

Shepard Park

“It can’t be good for him, you know. Living in that dark old house with your father. He shouldn’t have to drop everything just to take care of him. I’ve been saying we need to hire someone to do this.”

My mother’s voice lies somewhere between a distracted ramble and a conspiratorial whisper. I balance the phone on my nightstand and take my time tying the laces on my shoes.

“Well Mom if we could afford it we would. Plus, it’s not like he was forced into it. He wanted to do it,” I reply.

“Yes well, your father isn’t easy to take care of, let me tell you. I bet he orders him around the house all day, making him tie his shoes and spoon feed him for Christ’s sake,” she says. I don’t answer. It still feels strange when she talks about Dad like this, like he’s some lazy, evil man who ruined her life. I leave the phone on the dresser while I pull the duvet taut and place my six decorative pillows against the headboard. Pulling the strap of my bag over my head, I lean down to tell her I have to go, but she doesn’t pause.

“It just *can’t* be good for him, Hannah. I know the separation was especially hard for him but this just simply isn’t the way to get over it. Do you know what your brother told me last night?” She says this in an excited gloat, like she had held herself back from saying it all morning. I sigh and bring the phone to my ear,

“What did he tell you?”

“He said he’s started seeing a therapist. A real one that he’s paying god knows what to talk to for an hour just to hear that all his fears and insecurities are true and caused by some

horrible incident, probably something his *parents* did mind you, to mess him up this way.” I feel my breath fill up my throat, stopped by some knot in my tongue when she says this. I crack my wrist around in tight circles.

“I need to go to work Mom, I’m late” I manage to reply. A sourceless panic rushes me to grab a scarf from the wall and walk briskly out the door. There must have been something I forgot. An early meeting or a project I am supposed to do today. The thought of not knowing what I forgot causes a keen frustration to settle above the place the panic boils.

“Hannah, really? It’s so early. This is why you need a car, so you don’t have to walk so long alone through that menacing park. And did I tell you what today is? I saw Mary-Beth lighting those candles like she does. What is it now, 21 years?”

I hang up. I don’t know why I do it. I suppose it was ridiculous of her to keep talking after I said I had to go. I walk down the four flights of stairs which are filled with the smell of white dust, like an ice skating rink. The building is barely old enough to have worn steps or walls. I stop at the bottom of the stairs and lean against the wall. My heart is pounding from rushing, or from the anger, or the forgotten meeting. I hope she won’t call back, of course I know what day it is. She doesn’t need to call to remind me every year. Today I thought I was going to make it out of the call without her mentioning it at all.

Across the street from my apartment is a small park the size of a city block. It is barely a park. There are no grass fields or barbecues or benches. It’s not a place you want to linger and listen to the birds. It is a wild mass of a forest, with two fenced off paths that run through it. I cross the street in a trot and enter the path labelled with a simple plaque on top of a wooden post:

“Shepard Park. Thanks to the generosity of Jared Shepard,” and then under that, a red sign that reads, “Please stay on the path.”

I like the walk, and if the park wasn't there I would have to walk an extra five blocks every morning. The path is lined with patches of clovers with red stems and the brown, dry dirt of the trail makes a wonderful crunch sound when I walk. The sound is absorbed immediately by the heavy silence of the woods, which press in around the path and curve to form a tunnel overhead, letting disjointed patterns of light reach the ground.

I trace my finger along the wood fence which is blanketed by soft green moss. I press the moss to feel the morning dew on my fingertip and touch it to my forehead. The cold is subtle, and a drop runs into the corner of my eye.

My mother never used to call me this often. After she moved out of our childhood home and away from my father, she started calling me every week. Before, she'd only reach out on special occasions: birthdays, promotions, and this day. Every year on this day she tells me how hard it is for Mary Beth Berkovich. It's the anniversary, you know, she tells me. I usually nod into my phone and try to tune her out while she tells me about how Mary Beth Berkovich lights one candle for every year it's been and puts the candles out on her porch. She keeps them lit until the wax has melted over the wood and cemented to it. Every year she buys a new set, adding to the mound of white wax that has covered her porch. I picture it like walls, dripping down from the gutters and coating the floor so she has to slide across it to get to her mail. The wax flowing out onto the lawn and eating the grass. She bought twenty-one candles today. Twenty-one years since her son went into the woods behind our houses and did not come out. Peter Berkovich was six years old, one year older than my brother Brian was.

