he reminds himself. Routine is good.

For work, he decided on a relatively clean navy-blue summer suit with a simple, crisp white shirt underneath and shiny brown leather dress shoes, and he leaves the top two buttons of the shirt undone. The company he works for now lets him dress without a tie on Fridays. He was lucky to get accepted at Daehong so quickly; most of his friends were still trying to find jobs after their service. The last step before leaving the house is to put on his glasses, and they slightly dampen his good mood—the chrome, rounded metal makes him look like the sniveling little boy from his past, but he can’t go without them. As soon as he saves up enough money, Jeongmin is getting LASIK.

Jeongmin lives far from Daehong’s headquarters, but at least he found an apartment so close to the subway station. It’s already well over 30 degrees Celsius outside. The sun feels doubly close to the ground, but Jeongmin still leaves the suit jacket on. He passes a girl on the street who makes eye contact with him. She immediately looks away, and Jeongmin sees the flush of her cheeks as she ducks into a brightly lit convenience store. He’s twenty-seven now, done with the service. It’s time for him to find a girl to get married to—that’s what his mother reminds him of every time she calls him.
He descends the flight of stairs to the tollgate, weaving his way through the stream of workers that have just gotten off the Westbound train, and presses his transit card to the black box. Another flight of stairs, down to the bunker-like concrete platform. He stops walking when he gets to his usual number, the car he knows is closest to the stairs of the platform at his final destination. The happy jingle signaling the arrival of the next train plays over the blown-out speaker system above his head, and Jeongmin watches his reflection contort into bulging shapes in the glass barricade as the train barrels into the station.

The doors open, and Jeongmin waits for the onslaught of bodies to pour out of the car before stepping inside. The train is somewhat empty, with some seats still available. He conveniently snags the corner seat, the one with the plexiglass wall and railing, and leans against it. He has a 40-minute train ride to the other side of Seoul ahead of him. He closes his eyes and attempts to sleep, but his smartwatch around his wrist pings a message from the coworker group chat. It’s from Beomjun, who Jeongmin finds especially irritating. The message reads, “Jeongmin-ssi, grab the team some iced coffees on the way since you’ll be there early."

Jeongmin sighs heavily, and pushes up the bridge of his glasses. As he is typing out his reluctant response, the train suddenly lurches to one side, then to the other. Some women shriek in surprise. Jeongmin grips the metal bar for safety. He’s never been on the train when something like this happens, but he heard that it’s been happening more these days, because of the heat or something. The train makes a low, grinding sound, before coming to a sputtering halt. The fluorescent lights flicker, but stay on.

Jeongmin looks out the window behind him, and sees that the train has stopped in the middle of the blue ironwork bridge taking them over the Han River. If it was during any other
time, Jeongmin might have enjoyed the view from here: the two towers, Namsan and Lotte, sandwiching the roiling brown expanse of water the train is suspended over. The lights finally clunk off, along with the AC, and the car erupts in murmurs.

“What’s going on? Is the driver okay?”

“Shit, I’m going to be late for work.”

“I’m sure it’ll turn back on in a second.”

As the sounds of the car full of passengers grows more frantic, Jeongmin sits up straight and listens harder; under the din of worrying, he hears something coming from the roof of the train. Others begin to notice.

An elderly woman says, “Oh, I think they’re coming to fix the train! Remember, the driver said something a few minutes ago about a leak in car ten.”

The frail-looking old man sitting next to the woman says snippily, “Why would they fix it now, with a full train in the middle of a bridge?”

Heavy footsteps reach the top of the car, and Jeongmin’s gut twists with an unexplainable feeling that something is wrong. The steps don’t sound like those of a worker’s steel-toed boots. They’re heavier, and hurried, like a horse galloping, and there’s a metallic clicking sound accompanying each rolling thud the footsteps make on the metal train car. Jeongmin tries to think logically, but can only come up with impossibilities. He glances at his watch and makes note of the time.

