

The Thing That Happened

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The Thing That Happened

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Chapter 1: JAM

Setting:

A utility/storage room in a large corporate office.

Characters:

Jordan: 30-ish white male. Office temp and frustrated artist.

Sandra: 40s-ish Latina/Hispanic female. Administrative assistant.

Derek: Late 20s – 30ish male, any race/ethnicity. Underling to the boss.

Denise: 40s or 50s female, any race/ethnicity. The Boss.

There is also one line by an offstage male voice.

A common utility/storage room in a large corporate office. There are shelves along the walls with office supplies, reams of paper, a large industrial 3-hole punch, a paper cutter, and big stacked boxes that look like they've been through several moves with no one knowing where else to put them. There is one doorless entryway, stage left.

Down stage center stands a large office machine with its back to the audience. It should be about the size of a large copier, but there are no distinguishing markings on its back or sides to indicate its actual function. It is a monolith.

Jordan, a white male office worker in his 30's, stands downstage at the machine, holding a screwdriver which he's not really using. He is vexed.

JORDAN

Goddammit.

Sandra, a Hispanic woman in her 40s, enters, doing her own thing.

Can you help with this?

SANDRA

What?

JORDAN

It's jammed or something.

SANDRA

OK.

JORDAN

I've checked all over and can't find anything.

SANDRA

...OK.

I don't really know anything about that.

JORDAN

You don't use it?

SANDRA

Yeah, sure.

JORDAN

Has this ever happened to you?

SANDRA

It's crapped out on me before, yeah.

JORDAN

What did you do?

SANDRA

I called somebody.

JORDAN

Who, though?

SANDRA

Help Desk.

JORDAN

Ugh. Fuck me. Seriously?

She shrugs.

They take forever.

SANDRA

You asked what I do, that's what I do.

She leaves.

JORDAN

Fuck.

Derek (male, 20's, any ethnicity) hurries in, carrying a tall, heavy-looking stack of paper documents and multiple phones. At the sight of the jammed machine he freezes in horror. At first he is so vexed he can barely make coherent sound, much less form words.

DEREK

Hnnnh?

JORDAN

Yeah.

Aah uh ah?	DEREK
No.	JORDAN
GAAAAH.	DEREK
I know.	JORDAN
What's happening?	DEREK
I don't know.	JORDAN
Whatwhatwhat is happening?	DEREK
It's jammed.	JORDAN
Guh!	DEREK
I know.	JORDAN
I'm on deadline, like right now.	DEREK
Sucks for all of us, yes.	JORDAN
It's for <i>Denise</i> .	DEREK
I understand, Derek.	JORDAN

DEREK

Can you fix it?

JORDAN

I'm trying, but so far no good.

DEREK

(Wheels spinning, then:)

FUCK.

Derek exits, top speed. Jordan sighs, and starts re-checking all the stuff he's already tried. Sandra enters, hovering in the doorway.

SANDRA

Whatcha gonna do with that screwdriver? Take the thing apart?

JORDAN

I don't know, if I have to, yes.

SANDRA

Go get 'em, McGyver.

JORDAN

...

SANDRA

By the way, did you get my emails about sending me that thing?

JORDAN

(Concentrating on the machine.) What?

SANDRA

The thing, you were going to send it to me.

JORDAN

Yes.

SANDRA

Did you get my emails?

JORDAN

Yes, Sandra, I got them. I will send you the thing.

OK. **SANDRA**

JORDAN
I'm just kind of involved with this right now.

OK. **SANDRA**

JORDAN
In case that wasn't obvious.

....OK. **SANDRA**

*Sandra exits. Jordan continues to pull and push things inside the machine.
Suddenly a piercing alarm sounds.*

JORDAN
The fuck?

Derek runs back in, still carrying his stack of documents and devices.

DEREK
What did you do???

JORDAN
What?

DEREK
WHAT...DID...YOU...DO?

JORDAN
Are you kidding? That's not me! I didn't do anything!

DEREK
You did something.

JORDAN

No, Derek, I didn't. There's nothing I could possibly do here that would make the building alarms go off!

DEREK

I don't know that.

JORDAN

Derek, seriously, *what?*

The alarm stops.

JORDAN

See?

DEREK

What did you do?

JORDAN

I didn't do anything, Derek, stop it.

DEREK

Is it fixed?

JORDAN

No, Derek, it's not fixed. Does it look fixed?

DEREK

Well, I don't know, do I? How the fuck should I know? I just need it working. I need it working right now!

JORDAN

Sandra said we should call the Helpless Desk.

DEREK

Oh, God.

JORDAN

I know. I'm not calling India so they can send an email to Argentina so they can create a work order for the guys in Phoenix to send a message to the IT guys two floors down from us to come up here and fix this fucking thing. I don't have two weeks to wait for this.

DEREK

I don't have two hours, Jordan. I don't have two minutes. Do you understand that? Do you comprehend how much, how severely I do not have *two minutes*, Jordan? Denise is standing in her office waiting for this stuff, Jordan. *Standing*. In her office.

JORDAN

I get it, Derek, I really do.

DEREK

No, I don't think you do. I am about to start crying here, Jordan. Crying. I am a grown ass man and I'm about to start crying. AT WORK.

JORDAN

Jesus, Derek.

DEREK

I am becoming a danger to myself and others, Jordan. I mean it.

JORDAN

OK, I think we need to calm down, put this in perspective. This is not the end of the world.

DEREK

FUCK YOU, JORDAN.

JORDAN

Whoa.

DEREK

This is my *life*, motherfucker. And if you had any sense you'd recognize that it's *your* life, too. I mean if someone goes on a shooting spree in here tomorrow it's not gonna say "ARTIST TRAGICALLY AMONG THE DEAD IN SHOOTING RAMPAGE", it's gonna say "MISERABLE OFFICE DRONE KILLS SEVEN FELLOW DRONES COMMA SELF". *This* is where your life is *happening*, Jordan, so don't act like it doesn't *matter*.

JORDAN

I didn't say it doesn't matter, Jesus, of course it matters!

DEREK

Well, act like it!

JORDAN

I'm standing here yelling at you, aren't I??

Well, *good!* **DEREK**

OK! **JORDAN**

SO DO SOMETHING!!! **DEREK**

Jordan hits the side of the machine. The lights go out.

JORDAN
(In darkness)

That wasn't me, was it?

Ummm... **DEREK**

That wasn't me! **JORDAN**

Ummm... **DEREK**

Come on! **JORDAN**

I don't know. **DEREK**

Stop it. That makes no sense. **JORDAN**

What did you do? **DEREK**

JORDAN
I didn't do anything! I hit the side of it, that's all!

DEREK
Well, you must have done something.

JORDAN

That's absurd.

DEREK

It's all absurd, Jordan! Everything about this is absurd! *Catch the fuck up!*

SANDRA

Hey, guys.

DEREK/JORDAN

GAAAAAAHHH!!!! / Whoa!

SANDRA

Bang-up job you're doing in here.

JORDAN

Jesus, Sandra, you scared the shit out of us.

SANDRA

Keep up the good work.

JORDAN

IT WASN'T ME.

SANDRA

Pretty sure it was.

JORDAN

Sandra, I say this with all due respect, but I really need you to fuck off right now.

SANDRA

You're gonna send me the thing, right?

JORDAN

Jesus, Sandra.

SANDRA

I mean, once you get the lights back on in the entire office, of course.

JORDAN

IT WASN'T ME.

Just send me the thing, please.

SANDRA

Sandra...

JORDAN

Send me. The thing.

SANDRA

Pause.

Sandra?

DEREK

Pause.

Did she leave?

Pause.

She's kind of intense, right?

Lights come on.

Hey!

DEREK

OK.

JORDAN

What did you do?

DEREK

I didn't do anything!

JORDAN

Whatever. Just get it working, Jordan. I mean it. You do not want Denise coming down here.

DEREK

Derek exits, passing Sandra as she enters. She watches him scurry out.

He's kind of intense, right?

SANDRA

JORDAN

...

SANDRA

Hey, you got the lights back on.

JORDAN

That wasn't me.

SANDRA

So, no luck?

JORDAN

No, no luck.

SANDRA

You should re-set that knob on the left.

JORDAN

What knob?

SANDRA

The green thing. Turn it, then push the lever. That's what the Help Desk guy did last time.

A murderous pause.

JORDAN

That's what he did last time?

SANDRA

Yeah.

JORDAN

The last time this thing jammed, that's what he did?

SANDRA

Yeah.

JORDAN

And you didn't think to mention it until now?

She shrugs.

Why? Why would you not tell me that? What is wrong with you???

SANDRA

Where's my thing?

JORDAN

What?

SANDRA

Where...is...my...thing?

JORDAN

...

SANDRA

I've been asking you for the thing for two weeks now. Weeks. But you can't be bothered because who am I, right? My shit can wait, I didn't go to college, I'm just another Anita or Ana or Maria with three kids and a mother with cancer at home and not a white boy artist who's just here "temporarily" for the last five years because he's *better than this*.

JORDAN

Whoa.

SANDRA

I got better things to do with my time than play games with you, little boy, but if we're gonna do this, I will do this. And I will win.

JORDAN

Sandra, I didn't...I wasn't....

SANDRA

I was a Marine wife, don't fuck with me.

JORDAN

Sandra, I'm really sorry if...

SANDRA

Just send me the thing.

Pause.

JORDAN

My apologies, Sandra. I will send you the thing the minute I leave this room.

SANDRA

Thank you, Jordan.