I picture Brian driving by her house on his way to therapy today, eyes blurring over the road when he sees the twenty one small flames. Something sitting in his chest too, ignited by those flames. I feel the anger and the panic again. Am I angry at Brian for going to therapy? He must really need it. He didn't take the separation well. Talking like he had no clue they weren't happy together. And now, living with a dying man. Cleaning his body. Carrying him into bed. Watching our father deteriorate like that. I feel a pang of guilt for not being able to help him, but I can't imagine moving back into that house. So I'm glad about the therapy. But something about the image of Brian sitting in a too-warm room with the electric whir of a plug in water fountain droning on, talking deeper and deeper into our childhood, our parents, our memories, our secrets.

I stop walking and stare off the path into the dense cottonwoods, which look endless. The ground is covered in tall blackberry bushes and broadleaf lupine which have not bloomed yet. I crack my wrist around tight and bounce on my toes. I hate feeling like this. Jumpy. Paranoid. As I look deeper into the woods I can't help but notice how similar it looks to those woods behind my childhood home. And I feel suddenly like something in that dense dark is going to turn their head and look at me.

I rush through the park, keeping my eyes firmly down at my feet, feeling the closeness of the trees and hating that I can't see any buildings or roads or other people. When I emerge on the other side I don't turn around to look at it.

The building I work in is only two stories. My desk is on the ground floor, and I share it with a woman younger than me who wears long winged eyeliner and has recently shaved her head. She is already mid sentence when I sit down, like she started talking at promptly at 9:00, regardless of whether I was there to listen or not.

“It sometimes still feels like there’s hair on my neck or around my ears, like phantom hair. Like how people who lose their arms and still feel pain there? Like they still have an arm? It’s like that, feels hot and itchy all down my neck and I can even feel my phantom hair get oily and dirty too,” she says rapidly.

“Johanna?” I ask her. Normally I wouldn’t interrupt, it messes with her flow and when she really gets going she can get to some interesting places. But this morning I have a question. She looks up startled, like she forgot I was there.

“Yeah?”

“I was wondering — I know you’ve lived in the area for a while —what do you know about Shepard Park? The one just down the block,” I found myself holding my breath.

“Oh that place? It’s a weird one. I heard it used to be a little neighborhood in the 1930’s. Then something happened like the bank took over the whole plot of land or something, the Great Depression and all that, and the whole neighborhood had to be emptied out. Everyone left in a hurry, leaving their dogs and cats and all that. It was fenced off, and then...nothing. No one did anything with the land. It must have been a creepy ruin for awhile. And then the forest took its land back, those black cottonwoods grow fast you know, and it just grew up around the whole place, totally swallowed it. It’s been a wild, overgrown block ever since I’ve lived here, no one really went in just because with those bushes and vines and things you couldn’t even get in if you wanted. Then a couple years ago some naturalist bought it and made it a park. The city didn’t waste too much time on it though, just those couple of trails,” she says.

“So, you think it could be haunted?” I ask.

“Hmm, it could be I guess. But there’s no weird stories about it or anything fun like that. People just sort of avoid it really. Why? Did you see something?” sShe asks, sitting up straighter. I shake my head and we sit with it for a minute before I turn back to my computer.

“You know something though?” she says in a quieter voice, “I never really thought hard about it, but when they were making it into a park I would go down on my lunch to watch them remove debris and trash. And... well, it never seemed to me like they took out enough stuff to make up a whole neighborhood.”

I walk home that night through the park again. I had half a mind to take the bus, but then got a hold of myself. I hate the bus, and it was silly to avoid the park I’ve walked through hundreds of times just because I had a weird feeling about it this morning. I went through a period of years when I was a kid where I couldn’t enter a forest without getting lightheaded and scared. I would always cry about it, and tried to stay home from camping trips a couple times. But I got over it. Because I grew up. I’m a grown up now and I can walk through a goddamned forest.

There are short light posts along the path that turn on at dusk. Without them, the place would be pitch black. The branches block any moonlight that might make its way down here. The ground is washed in a musty yellow light. I watch moths gather in their slow, reckless dance. I walk through it at a brisk pace, refusing to actually run. I feel an itching at my back, one that makes me flash my head around to look behind me every few feet. The park feels just like those woods behind our house, vacant and teeming at the same time.

When I can see the exit by my building I slow down a bit to catch my breath. But it halts in my throat as a low shape emerges from the bushes onto the path. I grip my keys in my pocket tight until their teeth bite tiny marks into my palm. The shape moves in front of one of the lights, revealing itself as a dog. Not a wild dog, or even really a mangy one. It is a brown collie of some kind, with short fur. It looks clean and lost. I relax my muscles a little and approach it slowly, leaning down and reaching my hand out. I coo to it and it turns its head to look at me. Its deep brown eyes are open wide and I find myself leaning forward into them. Then the dog turns away and trots forward into the bushes on the other side of the path. I run to where it disappeared and consider going in after it. I want to go in after it. I feel this tug at the base of my skull pulling me into the dark black and the cicada hum. But I don't follow. I walk home.