Hara: Car ten, Friday, August 5th, 8:10AM
Hara twirls the plastic straw inside her reusable water cup as she waits for the train to pull into the station. She presses the cold cup to her forehead with a sigh, and a drop of condensation slides down her cheek. Her bright purple backpack has cemented her uniform to her skin with the amount of sweat collecting already. She ran to get here; the train doesn’t come to Hara’s stop as often as the other areas of Seoul, and she could’ve been waiting for up to thirty minutes otherwise. The train barrels into the station, sending a gust of hot wind through the crack in the barricade before it slows and stops. A few passengers leave, and Hara finds a seat near the middle, where the aircon is the strongest. She takes out her cellphone from her backpack’s front pocket and texts her teammates: “On the train now. Be there soon!”

Hara is the one who suggested the song for the talent show, not because she likes K-pop, but because she knows Hojun likes K-pop. The whole dance team agreed with it, and they’d enjoyed practicing to it for the past three weeks. But the fact that Hojun liked it mattered the most to her.

It is finally Hara’s chance to impress Hojun enough that he’ll want to ask her out. The other girls on the dance team agree that Hojun probably likes her, so this is the perfect opportunity. Hara hopes that if they start dating, he’ll follow her to Seoul National University to study veterinary medicine together.

The train travels through the swankier part of the city with 50-floor apartment buildings and expensive-looking cafés. She wonders about what the people living there had to do to get there, mentally comparing her parents’ modest duplex home with the ones she’s seeing now, all shiny floor-to-ceiling windows and steel. A message buzzes its arrival in Hara’s hand, and it’s her best friend, Seoyeon, sending a typical excited message full of emoticons and exclamation
marks. “After your practice, meet me in Shin-saem’s class…Junseop is acting crazy again!!! I swear I’m going to break up with him this time.” Hara hopes Seoyeon is serious. Junseop is not on track to take Suneung exam this Fall—instead, he makes it his goal to set the smoke alarms off in school every week from all the cigarettes he smokes in the bathroom, and hangs out with his other delinquent friends at the PC rooms instead of going to study like everyone else. Seoyeon is totally out of his league, and it stresses Hara out to see her best friend so upset.

The rest of the ride is uneventful, until the second to last stop of the journey. As the train departs the station, something smacks the window behind Hara’s head with force, and the light inside the car changes. She startles and looks over her shoulder, thinking she might see a stunned pigeon or magpie flying away after its miscalculation, but instead sees the color draining from her face in the reflection of the window when her mind begins to make sense of what she is actually looking at.

Hara screams.

Panic seizes every muscle in her body—the window is completely covered in blood, and the amount is from something much larger than a bird. Hara knows it’s blood; it’s pretty difficult to see it as anything else. The others on the train began standing up and moving away hurriedly, murmuring to themselves.

“Oh, Jesus. You don’t think someone jumped, do you?”

“It has to just be a bird or something. It has to be.”

“A bird doesn’t make that much blood.”

“How do we know it’s blood? What else is red on a train?”
Hara wills herself to stand up, running away from the window and toward the corner of the car by the doors, but the blood is running off the window as the train picks up speed, and the rivulets streak across the door’s smaller windows. She closes her eyes, and waits for the train to pull into her station.

The train finally slows to a stop at the next station, and an announcement from the driver comes on over the speaker.

“Hello, passengers. In car ten, there is a leak of fluid from the machinery that heats the train’s seats in the winter.”

Hara opens her eyes and sighs in relief when she hears this. It’s not blood. It can’t be.

The driver continues, “When you are exiting the train, please, do not panic. The Repairmen will be arriving soon.” Even though Hara feels somewhat reassured, something about the driver’s voice seems off, trembling. There is something underneath his words.

The train doors open, and Hara is hit in the face by the oppressive August heat, now accompanied by the sharp, metallic smell of whatever is on the outside of the train. She can’t help but notice the splattering of red all across the side of the metal car, but tells herself that it’s not what she thinks it is.

