

Speed of Light

"Thanks for the ride home, my mom took the car to pick up the extra shift." Lewis sighs as he fastens his seatbelt, flashing his friend in the driver's seat a grateful smile.

"Anytime, my man." Craig smiles in return and pulls a joint out of his shirt pocket.

Lewis's grin dissolves into a disappointed frown. "You can't smoke, Craig."

Craig raises a brow, the twisted paper pinched between his finger and thumb. Lewis shifts in his seat.

"Because you can't drive if you're high," he elaborates.

"You can drive then," Craig says as he shrugs, reaching for the lighter. Lewis shakes his head.

"I don't wanna drive your truck."

Craig sighs and lowers his hand. "So you're saying you don't want me to smoke."

"I'm saying if you smoke then you can't drive, and I'm not driving."

He tucks the joint back into his pocket and calls Lewis a dipshit under his breath as he twists the keys in the ignition. The truck comes to life with that familiar, exuberant rumble. Lewis turns to face forward. "Just wait till after."

Craig pulls away from curb and starts down the road. It doesn't take long for Lewis to realize that they're headed in the wrong direction.

"Where're we going?" He sighs in frustration. "Man, come on-"

"Listen Lewis, just chill- alright? Are you gonna piss yourself if you don't get home at seven sharp? You go to bed earlier than my goddamn grandma, man."

"I have healthy sleeping habits, ok? I always get my nine hours. It's important to me."

"See," Craig groans. "That's just my point, man, your priorities are a wreck. What are you gonna think when you're thirty and lookin' back on your life? Probably not much, cause you never do anything. You gotta *live*, man. Just trust me for chrissakes."

Lewis narrows his eyes at his friend. If he walked home he could make it in time to read a chapter of Agatha Christie before bed, but then again, Craig has a point. The most exciting thing he did this month was beat a five-star sudoku. Maybe a little bit of excitement couldn't hurt. Just this once.

Craig pulls his truck over to the side of the gravel road. The sun is hanging low over the three tops to their left, gleaming down onto Lake Haphazard. This is not where

he would've guessed Craig was taking him. A wave of nostalgia swarms his thoughts, summoning memories of the blinding noon day sun and fingers sticky with watermelon. Lewis can't remember the last time he came here, or the last time anyone he knew came here. At some point swimming in the lake stopped being cool, maybe because people like Jessica Stanley said it was gross. Lewis hasn't really ever liked water, mostly cause getting in meant taking off his shirt, but some naiver part of himself misses those days.

Craig slams the door to the truck closed and whips out the joint. "Are you gonna sit in there or you gonna come out on to the dock with me?" The lighter crackles as he flicks the sparkwheel with his thumb. Lewis returns to himself and carefully opens the truck door, swinging it closed softly enough that it barely shuts properly. He shuffles after Craig who has started unbuttoning his shirt.

"Still plenty warm for a swim, huh?" he calls. Lewis cringes.

"You're not gonna make me get in, are you?" he asks, slipping his shoes off in the grass and making his way across the dock barefoot. Craig sighs, puffing smoke into his face.

"Nah man, I'm not the boss of you or anything, shit," he chuckles as Lewis coughs. "I just thought you'd like the view."

He motions to the setting sun with his joint. Lewis has to admit, it's pretty fantastic. The horizon line is a stark crimson which fades abruptly into yellow and then transitions comfortably into that amicable blue. The clouds, which were sparse for most of the day but are now accumulating as a distant storm rolls in, are glowing like embers, and the whole scene is reflected impossibly clearly in the lake. Craig kicks off his jeans and eases off the dock into the water the a content sigh, careful not to get his joint wet, distorting the image with ripples. Lewis takes a seat and lets his feet dangle into the lake, which isn't nearly as cold as he expected.

"You remember when Mark died?" Craig asks after a moment of stillness, facing away from Lewis as he slowly exhales another plume of smoke.

Lewis blinks. "Uh, yeah." He remembers all right.

"It wasn't even two years ago. How fucked up is that?" Craig scratches his stomach and sniffs, like he's trying to play off the fact he's crying for Lewis' sake. Crying hasn't ever made Lewis uncomfortable, though. Shit, he cries all the time. What makes

him more uncomfortable is how Craig's tears are pouring from a reservoir so far down inside his chest. Witnessing this deep rooted sadness makes him feel guilty, like he's eavesdropping. It's too personal, too pivotal. The space Mark left behind runs so deep, so incredibly deep, and it's unsettling to stare-down that chasm. Lewis can't imagine ever having something like what Craig had. He wonders if Craig will ever have something like that again.

"You ok, dude?" Lewis asks. Craig nods and takes a long drag. They're silent for a moment, the two of them just watching the colors in the heavens shift and the clouds twist and change shape.

"You know what he said to me once? After he found out?" Lewis shakes his head no, but Craig is still facing the other direction. He continues anyway. "He said 'Craig, when I'm gone, the more you live the faster everything will go by. You're gonna be moving so fast sometimes it'll feel like I'm moving in the opposite direction, but I swear I'll be right there. The entire time. So don't be afraid of going too fast. You can break the fuckin' speed of light if you want, babe, but don't you ever be afraid of what you might be leaving behind.'"