Derek rushes back in.

DEREK

Where are we? Any progress? Any hope? ANYTHING AT ALL? Because Denise is saying she's *going to come down here herself* in a minute.

JORDAN

Yeah, we got something.

DEREK

Oh. Good. Great, right?

JORDAN

Sandra...remembered something.

SANDRA

Just came to me.

DEREK

OK, well let's do it. What is it?

JORDAN

Just this. Here we go.

Jordan leans down, turns and pulls as suggested, then stands back up.

Pause.

They all look at the machine.

DEREK

Is something supposed to happen?

JORDAN

I...

DEREK

Shouldn't something be happening?

JORDAN

That's what you said to do, right?

SANDRA

Yup.

JORDAN

Well????

SANDRA

(Shrugs.) Must be something else.

Pause.

JORDAN

I have always hated you, Sandra.

SANDRA

I have always not given a shit, Jordan.

DENISE

How's everybody doing?

Denise, the boss, is standing in the doorway. Derek shrivels.

JORDAN

Hey. Denise.

DENISE

We're having kind of a bad day, aren't we?

Awkward silence.

This thing giving you trouble, is it?

They nod.

Let's see here.

SANDRA

I told them to call the Help Desk.

DENISE

Ugh. The Helpless Desk. Let me take a look.

DEREK

You know about these?

DENISE

Please. This damn thing owned me for the first year I worked here. Did you check the tray?

JORDAN

The tray?

DENISE

Yeah, down there...anything gets in there, the whole thing just goes bonkers.

She crouches down, digs around.

DENISE

Yup.

She stands, holding a hard candy, wrapped.

You had a Jolly Rancher in there.

JORDAN

What?

DENISE

Watermelon. Anyone want it?

DEREK

Seriously? A Jolly Rancher?

JORDAN

How the hell...?

DENISE

It happens.

DEREK

It does? That's a thing that happens?

She kicks the tray shut, and steps back toward the entryway as the machine hums to life.

DENISE

OK, now.

You guys.

You know what I'm going to say now, right?

They nod. Sort of swallowed, they answer:

JORDAN, SANDRA, AND DEREK

“Be kind to one another.”

DENISE

The rest of this building may not remember it, but I'd like for us to.

OK?

They nod.

OK.

Outside the room, at a distance, a popping sound is heard. Then raised voices and commotion, people running. More popping.

DENISE

What now?

She turns and steps just outside the entryway. Pop pop pop POP. With a spray of blood, Denise collapses back into the room, lifeless.

DEREK

What the?

POP!

They all jump. From outside, the sound of more screaming and popping, louder and louder, as the gunfire moves closer.

Derek looks down at the pile of paper he is still carrying. He looks up at the others, then quickly move so his back is up against the wall beside the entryway. He hoists the papers up, as though he might throw them.

POP POP POP POP.

Jordan crouches down behind the stage right/shielded side of the machine. He changes his grip on the screwdriver, his only hope of a makeshift weapon.

He motions for Sandra to squeeze behind, too, but she shakes her head no. She goes to the paper cutter and quickly unscrews the blade arm, then yanks it free and brandishes it like a sword. She positions herself behind the cardboard boxes, blade raised.

POP POP POP POP.

In the terrible silence, each of them, isolated, clutching their sad makeshift weapons, faces the terrifying reality that these are their last moments on earth. They may regret, or pray, or weep, or quake, as they experience this awful moment, horribly alone. Then:

KRTCH.

KRTCH.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

Goddammit. Fucking jammed...

KRTCH.

Suddenly: an opening! And they look to each other -- they are not alone! Where before they each saw two pains-in-the-ass, they now see two beloved fucking children of God, made in His image; two comrades-in-arms, with whom they are about to fight...and win...and live.

They connect with each other.

Sandra gives the signal. They turn to the doorway and inhale as one, ready to charge.

Blackout.

END

Chapter 2: Status Update

SETTING:

A suburban kitchen on a Saturday afternoon

CHARACTERS:

Lee, a woman in her mid-to-late 40s

Gabe, her 17-year-old son

Music blares from offstage at an ear-splitting level – “Hit the Quan” by i♥Memphis – as lights rise on Lee, a woman in her forties, sitting at her suburban kitchen table.

“Hit the Quan, hit the Quan”

She’s got on jeans, a plain black t-shirt, and a cabled cardigan thrown over it.

“Hit the Quan, hit the Quan”

She is looking at her laptop with a cold, dead stare, something between “migraine” and “combat vet”.

LEE

Gabe...

GABE!

GABE

(from offstage) WHAT?

***“I said get down low and swing your arm
I said get down low and hit the Quan”***

LEE

TURN IT DOWN!

GABE

(off) WHAT?

LEE

TURN IT DOWN, GABE, JESUS!

Her son Gabe appears. He’s 17, wearing a t-shirt, basketball shorts, and socks that should probably have gone in the wash a few days ago. He’s carrying his iPhone, from which he appears to be controlling the music via Bluetooth connection to speakers somewhere. He turns it down – but not out.

GABE

You called?

LEE

Down, please. You need to be writing your essay.

GABE

Need is a strong word.

LEE

Gabe. College.

GABE

You don't think this is getting me in the collegiate state of mind?

LEE

It's too much, Gabe, I can't think.

GABE

One statement does not necessarily follow the other.

LEE

Yes, yes...

GABE

Your cognitive deficiency may be for reasons having nothing to do with the sound level, or me, or indeed with the Hitting of the Quan at all.

LEE

I'm doing something.

GABE

Maybe thinking just isn't your strong suit, have you considered that possibility?

LEE

It is entirely possible, pally, yes. Nevertheless...

GABE

Correlation does not equal causation.

He flashes a grin at her, clearly his "cute face".

LEE

Well, let's test my hypothesis, please, and see how my thinking goes without so much Quan-Hitting, ok?

GABE

Indeed.

He turns the music off.

LEE

Write your essay!

He leaves. She looks at her laptop again with that same dead stare. She scrolls. Something in her faces changes, a tremor...but then: the music blasts again, this time Adele's "Hello" at a teeth-rattling volume.

"Hello. It's me."

LEE

GABE!

He appears, with a carefully crafted super-innocent look on his face.

GABE

I thought this might be more soothing.

"I was wondering if after all these years you'd like to meet"

LEE

Gabe!

GABE

Not helpful?

LEE

I will pinch the head right off your neck with my bare hands and have no regrets.

GABE

So...not helpful.

He turns it off.

LEE

Is your essay done?

GABE

It would go faster if you'd help me.

LEE

That's all you. I'm doing something.

GABE

Certainly, it's just...I can't think with all this *quiet*.

They look at each other a moment. He flashes his cute-face grin. Another moment. He exits.

She returns to her laptop. She scrolls. After a considered pause, she sighs and puts her hands on the keyboard. She thinks. She begins to type something...when suddenly the music bursts on again, this time Violent Femmes "Add It Up".

***"Day after day, I will walk and I will play
But the day after today, I will stop and I will start"***

She jerks like she's been hit. She is motionless for a second, then leaps to her feet, agitated.

LEE

GABE. OFF. OFF RIGHT NOW.

Gabe appears.

GABE

What's that?

LEE

OFF OFF OFF, I MEAN IT, OFF -- RIGHT NOW. OFF!

He turns the volume down.

***"Why can't I get just one kiss?/Why can't I get just one kiss?/There may be some things that I
wouldn't miss/But I look at your pants and I need a kiss"***

LEE

Turn it off! Right now. I mean it.

GABE

I just thought it would be helpful to you to have some of your own music...

LEE

Gabe, I swear to god...

GABE

You know, music that's familiar and comforting to our elder folk...

LEE

It's still not off, Gabe...

GABE

Well, what's the point of a stupid system where your whole life gets determined by one stupid essay anyway?

LEE

IT'S STILL NOT OFF.

TURN IT OFF, ALL THE WAY OFF, FOR GOD'S SAKE CAN YOU PLEASE JUST DO THIS FOR ME PLEASE? OFF!

Tears explode out of her, in a wave that startles them both.

Please...just turn it...

Gabe turns the music off. He watches her while she struggles and finally succeeds in getting her sobbing under control. This takes as much or as little time as it takes. When she's ready:

LEE

A friend of mine...

<clears her throat>

Somebody died.

<swallows>

Roach died.

My friend died and I just found out.

An old friend. From a long time ago. Roach. And that was his um...that song was kind of a favorite of his. Violent Femmes were his thing, his, his, um, his jam.

I was just looking at Facebook and Edwin Jacobs' status update said: "Roach is dead."

And it turns out he was in that shooting, in California a couple of days ago? Apparently he worked there.

So. So that's what's happening. That's why I'm upset.

Sorry.

GABE

His name was Roach?

LEE

Hah. Yeah. No. His name was Dave, but we had too many of those. Too Many Daves. So he was Roach. Which he dug, it was very punk rock. *(Beat)* It made sense. To us at least.

GABE

Well, that's...that's a bummer.

LEE

Yeah.

Can...can I...?

She returns to the table and brings up a picture on Facebook. He pulls up a chair next to her to look.

That's Roach, on the end there.

GABE

Yeah, Roach makes sense.

LEE

Right?

GABE

Which one is you?

LEE

Seriously?

Seriously. She points.

GABE

Whoa.

LEE

I know. Skinny.

GABE

That hair!

LEE

We were super cool. Obvi.

Somewhere in here he swings his legs across her lap, so he's sitting kind of across her now.