She steps gingerly onto the platform, noticing that others who are getting off at the stop are staring at the mess on the outside of the train, too. Hara tries to hold it together, to not look terrified, and hoists her backpack higher onto her shoulders while she makes her way to her exit. As she jostles the backpack, her cellphone clatters out onto the concrete floor—great, she must’ve not zipped the pocket up all the way. She quickly bends down to pick it up, and a
shadow sweeps overhead, toward the roof of the train. Again, dread seeps through her arms and legs and she is frozen with fear. There is something else.

Hara looks over her shoulder, sees what landed on top of the train, and begins to run for her life.

Soojin: Ttukseom Station, Friday, August 5*, 8:20AM

The nursing room has to be the least convenient place in the world, Soojin thinks. The fact she even has to find a room to feed and change her baby in this country is ridiculous, but on top of that, the door was locked, so she had to find a staff member with a key to open it, already wasting ten minutes of her commute time. To make things even more stressful, her baby, tucked into his portable bassinet stroller, was beginning to overheat even in a muslin blanket, and shrieking with hunger. It hasn’t even been twenty minutes since they left the house, and already, so much was going wrong.

She pushes the stroller through the empty hallway toward the help desk, cringing at the reverberation of her son’s loud cries bouncing off the dingy tile walls. When she reaches the booth at the other end of the hallway, the worker, a young pimple-faced kid, is playing games on his phone, and doesn’t acknowledge her at all.

“Excuse me,” Soojin says. Her baby starts up another round of crying.

The worker glances up from his game. “Yes, what do you need?”

“Can you please unlock the nursing room?”

“It should be unlocked, ma’am.”
Soojin closes her eyes to hold in the frustration building behind her skull. “It’s not, I’ve already tried it. So, can you please unlock it for me?”

The kid puts his phone down on the counter with a mumble of curses under his breath that Soojin pretends she doesn’t hear, and grabs the ring of keys to the left of him, and steps out of the booth. Together, they walk back down the hallway with her now screaming baby. He unlocks the door, and gives Soojin the keys. “Just bring them back when you’re done,” the kid says with a sigh. After he disappears into the hallway, Soojin wonders if she should just leave them in the door for the other mothers who are bound to interact with this idiot today.

Inside the windowless, silent room, Soojin finally feels calm. She carefully lifts her fussy baby out of his stroller and places him onto the changing station. His head is hot and sweaty, and she wipes his face gently with a wet wipe to try and cool him off. He finally stops crying and calms down, but his pudgy bottom lip hasn’t ceased its quivering. His hair is finally starting to grow in, and he’s looking more and more like Jihoon every day, with his big puppy-dog eyes and sweet, gummy smile. Soojin and Jihoon haven’t decided on the perfect name for him yet; the fortuneteller gave them a list of names a few months before he was born, and they’ve been playing around with the ones she suggested. Soojin likes the name Ian, because if he ever decides to study abroad, his name will be easily understood by foreigners.

She changes and feeds her baby, and he coos as she softly pats his tiny back with the palm of her hand back to sleep. Soojin loves being a mother, despite how challenging it was in the beginning—her baby is her first and possibly only child, and to say she was ill-equipped is a severe understatement, but that’s life. She spent the first two months of her son’s life indoors,
trying desperately to understand his screams, squeals, and tears. Eventually, the two fell into a rhythm together, caretaker and cared for.

Jihoon hasn’t fully adjusted, but he’s trying his best, Soojin tells herself, but today was supposed to be a family outing—the three of them, visiting Ian’s grandparents, Soojin’s parents, for the first time since he was born. Instead, Jihoon had to go into the office for some last-minute work. Soojin can’t really blame him for that, but she *can* blame his thankless office job for making him so absent in their lives. She hopes one day, when they move out of the city, things will be different.

A few minutes later, when Ian is deeply asleep, Soojin wraps him back up in his muslin and tucks him back into the carrier attached to the stroller. She washes her hands in the room’s tiny sink and gets ready to leave, reaching for the keys that the worker kid gave her. She decides she’ll be the bigger person and give them back, despite his rudeness toward her. She opens the door with one hand and pushes the stroller with the other and turns the corner. She barely has time to look up when she practically plows into a young girl in a school uniform and wearing a big purple backpack, running at full speed down the hallway.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Soojin says. “Are you okay?”