I fall asleep easily, thinking of the lost dog only once or twice. I sleep heavily and still, barely moving my body. Around four A.M. I have a dream. A dream I haven't had in fifteen years. It is so bright that I can only see silhouettes of pine needles and my small shoes on the soil, sinking in. I see the fort in the woods. I see my brother and I see Peter Berkovich who looks at me with wide-open eyes which are a deep brown color. I wake up cold, sitting up fast on the floor of my bedroom. My heart is beating fast and I stare out into my dark room, wide awake. I look at my blankets sliding off my bed. I must have slipped out from under them. I feel my side for any bruise or pain from the fall but my whole body just feels numb. I crack my wrists around in circles, listening to the crinkling little bones and muscles echo into the room.

I walk to my living room and turn on all my lamps. I pull a woven blanket from the back of the couch and wrap it tightly around myself as I search through the cupboard in my end table. I find an old bottle of cheap, dark rum someone gave me as a housewarming gift. I pour some

into a glass and sit on the couch, staring out my window. From where I'm sitting I can see the tips of the cottonwood trees along the base of the window, peeking. I clink my glass against the bottle rhythmically and take a deep, shaky breath. I screw my eyes shut and push my knuckles into them, trying to get out Peter's smooth, shining face. Fuck Brian for going to therapy. And fuck my mom for telling me. I take a long sip of the rum, thinking of Brian sitting with his therapist, hands pressed in his armpits like he does when he gets nervous. He's talking back and back and back until he reaches a day in the woods 21 years ago.

Why does it terrify me so much? I don't remember much about Peter but I know we were close. I still have old notebooks where I wrote about how Peter and Brian and I were going to all become paleontologists and live in a treehouse that had bridges connecting every room. I ache thinking of us, and the years that Brian and I have lived. The inches we've grown. Our hands getting calloused. Our mouths wrinkled.

I didn't take Peter's disappearance well when it happened. I went practically catatonic. I couldn't make eye contact with anyone or speak for almost a year. They say that your personality is fully developed by the age of seven. I was six when Peter disappeared. I feel as though a scared six year old girl is trapped in me somewhere, curled up in the base of my throat, or my chest. Unable to speak.

I finish the glass in one sip then I fall asleep on the couch.

The sound that wakes me is like a broken howl. I sit up on the couch hazily, listening for the sound again, unsure if I dreamt it or not. It is silent for a while. The sun has not risen yet but the sky out my window is ready for it. It is dark blue in waiting. Then I hear the cry again. It's



far off, echoing. It sounds desperate. My ears buzz in the silence that falls when the sound stops. I can't close my eyes again. I can't lie down.

I get up, letting the blanket slide off me. I run my hands over polished red lines in my skin made by the wrinkling of the leather couch. I walk to the window and look out, hoping to see something on the street below that will answer this pound in my chest. Something simple that I can call someone about and go back to sleep. The city is barely awake. The street is empty. I hear the sound again and I cannot deny it is a dog in pain. It's not a panicked bark or an empty, lonesome howl to the moon. It is hurting. I bounce on my toes with shaky breaths. I consider calling the cops. What would I say? There's a dog in pain somewhere in Shepard Park? It's calling out and there is no one answering and it is alone and in pain. Please. Please someone go find it.

I pick up my phone. I consider calling animal control, or the humane society, or something. As I stare down at it, the phone lights up, buzzing. It's my mom. I throw it against the wall and squeeze my stomach hard, pinching it to stop myself from shaking out of my skin. I somehow know that she's calling about Brian, that he told her something I don't want to hear, that she wants to hear it from me. The dog cries out again. There is no answer. I walk fast out of my apartment.

My bare feet rush down the stairs and out the ground floor door. There is no one else on the street. The sun has barely risen. I stand in front of the trail entrance, resting my hand on the sign that marks it. I am holding my breath in fear of missing the sound. The dog cries out again and I can't help but think that it sounds just as far away as it did from my window. But I can tell

now that it's coming from my right, off the path. I walk onto the path then climb over the waist-high wooden fence, push aside long stalks of grass and walk deeper into the woods.