That night we had just come out of Rocky Horror and there was Roach and a bunch of the guys, hanging out outside the Vogue Theater which was like, what ya did....and we ended up getting chocolate shakes from who knows where - White Castle? Did White Castle have shakes? -- and putting vodka in them –

GABE

Yeeek.

LEE

I know. Then we hung out up on the reservoir while he blasted that Violent Femmes tape from his car. Me sitting there in the grass in my Columbia costume while he's dancing around me singing along, getting all "Why can't I get just one screw" right up at me. Man.

GABE

Roach makes sense.

LEE

I can't believe it actually *worked*.

GABE

...What?

LEE

Forget I said that. Don't think about that.

GABE

Yeah.

LEE

Yeah.

Beat.

GABE

How old were you?

LEE

(Beat.) Don't take this the wrong way, but you guys seem a lot younger than we were.

God, I hope you're younger than we were.

GABE

Yeah, don't think about that.

LEE

Yeah.

GABE

Yeah.

LEE

It feels like such a rip-off: he didn't die in a car crash, or of a heroin overdose – any of the things “Roach dying of” would have made sense. He was a software engineer. Dave the software engineer. And some asshole where he worked shot the place up.

He had a real job. And two kids. And a wife. (*gesturing at the screen*) And, apparently, khakis.

And tattoos. And a few piercing holes that had closed up, I'm sure.

GABE

How old was he?

LEE

Forty-seven.

That was old-people old.

But “David Williams, software engineer, dead at forty-seven”? Now that seems so *young*.

And here we all are, in different cities, with different lives, with our jowls and thighs and cat photos and our *teenagers trying to get into college*, which oh my god I can't even...I can't...

She puts her arm around him.

...and we're mourning him together on something called Facebook on something called the internet which none of us could have ever imagined back when he was Roach.

So I'm here on his timeline, looking at pictures of us with our hair and our eyeliner and our Hüsker Dü t-shirts and I just don't know what to say. But I don't want to *not* say something. Because I *should* say something, I should say something for Roach. And I just...don't know what.

They sit and look at the screen for a few moments.

GABE

What about...

He shifts the laptop and types. Not at great length, just something short. Then he turns the screen back for her to see. She reads what he has written. We can guess from her face that it is at once painful, funny, profound, and beautiful. She nods. She kisses his head.

GABE

It's OK?

She nods again, not trusting her voice. He posts – then leans back into her. It's sort of like she's cradling him in a lap he's now outgrown. They look at the screen together.

GABE

Whoa.

LEE

Wow.

GABE

That's a lot of likes.

LEE

Oh, hey. *(Someone has commented on her status.)*

That's Kimmy, she was the one with the safety pin in her lip...

GABE

Nuh-uh!

LEE

Nuh-huh.

They watch the likes and comments tally up.

GABE

Look at that. You're so popular...

LEE

Best ghostwriter ever.

Beat.

GABE

Will you help me with my essay now?

LEE

You do not need my help writing that essay.

GABE

No.

Beat.

But I'd like it anyway.

LEE

Are you nervous? About going away?

GABE

I guess. Excited, mostly. But nervous too, I guess.

LEE

Me too.

But.

No way but forward, pally.

A beat.

GABE

Indeed.

Beat.

LEE

OK, you go get started, let me just answer Kimmy real quick and I'll be in.

She kisses his head again; he uncurls himself and starts to exit.

LEE

Hey.

Yes'm?

GABE

Fuck it.

LEE

Whoa. Ears.

GABE

Play that Femmes album for me, would you?

LEE

A beat.

Indeed.

GABE

He exits. She regards her laptop. "Blister in the Sun" starts playing...

'When I'm out walking/I strut my stuff/And I'm so strung out'

...and after a brief moment, Lee starts typing away.

END

Chapter 3: Cassie Strickland Is Not Under the Bed

Setting:

A bedroom, with a bed and a cabinet; separately, an office with a desk.

Characters¹:

CLAY: 20s – 40s, male, any ethnicity. A mess.

HOWIE: 20s – 40s, male, any ethnicity, Clay's friend. Not a mess.

Clay, in his 20s to 40s, sits in his bed in boxer shorts and a t-shirt. He is holding his phone and looking unslept, unshaven, unkempt. With a great deal of trepidation, he starts to look over the side of his bed...but then chickens out. He makes a call.

CLAY

Come on, Howie...

Lights up elsewhere on Howie, 20s – 40s, at work. His phone buzzes.

Howie, please...pick the hell up.

Howie looks at the phone. He thinks. After a long moment he puts the phone down without answering.

Dammit.

Clay hangs up and again gingerly starts to peek over the side of his bed. Meanwhile Howie reconsiders, picks up his phone and calls back. Clay's phone buzzes, startling him.

Motherfuck!

He answers.

Howie!

HOWIE

Sorry, I...couldn't pick up. What's going on, how you doing?

CLAY

I can't get out of bed.

HOWIE

Oh. You sick?

CLAY

No, no, not...exactly. I just can't. Get out of bed.

HOWIE

...I get that. Yeah.

CLAY

No –

HOWIE

Do what you need to do.

No, it's not...that. Something is happening!

CLAY

What's happening?

HOWIE

There is someone under my bed.

CLAY

...what?

HOWIE

Something, under my bed.

CLAY

A beat.

What...makes you think there's someone –

HOWIE

--*Something!* –

CLAY

-- under your bed?

HOWIE

I can hear her.

CLAY

...It's a her.

HOWIE

Yes! I heard her whispering, and when I started to get up she tried to grab my ankle!

CLAY

She tried to grab your ankle?

HOWIE

Yes!

CLAY

You saw this?

HOWIE

Saw it, felt it, yes!

CLAY

HOWIE

Dude. No one is under your bed.

CLAY

Come over here and look and then tell me that! I'm telling you, she is under there, and if I try to get out of bed, she's gonna, she's gonna, she's just gonna...

HOWIE

What, exactly? She's gonna what?

CLAY

She's gonna...*get me*, that's what! Jesus!

HOWIE

Clay...

CLAY

How am I supposed to know what happens after that?? Come on, man!

HOWIE

Clay, look, I get it.

CLAY

You get it?

HOWIE

I get that it's hard for you, going out...

CLAY

Oh, huh, yeah, Howie, *ya think*? This whole town fucking hates me. No one wants to look at me.

HOWIE

That's not true.

CLAY

Except guess who, you know who really wanted to fucking look at me yesterday? I mean really fucking looked?

HOWIE

Who?

CLAY

Amber Strickland.

Yeah. I went out to the grocery store, just to the damn grocery store, and I saw her. Can you believe that? Of all people? From like a block away I saw her, and she was staring at me so hard. I can't even tell you what that stare looked like, but you can, you know, imagine.

HOWIE

Yeah...

CLAY

I'm lucky to be alive, from that look. I'm telling you.

But Howie? Honestly, what the...it wasn't my --- I'm not a fucking parent, this house isn't --- I'm just saying, they didn't have to ---

No. NO. I'm not gonna...do this again. No.

But, *yeah*, Howie, it's hard for me, going out. But I know what that is, and *that* is not *this*.

HOWIE

The whole town does not hate you, Clay.

CLAY

Bullshit.

HOWIE

Some of them are worried about you.

CLAY

Nobody's worried about me.

HOWIE

They're afraid you might hurt yourself.

CLAY

They wish I would fucking hurt myself.

HOWIE

Some, yeah, not gonna lie. But there are some who are...concerned. Including me.

CLAY

So now I'm also crazy? Fucking bullshit.

HOWIE

Dude. You just called me to help you escape a she-demon hiding under your bed. People are concerned.

CLAY

Don't act like I'm crazy. I'm dealing with some shit, but do not make out like I'm crazy.

You're the one person, Howie. Who's still, you know, here. For me. Who still picks up when I call. Please. Just come over. Please. I'll show you. Please.

HOWIE

...I can maybe come after work.

CLAY

After work? Man, really? I can't get out of my fucking bed!

HOWIE

OK, OK, lunch maybe! Jesus. I'll see about lunch. If I can. Do you need me to bring you anything?

CLAY

Yeah, no, but yeah, once you get here. I need you to get me my SIG.

HOWIE

Your pistol?

CLAY

Yeah, my SIG P220.

HOWIE

You want me to come to your house and get your gun and bring it to you in your bed.

CLAY

Yeah.

A beat.

HOWIE

...That's not...the one that ---

CLAY

No! No, of course not, you think I kept that? No! I sold it, sold everything to this dude from California, he bought pretty much my whole stash.

HOWIE

But not all.

CLAY

Howie, this whole town wants me dead, I'm not getting rid of them all.

No, this is my SIG Classic. I kept that one.

HOWIE

What are you going to do, shoot the lady under your bed?

CLAY

It's not a lady, and yes, I fucking will.

HOWIE

...Where are you keeping it?

CLAY

In the cabinet, where do you think?

A beat.

HOWIE

I assume I would need a key?

A long, tense beat.

CLAY

...Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kid--- Fuck you, Howie.

HOWIE

Sorry.

CLAY

FUCK YOU, HOWIE, I wear that key around my fucking neck now, I check it eight times a day are you fucking kidding me? "Would I need a key"????

HOWIE

I'm sorry.

CLAY

You got a fucking time machine, Howie, I will go back there right now, I will go back and lock that cabinet and I will I will I will *choke myself* with this fucking key! I will choke the fucking *life* out of my worthless sorry ass with this key and save everyone all the pain and trouble of hating me, I will do that, yes I will.