The girl is clearly upset, her brown eyes are wide and brimming with tears, and her long, straight hair is sticking to her sweaty forehead. “Don’t go that way,” she rasps through heavy breaths. “Come on. Come with me. We need to hide.”

Soojin looks beyond the girl and sees others coming from the same direction now, running or walking swiftly, and people who are clearly strangers are talking amongst each other, something that doesn’t happen often. She looks back at the girl’s sallow, frightened face, and
realizes something has to be terribly wrong. The girl grabs Soojin’s shirtsleeve and begins pulling her and Ian’s stroller toward the exit.

Soojin resists. “Wait, hold on. Is there a fire or something?”

The girl shakes her head. “No, it’s something much worse. Please, we have to go. Get your baby out of here.”

“Then, what? Is the North attacking?” It couldn’t possibly be bad enough for Soojin to walk the fifteen minutes with her baby back to her house in the sweltering heat.

“It’s—I don’t even know how to explain,” the young girl says. “Please, ma’am, let’s go.”

Soojin allows the girl to steer her through the crowd of other panicked people toward the escalators. Soojin and the girl pick up the stroller with Ian inside, astoundingly still sleeping, and carry him quickly down to the sidewalk. From this exit, looking up, Soojin can see the subway tracks on the blue bridge that connects this station to the next. The train is slowly rolling out of the station now, the metal glinting brightly in the strong, early morning sunlight like the iridescent scales of a venomous snake.

There is a huge, black figure on top of the moving train.

**Yongsik, Car three, 8:22AM**

Yongsik’s joints are screaming from his frantic climb down the subway stairs, but he makes it inside the train just as the doors begin to close. He hobbles his way to the burgundy elderly seats at the front of the car, and uses his cane to support his body as he eases down onto it. He hangs his cane on the metal handrail next to the seat and smooths his khakis over his bony knees.
This morning, Yongsik is going to play *baduk* with some of his friends. Minchul, Jongsoo, and Sangho are his closest friends; he’s known them for as long as he can remember. Minchul, with his silly sense of humor and missing front tooth, Jongsoo, the shortest and most successful, and Sangho, the strongest and wittiest, spring to his mind.

He grew up with them in the time Korea was rebuilding from the war—their bodies were tanned and skinny, and their clothes were many seasons overworn, but Yongsik remembers that time fondly: despite being poor, Minchul’s mother would make them *ddeokguk* for an after-school snack, and it was the best he’s ever tasted. Afterwards, the boys would kick around a ball they fashioned out of old t-shirts and rags through the dusty streets of Seoul, singing songs and laughing together. Now, they are old men. Many of their friends are long dead, but the four of them have withstood time like the ancient trees they rebuilt the city around. He’s grateful for his life, but often wonders why he got to make it this far.

After *baduk*, he’ll probably spend the rest of the day alone at home or wandering around the neighborhood. After his wife died, Yongsik’s friends are the only connection he has to his generation anymore, so he cherishes them. Yongsik’s only child, Eunjoo, has her own life with her husband and son, so he usually doesn’t want to bother her with his problems. He wonders if she’ll be around to take a phone call today.

Yongsik is startled out of his daydreaming by a loud screech. The train, which has begun to make its journey over the Han River, has slowed to a crawl before finally shutting down. The lights turn off, and the other passengers begin to murmur to themselves.

The woman sitting next to him says, “Oh, I think they’re coming to fix the train!”
“But why would they fix it now, with a full train, in the middle of a bridge?” Yongsik grumbles. His eyes catch a smartly-dressed young man with glasses. He looks utterly terrified. Yongsik initially thinks the boy is overreacting—kids are so anxious these days for seemingly no reason—but then he begins to hear what sounds like a dog’s claws on the roof of the train. The steps are too heavy to be a dog though. Maybe a bear would be a better comparison, but that would make no sense. Suddenly, the footsteps stop, and it’s eerily quiet.

Yongsik continues to watch the well-dressed man as he looks at his watch, and then the roof of the train crumbles like a tin can and splits right down the middle to reveal something out of a nightmare.