The trail disappears quickly. My feet curl as I try not to put my full weight on the broken sticks and the sharp edges of dead leaves. I don't think about how I'm going to find my way back. My head feels filled with sand and it is still too dim to fully see my surroundings. I look up to try and see if the sun is out yet. Something in the tree catches my eye. About twenty feet above me there's a piece of wood sticking straight out of the trunk. It's faded white and cut in neat curves at the end. It looks like wood from a picket fence. I keep walking. In another tree, at the same height, there's a rusted bicycle, bent over itself. It wasn't put in there, it was enveloped. Like the tree grew around it and pulled the bike into itself, carrying it as it grew. The wood around it looks bulbous, like a thick scab. I continue walking, staring up into the foliage. I find more and more things in the trees. Doors. A sink basin. Pipes. Chairs. Wood burning stoves. They are all along the same height. I stop walking when I come to a patch of trees full to bursting with these things. I remember the neighborhood that used to be here and a chill runs through my body. The people who cleaned the park didn't remove enough debris because there wasn't anything left to remove. The trees claimed the houses as their own. They took what they wanted, what they couldn't leave to rot, and carried them up. An entire neighborhood suspended above me. I feel suddenly like I'm walking underground, staring up at a silent and peaceful place which looks down at me with unease. It does not wish to be disturbed.

A long, shaky howl pierces the stillness. I jump and turn around. It sounds louder than it ever has. I know I am close but I feel my feet sink into the soil, unwilling to move. I force myself to walk forward slowly. The forest gets brighter. I stare straight ahead and the green bush around

me blurs as I move. Pushing aside tangled ferns, I am face to face with the thing. The dog, hunched over, facing away from me. I crouch down, get onto my knees and try to unstick my voice from my throat. The dog shifts. Turns to look at me. The sun is right above us now. The green of the forest is bright and bursting.

A young boy with curly brown hair turns his head around and looks at me with his wide brown eyes. He smiles and I giggle at the gap in his grin. He lost a tooth yesterday and now I want to lose my tooth too because Peter said his mom gave him a dollar because of it. We run through the woods, climbing on tree roots sticking out of the ground like tree feet. My brother calls from behind us, wanting us to slow down. I take Peter's hand and run faster. We laugh and find a small creek where I splash him and he splashes back but he wants to keep going and not play in the creek because he found a house for us all to live in. Brian appears next to us breathing heavily and whining about something. I tell him he can't live in our house but Peter says he can because there's plenty of room. I frown but follow anyway.

The house is an old abandoned shack or fort or cabin or something. It's just one room inside and there are gaps in the wood walls you can see through and there's moss growing all around the doorframe. Inside, Brian and I claim corners as rooms and then Peter leaves to go get sticks for the soup we are making. He is gone for a long time.

Then we hear thick footsteps, much slower and heavier than Peter's. I shush Brian and pull him over to the door to look out. There is a man standing outside with his back to us. He is holding Peter in one arm. I can't see his face. His body is bent harshly over the crook of the man's arm. His legs swing in a way that makes my stomach fold.

The man turns around to look straight at us and we are frozen. I recognize him. He wears a yellow vest at our school and has a sign to stop the cars when we cross the street. When he sees us, he flinches and pulls Peter closer to his chest. He walks forward two steps and I put my arm in front of Brian. He leans down and speaks to us. He says you won't tell anyone, right? If you tell, I'll find you too and make you sleep. I'm a demon from the woods and I'll know if you tell and I'll eat you in your sleep. I feel my head nod 'yes' from a million miles away. My eyes are already turning fuzzy and dark at the corners and I already know that I will not let this become a memory.

I know it will be a dream that I will make myself forget. I know that my brother and I will return home through the woods and we will not even run. The fear that encases our bodies will not be red hot, but heavy and damp, like we are already dead. We will go home and our mother will scold us for staying out too late. The next day Mary Beth Berkovich will come by and ask if we have seen him and I will look my brother hard in the eye and that will be the closest either of us ever come to speaking it out loud. We will shake our heads no.

The next week there will be men in suits asking us questions and at the news of Peter I turn into stone so they do not spend too much time with me. At school the man will no longer be at the crossing walk. He will never be at the crossing walk again. And the men in suits will never find him. His face will stay sealed for many years. And Mary Beth Berkovich will stay sad and lonely and covering her grief in white wax. I will move away and one day my brother will no longer fear the demon. He will summon his image. And hundreds of miles away, maybe even at the very same instant he speaks his image out loud, I will see the man again too.

I open my eyes into bark. I am curled in a ball, my limbs supported by the grey and black skin of the cottonwoods. I wrench my head from thin vines that were holding me. I am in the top of the trees, staring out at a dead neighborhood. I turn my body and it hurts with the movement, like I have been laying still for many days. I reach out for a branch and pull myself out of the tree. In one slow long breathe I make it to the ground. The dog is not there. I sit down in a slump. There is a creaking above me. I look up to see a frayed and molded red armchair fall from the tree. A door falls. Pipes and a white metal boiler fall. The forest rains the heavy things down around me. Shaking the ground and sending the insects that were sleeping into the air, flying with the buzz of stretched wings which they have never used before.