But, you know, *lacking that*, I have to keep living this miserable fucking life, and that means getting out of this bed. And *that* means killing this thing that is *under the bed* that is trying to *get me*. So PLEASE, Howie, PLEASE help me.

I will kill it, but you have to help me, Howie. Please help me.

Please. Howie. Please.

HOWIE

Clay...

Dude...you think Cassie Strickland is under your bed.

I know you actually know this, but I got to say it: Cassie Strickland is not under your bed.

She's over in Green Hill Cemetery...and that's a hard fact for you to deal with, and for Amber Strickland to deal with, but it is a fact.

You made a mistake. A big mistake, yes, the biggest, but it was a mistake. And this is really awful, and people don't know how to act around you, but someday they will again, I swear. It may not seem like it right now, but they'll find a way. Cassie's mom won't, no, but you can't do anything about that. All you can do now is learn from it, which you have. You won't ever make that mistake again. I know it, you know it, everybody knows it.

Cassie may be *why* you can't get out of bed, buddy. But she's not...actually...under your bed.

CLAY

Come over, you'll see, please come over.

HOWIE

No, Clay, I'm not gonna come over there and fetch your gun so you can shoot a bunch of holes in your floorboards. You don't need to be doing anything with your gun right now. You just need to get out of bed.

CLAY

I CAN'T, she will ---

HOWIE

--- Just look, then. Just look under the bed, and see that there's nothing under there. Just do that.

CLAY

I can't!

HOWIE

Just look. What'll it hurt to look?

CLAY

Because what if she's there!

HOWIE

She's not there.

CLAY

If I look and she's there, Howie...I will die. I know it.

HOWIE

You will not die.

CLAY

But Howie...I will genuinely shit myself.

HOWIE

Clay, if you look and she's there, you got bigger problems than shitting yourself.

CLAY

...Stay on the phone with me.

HOWIE

I'm right here. Just look.

It takes a moment, but Clay musters the strength to pull the covers up, and then to look under the bed. There is indeed nothing there. He drops the covers and sits back.

HOWIE

Clay?

CLAY

Nothing there.

HOWIE

OK.

So just...put your feet on the floor. That's the next thing. Just do that, just that much.

Clay revs his courage and starts to move, but stops when Howie continues.

Look, I gotta go. But listen, after that it's just one foot in front of the other, dude. And you can go across the room and get your gun yourself if you want to. Or just...not. Take a shower. Eat something. Get on with your life. Leave that shit locked up and get on with your life. See a shrink or something, seriously.

You're not a murderer. You're allowed to live. You just gotta do it. There's nothing stopping you but you.

You good?

A beat.

CLAY

I'm not fucking crazy, Howie.

HOWIE

Clay ---

Clay hangs up. Lights out on Howie.

After a moment, Clay's phone buzzes. He looks at it, then declines the call and tosses the phone aside on his bed.

He inches toward the edge of the bed and starts to lower one foot. He panics, though, and pulls it back.

He repositions himself into a crouch and after some maneuvering, he takes several deep breaths, psychs himself up...and leaps from the bed, landing as far out of its reach as possible. He turns quickly and looks back at the bed.

Nothing. He's clear.

He heads to the cabinet, readying the key to unlock it...but then he stops. He stands for a moment. He looks back at the bed, at his phone, at the cabinet again, hesitating.

Maybe Howie was right; maybe he could just...not.

CLAY

One foot in front of the other...

He makes the decision: leaving the cabinet locked, he takes a deep breath...and exits.

The room is empty for a long moment.

On the bed, Clay's phone buzzes. It continues until it stops.

Suddenly, Clay re-enters in a hurry, straight for the cabinet.

CLAY

No, fuck that. No.

Clay uses the key around his neck to unlock the cabinet and takes out his one remaining pistol. Drawing courage from the gun in his hand, he finds the nerve to

approach the bed and, in one quick movement, pulls the covers back to reveal...nothing under the bed. He lets the covers drop.

He sits on the floor next to the bed. A beat.

He lifts the covers again.

There is still nothing under the bed.

After a moment, he shatters: a combination of relief, grief, and shame overcome him.

Eventually he is able to suck it back in. Once he's pulled himself back together, a deep breath.

CLAY

Nothing stopping you but you.

With a new sense of calm, he gets up from the floor and goes to return the pistol. He opens the cabinet.

Cassie Strickland is inside the cabinet.

Clay screams and tries to jerk away, but before he can aim his gun at her, Cassie grabs him by the wrist. Clay, for all his greater size, is pulled into the cabinet, screaming and flailing like a wild animal. The door slams, and the cabinet rocks from the struggle inside.

The sound of a gunshot. The cabinet goes still. Silence.

After a moment, over on the bed Clay's phone buzzes.

It buzzes and buzzes and buzzes.

END

¹Addendum to Cast of Characters: CASSIE: girl age 4 – 9, non-speaking role.

Chapter 4: Things Are Looking Up

Setting: An aisle near the front of a 7-11 type convenience store, near a large hospital.

Characters:

ADAM: 20s – 40s-ish male nurse, any ethnicity, of large build. Could have played defense on a football team at some point, now he's a nurse in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

COLLEEN: 20s – 40s-ish female nurse, any ethnicity. New hire in the Emergency Department.

PAULA: 70s-ish female nurse, probably white but any ethnicity except Asian/Pacific Islander would work. Veteran nurse in Pediatrics.

The interior of a 7-11 type convenience store near a large hospital. ADAM, a burly man in a nurse's uniform, is scrutinizing a very limited selection of sewing kits and notions. He is not happy. He is holding a tiny sweater, and maybe occasionally holds something from the shelf up against the sweater to see how it looks.

Another nurse, COLLEEN, approaches him. She wears a cardigan over her uniform and is carrying her purchase in a small bag. She pulls out and begins to unwrap a piece of gum.

ADAM

(Glancing over) Lot of gum there, Colleen.

COLLEEN

Quitting smoking, Adam. ...It is Adam, yeah?

ADAM

Yeah.

COLLEEN

Aces. *(pops the gum in her mouth)* Figured I'd make all the big changes at once. New job, quit smoking, fresh start.

ADAM

Stressful. I'd more like to space those things out.

COLLEEN

Yeah, maybe it wasn't the best idea. But it's been fine. Pretty slow here at first. Dull, even.

ADAM

Dull is good.

COLLEEN

I'm supposed to say yes. But it's just...it doesn't help with the antsiness, you know? You don't expect to *ease* into a Level 1 Trauma Center.

ADAM

Just lucky, I guess.

COLLEEN

The E.D. I was in before was super-suburban, quiet, a whole lot of nothing. You go into Emergency, you sort of want to get your hands dirty. Like an earthquake or something.

ADAM

Now you're asking for it.

COLLEEN

Yeah, my mouth didn't make me real popular over there.

ADAM

Popular's overrated. You waiting on me?

COLLEEN

Nah, Paula – it's Paula, right? – she's getting some lottery tickets.

ADAM

Yup.

COLLEEN

If she can get the guy to quit staring up at the TV. She's so polite. She's where, again?

ADAM

Peds. (*pronounced "PEEDS"*) I'm NICU. (*pronounced "NICK YOU"*)

COLLEEN

That's intense, too. You not finding what you're looking for?

ADAM

I am not well pleased with this selection, no.

PAULA enters with her lottery tickets. She's also a nurse, at least a couple of decades older than the others. She's bubbly. A giggler.

PAULA

Got my scratchers!

ADAM

Great.

PAULA

(To Colleen) I do this every week, it's my little treat to myself. I like doing the Wheel of Fortune one and the Lucky Seven. My grandson makes a lot of fun of me for it, he lives with me, my grandson, and he's always making fun of me for buying my scratchers every week, he's always like "Grandma, you are wasting your money, throwing it away like that" but I tell him: I don't care, it makes me happy, so there. Ha!

She pulls out a coin and starts doing the scratching off.

COLLEEN

Good for you. Don't let him push you around.

PAULA

Oh, he wouldn't. Wendell's a sweet boy, really.

COLLEEN

Ever win anything?

PAULA

Every once in a while. Little things. One time I won \$100, so that was something. *(To Adam)* Is that for your knitting?

COLLEEN

Oh! You knit?

ADAM

Yes. Shut up.

COLLEEN

O...kay.

ADAM

Not really shut up, just people get weird about it.

COLLEEN

No, I think it's cool.

ADAM

It is cool.

COLLEEN

Hell yeah.

ADAM

People are stupid sometimes, though.

COLLEEN

Yup. I used to crochet. Never could figure out knitting, but I did do that. Crochet.

ADAM

Crochet is for pussies.

PAULA

You are too much!

COLLEEN

Well, it was in third grade, so.

ADAM

All crochet looks like it was made in third grade.

COLLEEN

You're not wrong.

ADAM

That's a craft project, not a garment.

COLLEEN

You should tell people.

ADAM

It'd be the right thing to do. So they don't look back later and think "Why didn't anyone tell me I was wearing a potholder?"

COLLEEN

Are we just bad people, though? Should we maybe let people kid themselves, and love the ugly thing they love?

ADAM

You mean, let them "have things"?

COLLEEN

Yeah, let them have things.

ADAM

...No. Truth matters. Call that shit out.

She gives him an approving look.

COLLEEN

You're my people.

PAULA

Who'd you make a sweater for?

ADAM

Sweaters, two of them. These two little twin preemie girls we've had in the NICU. They're going home today.

PAULA

Oh, that's precious!