A giant, spindly arm, that meets at a single, glinting point like a scorpion’s stinger or a wolf’s fang, descends downward until it reaches the train’s floor. Everyone is in shock as the rest of the creature comes into view. It’s built like an insect, with six legs disproportionately longer than its main torso, which suspends above the floor. The eyes are cavernous black holes, and its mouth is mangled with jagged, thin teeth that are exposed in a lipless grimace. Behind its back are leathery, clawed wings, tucked in as the creature stoops down and another leg drops inside.

A woman starts screaming first, and then the whole train erupts in chaos. People start running for the end of the car’s adjoining doors that lead into other parts of the train, clawing and pushing each other in a frenzied mass of bodies. The creature’s head tilts slightly to the side as if confused by the reaction it caused, before the rest of its legs descend into the gaping cavity from above. Yongsik is frozen to the polyester seat in terror. But, the thing isn’t moving quickly. It’s exploring, touching things with its dagger-like appendages, scraping them along the metal
handgrips that line the car, its hollow eye holes transfixed like some baby animal feeling out its alien world for the first time.

Someone starts shaking him on the shoulder, and Yongsik tears his eyes away from the creature teetering closer to him. He looks up at the young man with the glasses.

“Get up, sir! Please!” The man’s eyes are wide with shock.

Yongsik’s legs strain and shake as he tries to lift himself up. The creature is about halfway to them now, and Yongsik can already smell the fetid breath from the maw of a mouth wafting over him like fog on a mountain. Yet, it makes no advances to kill them. It simply stands there, watching them, with the same puzzled look on its terrible face, if one could even attribute a human emotion to something so gruesome looking.

The man with the glasses is surprisingly strong, and lifts Yongsik fully out of the seat and toward the doors, pulls them open, and the two climb inside. Still, the creature doesn’t attack. Instead, it moves more quickly than it had before, back to the place it descended from, lifts itself up out of the hole it made in the train, and disappears from sight. Yongsik and the other man can hear the creature’s scraping and skittering on the roof before silence.

“Are you okay? Can you walk, sir?” the man in the glasses says after a minute.

“Barely,” Yongsik replies.

The man speaks in a panicked, overwhelmed tone. “There’s an escape hatch somewhere on the next car. We’ll have to go through it to get out of here.”
Beyond the man’s slender shoulder, Yongsik can see a few people in the next car, lining up single-file and waiting for their turn to crawl out a busted-out window, presumably onto the tracks.

The man continues, “From there, we’ll have to walk to the emergency ladder. I read about it just now and I think it’s not far from where the train has stopped.” Yongsik notices the glowing phone in the man’s hand for the first time. He’s gripping onto it, and his teeth are chattering.

Asking the obvious, Yongsik says, “Did you try calling the police? Did anyone try calling the police?”

The man shakes his head, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. “I tried pressing the emergency call button, but the lines are completely down, and I can’t get through to my mother. Something really bad is happening.”

Yongsik looks again at the open window, and then back where he and the man in the glasses came from, at the open cavern in the roof. The climb will probably kill him—but he’d rather risk his life trying to save himself than wait for that thing to come back and decide it was done toying with them.

Yongsik stands as straight and strong as he can, filled with a sudden burst of strength, and pulls open the door to the next car. “Come on. No use in just talking about getting out,” he says to the young man in glasses, who is now fully shaking with fear.

Yongsik puts a hand on his shoulder. “You were tough before, helping me out of that chair. Thank you,” he says. “Now, pull it together.”
Author Biography

Natalie Matheny is a teacher, vocalist, and author hailing from St. Louis, Missouri. She cultivated her passions for writing and music as a child surrounded by rock albums and literary classics, and used them to fuel her unyielding sense of adventure. Currently, she lives within a stone’s throw from the beach in Busan, South Korea with her Stratocaster-wielding husband. When not wrangling tiny humans, or belting out songs in solo singing rooms, Natalie enjoys collecting beach glass and obsidian chips, listening to metal music with noise-canceling headphones, and cuddling up with her two cat babies, Pumpkin and Juneau.