ADAM

Been here so long, I thought I had plenty of time; I was out three days and I come back and they're leaving. I didn't expect them to take this giant turn for the better.

COLLEEN

How dare they.

ADAM

Right? I just needed to do the buttons, but I hadn't picked 'em out yet. So now I'm scrambling for buttons and what's here sucks.

COLLEEN

Buttons can indeed make or break a sweater.

ADAM

Grrr. Stupid preemies.

COLLEEN

So inconsiderate.

ADAM

The worst.

PAULA

Little miracles --- OH! OH! Oh, my goodness! Oh my GOODNESS, guess what?

COLLEEN

Did you win?

PAULA

I did, I think! I won! I think I won! Look at that, doesn't that say I just won 250 dollars???

COLLEEN

...Yeah, yes, it does! That sure looks like you just won 250 dollars!

PAULA

Oh my goodness!

ADAM

Hey, that's great.

COLLEEN

250 bucks is not bad! Good for you.

PAULA

Oh my – you know what? You know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna give this \$250 to Wendell.

COLLEEN

Really? I mean, don't you want to...rub it in a little?

PAULA

Oh, you're terrible! No, no, I'm sure. He's going through a tough time right now: he just lost his job, which is hard – I mean he's OK because he lives with me, his parents were like "You're 30 now!" so he's been living in my spare room in the basement – but now he lost his job, not sure why but it is a blow, you know, to his feelings. Especially because there was this girl he really liked there at work, cute little oriental gal (not supposed to say that, but you know what I mean: Japanese or Chinese or maybe Korean, I don't really know which, which is why I say oriental, so I don't get it wrong), and now he doesn't get the chance to see her every day like he used to and that's making him sad. He spends all his time down there playing video games or on the internet or something, but now this extra – I'm gonna give him this extra. That'll feel good. Let him buy himself something he really wants.

COLLEEN

Well, you're way nicer than me.

PAULA

I'd get him a present or something, but I wouldn't know what to get. I see him come home with these big boxes and stuff, but I don't know what all it is so even if I tried to surprise him I'd probably get the wrong thing. Better to let him get exactly what he wants. It breaks my heart because he's such a sweet boy. He deserves to be happy. Such a sweet boy, really.

So this is a nice bit of luck! Maybe the start of a whole bunch of good luck for him!

Adam is staring up at the unseen TV behind the counter.

ADAM

Hunh.

COLLEEN

What's up?

ADAM

Just...on the TV there. *(nodding up toward it. The others start watching as well.)*

COLLEEN

Oh.

PAULA

Oh no.

ADAM

Another one.

COLLEEN

Goddammit.

PAULA

Oh my lord.

COLLEEN

Wait, is that here? That's here!

ADAM

Yup. That's local.

PAULA

That's...oh my word, I think that's where Wendell works – used to work!

COLLEEN

Really? That building?

PAULA

Used to work.

COLLEEN

But not any more, right?

PAULA

No, no, not for about a month now...

COLLEEN

Well, that's good at least.

PAULA

Yes, lucky, that's lucky....

COLLEEN

Yeah.

PAULA

But oh my gosh, he probably knows all those people...

She takes out her phone and makes a call.

COLLEEN

How many, did they say?

ADAM

I don't think they know yet, it looks like it's still an active scene.

PAULA

(Into phone) Wendell? Something bad is happening at that office you used to work at and I need you to call me. Active shooter, they're saying. Honey, when you get this message, call me. Call me right away. *(She hangs up.)*

ADAM

(Looking up out the windows of the store) There's helicopters.

PAULA

He's not picking up.

COLLEEN

Where is that? Is it close to here?

PAULA

I'm gonna send him a text.

ADAM

Just about a mile or two, I think. We should get back. They're going to be bringing them to us.

COLLEEN

Yeah.

ADAM

Whenever it is they can get people out of there.

PAULA

(On the phone again) Wendell, honey, it's grandma again, I just need to hear your voice. OK. Bye-bye. OK. Call me, baby. Bye. ...Okay. Bye.

She hangs up.

COLLEEN

There's no reason he would be there today, is there?

PAULA

No, no, there's no reason he would be, but wouldn't that be terrible? If he went back – to see that girl, or have lunch with a friend or something?

COLLEEN

I'm sure he didn't.

PAULA

No, no, he wouldn't.

COLLEEN

Unless...Oh shit. Holy shit. What if...

Do you think it's possible that –

Adam stops her – with a look, a touch, something small enough for her to see but not Paula. She looks at him. He begs her with his eyes: don't.

ADAM

Maybe we...can? Let people...have things?

Paula tears herself away from the TV to look at Colleen.

PAULA

That what?

COLLEEN

...Nothing.

Paula's attention goes back to the TV. Colleen watches her.

PAULA

Oh, please don't be there...

ADAM

Well, things are looking up.

COLLEEN

(to Adam) What?

PAULA

...Please, baby, don't be there...

ADAM

You're about to get your hands dirty.

Colleen and Adam look at each other. He gives a sad shrug. She drops her head into her hand...then notices the buttons on her sweater.

She pulls all the buttons off, snapping the threads, and hands them to Adam.

COLLEEN

Here. Finish the sweaters. We're all lucky today.

I gotta go.

She leaves. Adam looks over at Paula, who is fixed on the TV.

PAULA

(A prayer.) My sweet baby. Please. Please. Please.

After a moment Adam looks down at the buttons, and places one onto the tiny sweater to see how it looks.

END

Chapter 5: She's Blow Away

Setting:

A hidden-away nook on the outside of a high school – a back stairway no one uses, a loading dock, bleachers on a field where no one plays, something like that. Wherever there can be some open space on the ground, with a place to sit perched higher up.

Characters:

IZZY, teen boy, any ethnicity, deep in the throes of love

RUPE, teen boy, any ethnicity, his eager sidekick

MIKA, Asian-American teen girl, their cool-headed friend

A hidden-away nook on the outside of a high school – a back stairway no one uses, a loading dock, bleachers on a field where no one plays, something like that. It's just after the last class of the day, but just before activities start. Mika and Rupe sit perched above as Izzy, buzzing with adrenaline, holds forth on the ground below. He is having fun.

IZZY

I know, I know! Two dozen red roses, waiting for her on her desk in Physics!

RUPE

Oooo, that's good.

IZZY

How much is two dozen roses?

MIKA

Um...two dozen?

IZZY

No, ha ha, but like, how much?

Rupe does an arm gesture, around what he thinks the girth of two dozen roses would be.

RUPE

Like this?

IZZY

Is that enough? It should be a lot.

MIKA

Do you even know how much two dozen roses cost?

IZZY

No.

MIKA

You can't afford *one* dozen. Try again.

RUPE

Well, then, like, a single rose, but with a stuffed teddy bear?

MIKA

Well, let's think, Rupe: is Lina damaged in some way, mentally? Then no.

IZZY

You're right, it's not big enough anyway. Oh, crap, I've got Hi-Q in like five minutes.

RUPE

I have soccer in ten.

IZZY

Come on, you guys, think! It needs to be BIG.

MIKA

It does not. Need to be big.

IZZY

Oh but it does.

MIKA

Oh but it does not.

IZZY

Mika, you don't understand! It's *got* to be! It has to be big enough to show, to capture, to express the sheer overwhelming magnitude of my love for her.

MIKA

You don't even know her.

IZZY

But I do!

MIKA

You don't. You have Physics together.

IZZY

And Chemistry!

RUPE

What, no, you have Chemistry third period, she has it ---

IZZY

I meant metaphorically, Rupe! Help me out here!

RUPE

OK...well, what are her interests?

IZZY

Ah! Yes! Research! Luckily, her Insta isn't private.

Izzy starts scrolling through Lina's Instagram on his phone.

She really likes puppies.

MIKA

OK, but are there any people on Instagram who don't like puppies?

IZZY

No, no, this is a thing! She's really into dogs!

RUPE

Does she have an actual dog?

IZZY

...yes, YES, it looks like she has this one old dog! YES. That's the way in!

RUPE

OK, so you get her a present for her dog, like a toy or something.

MIKA

That is the least terrible idea so far.

IZZY

You guys. So disappointing. It's right under your noses. Big, remember! I need to get her...an actual puppy!

RUPE

Go big or go home, I guess...

MIKA

No.

IZZY

Come on, as gestures go, that is big, and it's lovable! Big and Lovable.

MIKA

Besides the...the myriad, the host, the veritable cornucopia...of other reasons that's a terrible idea, do you even know how much a puppy costs?

IZZY

No, actually, how much?

MIKA

More than roses, you goon! You can do a small gesture, you know.

IZZY

Small gesture? No way. Won't cut it.

MIKA

It's better, I'm telling you. Like, something to show her you've noticed her, and lets her start to notice you. Just pique her interest, dingus, don't hit her over the head. You're trying to use a chainsaw on a job that needs a scalpel.

RUPE

Yikes.

MIKA

I just mean, maybe you can try subtlety. Ya big dorks from North Dorkistan. You're supposed to be so smart, Mr. Hi-Q, you should be able to use your vast reading comprehension skills to interpret human nuance, for god's sake.

Just...show her a little bit of who you are. The real you, not some...display. A small gesture says a lot, I'm telling you. If she likes you back, it'll *feel* huge.

IZZY

It won't *feel* huge, it won't *feel* anything. She can't like me back yet, she barely knows I exist.

MIKA

So let her know. Just start simple. Small gesture now, big gesture later.

IZZY

I hear you, I do, but trust me on this, she has other guys after her. This has to be big.

RUPE

I mean, maybe not though. Maybe starting small could be the right way to go...

IZZY

Come on, Rupe! You're only saying that because the one big gesture you ever tried was a big total flop.

MIKA

Oh?

IZZY

Oh, yeah! Floppo! Did you never tell her about that?

RUPE

No, what, oh god --

MIKA

I don't think so.

IZZY

It was in 7th grade. Apparently there was this girl he liked and he gave her this elaborate 3-D pop-up valentine he made himself. Super elaborate. Had it sitting on her desk when she came to class. She took one look at it, and what did she do? What do you think she did?

MIKA

I can't wait to hear.

IZZY

She threw it in the trashcan in front of the whole class without saying a word.

MIKA

Ouch.

IZZY

I'm getting this right, right? That's what she did?

Rupe doesn't answer.

MIKA

Pretty cold.

IZZY

Right?

MIKA

OK, but, also: You know what every 7th grade girl's worst fear is? EVERYONE LOOKING AT HER. You're like 12 years old, the worst thing you can imagine is people watching you, waiting for a certain reaction and not knowing what the right one would be but knowing 100% that whatever reaction you have it will be the wrong one. No. Sorry, but I get it.

IZZY

You have no romance in you, Mika. None. Your heart is a cold, dead place, barren of joy.

MIKA

You got me, Iz. You figured me out.

IZZY

Oh my god, OH MY GOD that's it: A SCAVENGER HUNT.

RUPE

What?

IZZY

A scavenger hunt! That's it! It's totally it! I'll leave her a note, a mysterious note, a clue she needs to figure out, and that'll lead her to another clue, and then a whole string of clues, and they'll take her to all her favorite places and lead to all her favorite things, and it'll be this whole adventure which ends with like, me, with a single rose at like, her favorite restaurant -- or no no wait even better Homecoming!!! This is perfect! Now, that's big! I just have to figure out what all her favorite places and favorite things are, but that's the easy part.

MIKA

No, no, you're making her do all this work, when she doesn't know who or why? Why would she? Plus it's super-stalkery.

IZZY

It's research.

MIKA

It's creepy.

IZZY

It's romantic!

MIKA

It is *not* romantic, it's *terrifying*! No, no, I mean this, listen to me, this is not funny, it's not fun, and you have to stop. Stop it. You will make her hate you, you're making *me* hate you. This is creepy stalker stuff and you need to believe me and stop it RIGHT NOW.

IZZY

OK, no, that's just not ---

MIKA

RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW, IZZY. RIGHT. NOW.

A beat.

IZZY

Mika. What? Wow. I'm not...I'm not some kind of creep. I'm not.

MIKA

Well, stop acting like one.

IZZY

I...I think it's a good idea.

MIKA

It's not, it's terrible. Please listen to me: it's terrible.

IZZY

I...I...OK, jeez. I'll keep thinking. Jeez.

I have to get to Hi-Q. Rupe, meet me after?

Rupe nods.

Dang, Mika. That hurt. ...For real. Dang.

Izzy leaves. Rupe and Mika sit in silence for a moment.

MIKA

I didn't mean to be mean.

RUPE

Oh, he'll get over it, he doesn't retain anything.

MIKA

No, I know, not him. I mean when I threw out the valentine.

A beat.

RUPE

Oh, man.

I had kinda hoped we could go our whole lives without ever having to talk about that valentine.

MIKA

It was a big gesture.

RUPE

Well...throwing it in the garbage was a pretty big gesture, too...

MIKA

OK, yeah, but that wasn't - .

A guy where my aunt Haruka worked once started giving her presents and asking her out and making more and more of a stink when she said no. When I think about it now there was probably some fetishizing or Orientalism or whatever going on there, too, is what I think. Anyway, she tried being nice; she tried being tough; then she talked to HR and they finally fired the guy and she didn't have to see him anymore. Until one day he came back with a buttload of guns and he shot my Aunt Haruka, nine times. And a whole bunch of other people, too.

RUPE

Holy crap.

MIKA

Yeah.

RUPE

Holy crap. Did they get the guy?

MIKA

The cops didn't. Some of the people in the office rushed him. One of them had a machete or something. But my aunt was already dead.

RUPE

Oh, wow.

MIKA

Mad respect, though, to the lady with a machete in her desk.

RUPE

Wait, was this the one like four years ago? Like eight people died?

So, when we were –

MIKA

Seventh grade, yeah.

RUPE

Oh, crap.

MIKA

Bingo.

RUPE

Holy crap.

I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. I had no idea. I never would have. Done that. If I knew.

MIKA

Here's the thing, though, Rupe: even if it hadn't happened, I still would have hated that valentine. I just wouldn't have thrown it out. I would have wished for the earth to open up and swallow me whole and then tried to say something nice and made a joke or something and then I would have never been able to look at you again as long as I lived. But in that moment, I just thought: no. I didn't ask for this. No.

I just...didn't have it in me to make the priority some boy's feelings.

So, yeah. Sorry not sorry, I guess.

RUPE

I guess, then...I guess I'm glad you threw it out. At least this way you talked to me again.

MIKA

Yeah.

RUPE

Yeah.

I'm supposed to be at soccer. Do you...should I blow it off?

MIKA

No, what, no, I'm fine. Go to soccer. I'm fine.

RUPE

OK. You're sure? OK, then. I'll talk Izzy down, I promise. I'll handle it.

He gives a dumb little wave and starts to go, but then stops.

I'm really sorry this happened to you. I'm sorry it happened to her. I bet she was really cool.

MIKA

She was, thanks.

He turns to go again.

Hey, Rupe?

Nobody knows about my Aunt Haruka. I mean, a couple of people know she died, and how; but they don't know the why part. That she was who he was after. I can't stand the thought of

anyone thinking it was her fault somehow, that all those people died. I couldn't stand it. Nobody knows that part but you, so...

RUPE

Got it. Safe with me. I promise.

He starts to go again.

MIKA

Hey. Rupe?

RUPE

Yeah?

MIKA

Just, um...FYI: telling somebody something nobody else knows? That counts. As a small gesture.

...Just FYI.

RUPE

...Oh!

Huh. You were right.

That...felt...huge.

She nods. He nods back. They sort of smile at each other for an awkward beat or two. He gives his dumb little wave again, then goes.

She sits alone with her thoughts for a long moment as the lights fade.

END

Chapter 6: Janmadin

Setting: An office. There are three main playing areas: Divya’s desk area, crowded with partially unpacked boxes; across the stage, a conference room with a table, chairs, and ideally a door, occupied by Sunil; and in between, a random point in an endless stretch of office hallways, where Henry happens to be. Nathan will, much to his annoyance, move repeatedly between the three.

Cast of Characters:

Nathan, 20s – 30s, Black office worker: an unwilling recruit in office-morale projects
Divya, 30-ish, of Indian descent, manager-level: trying her best to keep everything together
Henry, 40s – 50s, any ethnicity, on the facilities staff: been here a long time
Sunil, 30s-ish, Indian: emotionally transparent, urgent, speaks no English

Note: Sunil’s lines are written in Hindi, with transliteration added in parentheses and translation provided in the end notes. For readers, it’s recommended that you **not** look up the translations as you go along – you should be as much in the dark as to what he’s trying to say as Nathan is. (Hindi speakers, you will find Sunil’s dialogue full of spoilers. Sorry about that.)

Another note: I hope the director and actor playing Nathan find the “endless stretch of office hallways” a playground for their imagination, regardless of the size of their playing space. Whether you’ve got a huge proscenium or a postage-stamp size black box, have fun with it.

Lights rise on Divya in her desk area, unpacking boxes. Behind her, Nathan stands holding a couple dozen grocery store cupcakes and a large bouquet of cheap “Happy Birthday!” mylar balloons.

NATHAN

I have done your dark bidding, Divya.

DIVYA

Jesus! Nathan, you startled me – Hey! That looks great!

NATHAN

I hate my life.

DIVYA

Why? These looks yummy!

NATHAN

They’re adequate at best.

DIVYA

And so many balloons!

NATHAN

Imagine my elevator ride.

DIVYA

Did Tammy see you?

NATHAN

Why?

DIVYA

Because it’s a surprise!

NATHAN

It’s not a surprise.

DIVYA

It’s her birthday surprise!

NATHAN

It’s never a surprise.

DIVYA

Sure it is!

NATHAN

It is not. It's not like you don't know it's your birthday; then suddenly a meeting shows up on your calendar for some bullshit-sounding topic in one of the conference rooms? You think anyone with even three functioning brain cells doesn't know they're about to get the same "Surprise!" and grocery store cupcakes and cheap balloons and reused "Happy Birthday" banner they've seen at a hundred of these already, with *maybe* a box of JavaBean and some paper cups if they're really lucky? Everyone. Always. Knows.

DIVYA

Well, maybe, but it's a nice thing to do.

NATHAN

You need to know, nobody likes this.

DIVYA

Of course they do!

NATHAN

They do not.

DIVYA

Birthday cupcakes? Come on!

NATHAN

A lot of people take a PTO day on their birthday specifically to avoid this.

DIVYA

Nonsense!

NATHAN

For real. Even if you don't do a damn thing special, at least you're at home and don't have to sit in some boring-ass conference room and eat cheap-ass cupcakes and make awkward conversation with people you don't really know or care about who don't really know or care about you but you're forced to sit there and act like you're "family" or something instead of just fellow cogs in the big capitalist machine. Like the boss and the company care in some way. Everybody knows it's bullshit and nobody likes it.

DIVYA

OK, yeah, I know. But we gotta do it anyway.

NATHAN

Says who?

DIVYA

Says everybody says. Morale is bad enough, OK? We've downsized to this new office ---

NATHAN

This isn't downsized.

DIVYA

-- to save on real estate ---

NATHAN

This place is huge.

DIVYA

-- OK, yes, but in terms of rent, it's way cheaper and a total steal, so budget-wise, yes, it is downsizing and that lets us not cut headcount, at least this year. Nobody wants to cut people, Nathan, and even if you can't see it, they're making decisions to try to keep people in their jobs because they do care, actually, Nathan, actually. But that doesn't really translate, you know, in terms of people's feelings, and yeah, sure, this may be the least we can do, but if we didn't do it believe me people would notice, that we aren't even doing the little things. This is the low-hanging fruit, man, we gotta do at least this.

And you don't know, somebody may like it. Somebody -- maybe not Tammy, or you, but some sweet summer child out there may actually get some warm fuzzies because we gave a shit. At least this tiny little shit, we gave. So please?

NATHAN

You're the worst.

DIVYA

And you're my favorite so what does that tell you?

She rummages in one of the boxes and produces a sad, crumpled "Happy Birthday" banner and some birthday candles.

Here. It's conference room 200, at the other end. I booked it early so we can decorate.

NATHAN

You mean so *I* can decorate.

DIVYA

Yeah, that's what I mean, yeah. Please? My favorite...?

He starts to go.

Go the long way around so Tammy doesn't see you.

NATHAN

She knows.

DIVYA

No she doesn't!

NATHAN

They all know.

DIVYA

No they don't!

NATHAN

Everyone. Always. Knows.

DIVYA

Help me out here?

NATHAN

Again: you: the worst.

Nathan goes. Still carrying the cupcakes and balloons, he winds through a comically endless course of hallways, eventually coming upon Henry, a worker on the custodial staff, with his mop and bucket. Henry is staring off in the direction in which Nathan is headed, distracted. Anxious.

NATHAN

(with a nod) Hey.

Henry nearly jumps out of his skin.

HENRY

JESUS.

NATHAN

Whoa! Hey! Sorry.

Henry grunts and goes back to his mopping, agitated, avoiding eye contact. Nathan continues past, perhaps making a “Yikes” face to himself once he’s in the clear. Behind him, Henry stops mopping and watches him go.

Nathan continues through the hallways until he arrives at the door to conference room 200. He pokes his head inside, and finds a sad-faced Sunil sitting at the conference table.

NATHAN

Oh.

Sunil looks at Nathan expectantly.

Uhhh, my bad. Is this...is this 200?

Sunil doesn’t respond.

I think...I think we have this room now?

For another moment they just look at each other. Then:

SUNIL

क्या आप मेरी पार्टि के लिए यहां हैं? (kya aap merree paartee ke lie yahaan hain?)ⁱ

A beat.

NATHAN

You know what? Excuse me.

Nathan leaves the room, shutting the door behind him, and heads back down the endless series of hallways. As he approaches Henry again, Henry stands waiting for him with an inscrutable look. Just as Nathan passes him:

HENRY

He in there?

NATHAN

...What? Oh, yeah, there’s someone in there. We’re supposed to have that room, though. You know that guy?

Henry starts to speak, stops, starts again, stops...then goes back to his mopping.

Okaaaay...

Nathan winds back through the endless hallways and returns to Divya's desk.

NATHAN

Hey.

DIVYA

(startled) JESUS! Again! *(Noticing he still has the cupcakes and balloons.)* What's happening?

NATHAN

Someone's in there.

DIVYA

In where?

NATHAN

In 200.

DIVYA

I have it booked.

NATHAN

Nevertheless.

DIVYA

So tell them to get out.

NATHAN

I'd be happy to, but he doesn't appear to speak English.

DIVYA

What?

NATHAN

He didn't say much, but it was in Indian, so I'm afraid this situation is one you're going to have to handle yourself, ha.

DIVYA

Indian.

NATHAN

Yup.

DIVYA

“Indian”, you say.

NATHAN

You know what I –

DIVYA

Because, yes, “Indian” is a language that exists in the world, sure. And India is not –

NATHAN

OK, OK --

DIVYA

-- NOT as I was saying NOT the second-most populous country in the world ---

NATHAN

Oh, lord, you know what I ---

DIVYA

-- NOPE, buckle up, buttercup, you bought this ticket you will take this ride -- as I was saying, the second-most populous country with over a billion people in it, speaking any one of potentially THOUSANDS of languages depending on how you define “language” versus “dialect”, but certainly and unequivocally at least eight different major languages recognized by the government, most of them regional, so given, as I said, that there are A BILLION people living in India, this gentleman could be speaking Hindi or Bengali or Tamil or Punjabi or Urdu or something else entirely, and I won’t understand him any better than you do unless he happens to come from exactly the same place I come from. Do you know where I come from?

NATHAN

Where?

DIVYA

ALBERQUEQUE! I don’t speak shit! Besides 3rd grade Spanish. If it’s not one of the, like, eight Hindi words I remember my grandmother saying when I was little, I got nothin’.

NATHAN

Fine.

DIVYA

...“Indian”.

NATHAN

I'm sorry, all right, mea culpa, I will examine my white privilege and reflect on my actions and be a better man. But right now you gotta tell me how you want me to get him out of there.

DIVYA

There's hand gestures, there's body language; "Get out" doesn't seem hard, did you even try?

NATHAN

...Not very hard, no.

DIVYA

Please, Nathan? There's so much going on, can you just handle it?

With a sigh and a glare, Nathan leaves, and makes the long, twisty journey back toward room 200. This time, Henry intently watches him approach.

NATHAN

Hey.

Henry nods back. Then just as Nathan has passed:

HENRY

You going back in there?

NATHAN

Huh?

HENRY

Best not to.

NATHAN

...We have that room.

HENRY

He'll be gone tomorrow, just come back tomorrow.

NATHAN

But...we have that room. Today.

HENRY

Do what you want, but...

He gives a pointed slow shake of his head. Beat.

NATHAN

Excuse me.

Nathan continues on his way. Behind him, unheard:

HENRY

I hate this day.

Henry returns to his mopping. Nathan continues down the halls to room 200. He enters the room fully this time.

NATHAN

OK, hi, listen.

He puts the cupcakes down so he can use his hands to gesture, still holding on to the balloons.

You? (*gestures*) Need to go. (*points*) We (*gestures*) have this room (*gestures*) booked now. Reserved. It's ours now. Our turn.

Sunil's attention is on the balloons.

You (*gestures*) need to go (*gestures*) somewhere else (*big gesture*). Ya got me?

Sunil responds with delight.

SUNIL

गुब्बारे ! (gubbaare!)ⁱⁱ

NATHAN

Excuse me?

SUNIL

क्या वह मेरा केक है? (kya vah mera kek hai?)ⁱⁱⁱ

NATHAN

Uhhh...

SUNIL

क्या आप गाना गाने जा रहे हैं? (kya aap gaana gaane ja rahe hain?)^{iv}

कृप्या। (krpya.)^v

Sunil's tone has shifted. He is pleading, near despair.

मुझे गाना सुनना अच्छा लगेगा। (mujhe gaana sunana achchha lagega.)^{vi}

कृपया गीत गाएं। कृप्या। (krpaya geet gaen. krpya.)^{vii}

कृप्या। (krpya.)^{viii}

NATHAN

I...I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're...

Sunil just stares at him, with a look that is hurt, plaintive, disappointed.

I don't know what you want me to do here. We have this room.

Beat.

What is it you want me to do?

A standoff: a baffled Nathan versus an anguished Sunil. Nathan blinks first.

Excuse me.

He collects the cupcakes and takes the balloons and leaves the room. Slowly he makes his way back through the hallways to where Henry is.

NATHAN

Hellooo, hi. Nathan. Hi. New here. You are...?

HENRY

Henry.

NATHAN

Hi, Henry, Nathan, really nice to meet you, Henry. So, Henry, you...you seem to know something about that gentleman in 200, is that correct?

HENRY

...Yes.

NATHAN

Does he work here?

HENRY

Did.

Did. **NATHAN**

About 15 years ago. **HENRY**

That guy worked here 15 years ago. **NATHAN**

Yes. **HENRY**

Did...did you work here 15 years ago? **NATHAN**

No, not 'til after. **HENRY**

But you know him. **NATHAN**

No. **HENRY**

Oh. **NATHAN**

Beat.

Well, if he hasn't worked here in 15 years, do you happen to know what he's doing in there?

HENRY
Doing? No.

...But I can tell you why he's there.

NATHAN
Please.

HENRY
He's there...because he died in there.

A long beat.

NATHAN

I do hope you'll say more.

HENRY

Well.

15 years ago, this was the Consolidated Assessments building. Does that ring a bell? No? It was on the news a lot. 15 years ago, on this very day, a "disgruntled former employee" got into the Consolidated Assessments building armed with semi-automatic weapons and shot 23 people. Killed eight of them.

He was one of the eight. Right in there's where they found him.

NATHAN

Holy crap. Excuse me, but holy crap.

HENRY

Mm-hmmm. I got hired right after, when the building was empty. The operations staff had mostly all quit, but they needed a few folks around to maintain the place. They tried to get new tenants, but that was, you know, a pretty hard sell there for a while. So for me, when I started, the place was pretty much a ghost town.

Not really, though. Not at first, anyway.

But then about a year later, on the first anniversary, there's people leaving flowers and teddy bears and shit outside, the building's empty still pretty much, except for me and the rest of the skeleton crew. And I'm just doing my rounds when I go into 200 and there he is. Just sitting there.

Just sitting there, looking at me.

I thought maybe he was a relative or something, one of the mourners who somehow got inside. But he didn't seem to understand me, and I sure couldn't understand him, so I went and told Jerry our Operations Manager, who came up to talk to him.

Now, Jerry had been around when it all happened. The only one left who was. Tough guy, Jerry. Wasn't gonna let that, you know, stop him. Well, he went in there, into 200, to talk to that fella...and Jerry came out of there white as a sheet. He knew that guy, he said. He knew him because he'd found him in there before. He'd found him in there one year ago, slumped dead at that conference table with a bullet through his head.

But there he was, sitting there talkin' to him in Indian like it never happened.

NATHAN

Indian's not a language.

HENRY

Huh?

NATHAN

Yeah. It's not.

HENRY

Hunh.

NATHAN

Turns out.

HENRY

Hunh.

A beat.

Anyway, the next day he was gone.

They both were, actually. That was the thing that got Jerry to quit.

Now every year since, no matter who comes or goes, every year on this day, there that guy is.
Just sitting there.

Waiting.

NATHAN

Waiting for what?

HENRY

Nobody knows.

Beat.

NATHAN

Are you...are you fucking with me?

HENRY

I got no reason in the world to be fucking with you.

NATHAN

That...is crazy.

HENRY

That is the truth.

NATHAN

...Do excuse me, won't you?

Nathan moves away slowly, then makes his way back to 200.

He peeks back into the room. Sunil looks up. They hold eye contact for a long moment. Nathan backs out and slams the door.

He hurries back along the hallways, shooting past Henry...

HENRY

Right?

...and speed-walks with his balloons and cupcakes all the way back to Divya's desk where he arrives out of breath.

NATHAN

(With a big "j'accuse!" flourish) You moved us into a haunted office!

DIVYA

Shhh! What?

NATHAN

This place was the scene of a *massacre!*

DIVYA

Calm down. Yes, the building has a history...

NATHAN

A history of *murder!* You moved us into a place where eight people died –

DIVYA

Well, nine, really –

NATHAN

What?

DIVYA

The shooter, the shooter made nine. Technically.

NATHAN

So there's NINE DEAD PEOPLE walking around this joint –

DIVYA

No, no, calm down, it's just the one, tops.

NATHAN

WHAT.

DIVYA

There's only one that's an alleged "ghost", no one ever said all nine of them were around...

NATHAN

I don't believe this.

DIVYA

...so it's really not the big deal you're making it out to be.

NATHAN

You KNEW. You knew that every year, on the anniversary of the *massacre*, a dead guy shows up and *haunts the joint*!

DIVYA

OK, whoa, ease down. We knew about the shooting, yes, but that was fifteen years ago, and there's no such thing as a "haunted office", so can we please not? And yes, today is the day it happened, and yes, there are superstitious people who claim to have seen a "ghost" over the years, but just the one, not nine, and the rent really is amazingly low for this much space...

NATHAN

YA THINK???

DIVYA

...and everyone's just trying their best, is all I'm saying, OK? So while I get that it's maybe upsetting, it is not actually any sort of crime, or even, frankly, unethical. It was move to the cheaper office, or fire people. I can't be mad at them for choosing not to fire people, can you?

Life goes on, people need office space. So can we please just calm down?

NATHAN

You KNOWINGLY sent me into a haunted conference room! With *cupcakes!*

DIVYA

It's not haunted.

NATHAN

It's the conference room where he *died*, there's a *dead guy* in it!

DIVYA

He's not a dead guy.

NATHAN

He is, he's a dead guy, an Indian dead guy. Look him up.

DIVYA

Look up "Indian dead guy"?

NATHAN

Look up the shooting, the news reports. There'll be a list.

DIVYA

Fine.

She turns to her a computer or other device and does a search.

OK, here's something...yes. OK, here. "Eight Lives Remembered".

NATHAN

I thought it was nine.

DIVYA

Shooter doesn't count. OK, OK, let's see...Diane Bowers...Denise DeLaurier...Purvi Agrawal –

NATHAN

PURVI AGRAWAL!

DIVYA

-- girl's name ---

NATHAN

Oh.

DIVYA

.....David Williams...Haruka Ito...Charles Nkosi...

...Sunil Mishra.

NATHAN

Sunil Mishra. Right? Sunil Mishra. Bingo.

Divya clicks on the link, and it's clear a photo has appeared on the screen.

THAT'S HIM! That's his face! That's him, that's him, that is him him him!

DIVYA

“A native of Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh, India, Mr. Mishra had only been in the United States for less than a month when the tragedy occurred. Colleagues say he seemed very excited to be starting his new job and new life in America, and was looking forward to the English as a Second Language classes he was due to begin that week.”

That...doesn't say much.

NATHAN

He just got here.

DIVYA

That's so awful.

Suddenly Nathan gasps, hugely.

What?

NATHAN

Look at his dates!

DIVYA

It's today, yes, it's the anniversary, what ---

NATHAN

DateS! Sss! Sss! Plural!

DIVYA

What...

She looks at her screen again. Suddenly Divya gasps, just as hugely. They both stare at the screen, speechless.

DIVYA

...is...is that...oh my god...is that why he was in the conference room?

A beat.

NATHAN

EVERYONE. ALWAYS. KNOWS.

They both suddenly spring into action, one grabbing the balloons, one grabbing the cupcakes, and they hurry off down the endless series of hallways at top speed.

NATHAN

Can he even eat a cupcake?

DIVYA

I don't know the rules!

NATHAN

What if –

DIVYA

Shhh! I'm trying to remember shit my grandma said!

They wind along until they come upon Henry; Nathan scoops him up to join them.

NATHAN

Henry, Divya. Divya, this is Henry.

HENRY

What's happening?

NATHAN

We're doing an exorcism. You're gonna help us decorate.

Nathan hands Henry the banner. He reads it, then understands.

HENRY

Oh, shit.

Divya, Nathan, and Henry hurry on to room 200. They take a moment, then gingerly enter the conference room, all eyes on the waiting Sunil. They close the door behind

them. While Nathan sets up one of the cupcakes with a birthday candle and Henry hangs the banner, Divya addresses him.

DIVYA

सुनील? (Sunil?)

He sits up a little straighter. He nods.

SUNIL

हाँ. (haan.)^{ix}

DIVYA

दिव्या. (Divya.)

Ummm... जन्मदिन? (...Janmadin?)^x

Sunil heaves a sigh of relief, nods his head again.

SUNIL

हाँ. (haan.)^{xi}

DIVYA

Well, then. Ummm... जन्मदिन की बधाइयाँ. (janmadin kee badhaiyaan.)^{xii}

Sunil breaks into a wide, relieved, gorgeous smile.

SUNIL

धन्यवाद।. (dhanyavaad.)^{xiii}

Nathan places the cupcake with a lit birthday candle on the table in front of Sunil.

क्या आप गाना गाने जा रहे हैं? (kya aap gaana gaane ja rahe hain?)^{xiv}

कृप्या।. (krpya.)^{xv}

मुझे गाना सुनना अच्छा लगेगा।. (mujhe gaana sunana achchha lagega.)^{xvi}

गीत।. (geet.)^{xvii}

Sunil “conducts” with his fingers in the air as he sings a tuneless “la la la”.

गीत।. (geet.)^{xviii}

कृप्या।. (krpya.)^{xix}

Divya, Nathan, and Henry look to each other awkwardly. Then Henry starts:

HENRY

(singing) Happy Birthday to you...

HENRY, DIVYA, AND NATHAN

(singing) ...Happy Birthday to you...

Divya takes Nathan's hand. He squeezes hers back.

Happy Birthday, dear Suni-il...

Nathan takes Henry's hand, who, though startled, accepts.

Happy Birthdaaaay...tooo...yoooouuuu.

A beat. Sunil's smile is like a sun shower: wet, yet dazzlingly bright.

SUNIL

धन्यवाद।. (dhanyavaad.)^{xx}

Divya nods toward the birthday candle, prompting him to blow it out.

NATHAN

(aside) Can he do that?

DIVYA

No idea.

HENRY

Make a wish. Does he know to make a wish?

NATHAN

This is crazy.

DIVYA

Yup.

A beat. Hushed and reverent, watching Sunil and his birthday cupcake:

NATHAN

I take it all back. Tammy's birthday party is LIT.

Divya holds his hand tighter. She, Nathan, and Henry wait expectantly.

Sunil smiles at each of them, inhales deeply...and blows the candle out. Blackout.

END OF PLAY

END NOTES - Translation

- ⁱ Are you here for my party?
- ⁱⁱ Balloons!
- ⁱⁱⁱ Is that my cake?
- ^{iv} Are you going to sing the song?
- ^v Please.
- ^{vi} I would love to hear the song.
- ^{vii} Please sing the song. Please.
- ^{viii} Please.
- ^{ix} Yes.
- ^x Birthday?
- ^{xi} Yes.
- ^{xii} Happy Birthday.
- ^{xiii} Thank you.
- ^{xiv} Are you going to sing the song?
- ^{xv} Please.
- ^{xvi} I would love to hear the song.
- ^{xvii} The song.
- ^{xviii} The song.
- ^{xix} Please.
- ^{xx} Thank you.