Lewis hesitates. "You really miss him, huh?"

Craig laughs, but it sounds demented and pitiful reverberating in that hole in his being. It echos off the edges of the lake and returns like a disjointed cry.

Lewis hadn't known Craig when it happened, nobody really knew him, it was too risky to get close. That's just how it is for guys like Craig in towns like this. That wasn't why Lewis hadn't befriended him. He simply didn't want to risk getting to know *anyone*. That is, until the first week of Junior year when Craig decided *he* wanted to get to know *him*. It's not as though he had a reputation to uphold and, even if he did, Lewis can't say no to Craig. He knew all about him and Mark, everyone did, but they'd never talked about it. Not until now.

"Monica told me you didn't go to his funeral," he says, picking at his thumb.

"As if his hick parents would've let me anywhere near the ceremony." Craig chuckles. "Not that it mattered. I'd already said my goodbyes."

They don't speak for long enough that the fire drains out of the sky and settles into dusk.

"It's getting dark." Lewis observes. Craig bursts out laughing, the harsh sounds battering the tree line.

"Sorry, sorry, it's just-" he giggles. "Kind of a pun."

Lewis chuckles and the air around them seems to lighten. "Ya, that wasn't intentional."

"Man, I suck." Craig sighs. "I brought you out here to chill and I just dumped all my friggin' grief on you, dude."

"Nah, it's ok." he shrugs. Craig turns around.

"It's just, this is where we met, ya know? It's just... ya." Craig takes one last drag of his joint before putting it out on the dock. "You wanna go home?" he asks. Lewis wavers then shakes his head. Craig raises a brow.

"It's nice. Being out here." He shrugs. "The stars will be out soon, too, I like to name constellations and stuff."

Craig grins and shakes his head. "God, you're such a dork."

He turns back toward the lake, arms propped against the dock, and the two of them wait patiently for darkness to fall.

The Collector

The Detective cuts the engine but keeps his hand on the keys, steeling himself to step out of the car and onto the property. He sighs as he gazes through the windshield, observing the front of the house. There's a new windmill in the yard; a turkey with boney yellow legs whirring, trying desperately to flee but going nowhere. What used to be a vegetable garden is completely overgrown and has begun to take over the wrap-around porch. Along the gutter an array of wind-chimes, many tangled together, sways and dances. If he looks hard enough he can see the chaos of the house spilling out onto the porch, stacked and organized but a mess nonetheless.

He finally pulls the keys from the ignition and slides them into his pocket as he opens the car door. The crisp air is an almost shocking contrast to the stuffy smell of the new car. It was a gift from the state of Montana after he solved his one hundredth cold case. He's had the car for weeks and he still hasn't figured out what all the buttons do. It feels as though he'd landed a piece of futuristic tech in a primordial place.

He walks up the path to the garden gate as the wind sends the mass of wind-chimes to singing. The windmills flutter behind him as a leaf scrapes the slate rock on the path. A shiver runs down his spine. He opens the shrieking gate and the wood clatters as it snaps back against the fence. He climbs the first step, then the second which groans under his weight, and surpasses the third to find himself standing before the peeling front door. He presses the rusted doorbell and waits. It's impossible to tell when the house was built. It could have been as early as the 30's, which would account for the disrepair, or as late as the 80's and had simply suffered from neglect. Glockles is quite familiar with neglect. It's his job to dust off long-forgotten case-files and unearth

Montana's ghosts. He's been told that he's an excellent detective, one of the world's best, and he has half a mind to believe it, but he knows he wouldn't even come close to solving these cases if he hadn't stumbled upon this place.

The lock on the inside clicks and the doorknob scrapes as it's turned. The familiar visage of Leonard appears in the gap of the open door. He isn't as old as one might expect; the Detective estimates he's no older than sixty-five, though with each visit it is harder to tell. He's wearing his khakis which, as Glockles has noted on previous visits, are worn around the ankles and missing two belt loops. The belt's leather is cracked, and three notches are torn into holes. The buckle has grime and the dull shine where the finish has been buffed off. His sweater is more of a collection of pilled yarn than an item of clothing, and moths have had their way with it. Despite his clothes, Leonard himself is well-kept. His shave isn't as close as it could be, likely because he's using a rusty razor, and his hands are visibly dry, but he seems a healthy older gentleman otherwise.

"Detective Sergeant Glockles," Leonard greets with a nod and nudges the stack of newspapers by the door with his ratty loafer. "How was your Thanksgiving?"

"Fine, considering I just ate a turkey sandwich and watched the Macy's parade. I saw the new windmill out front." He jabs his thumb in its general direction.

Leonard smiles, his crow's feet reaching down his cheeks. The Detective imagines the claws are trying to pull his lips into a wider smile. "Isn't it funny? They were selling them at that little place by Seven-Eleven. Well, come on in then," he invites, and steps back into the foyer. "Close the door behind you, if you don't mind."

The door can only open halfway because of the newspapers lining the walls. Glockles has to step around the door between the papers and the frame, trying not to catch his foot on either. He closes the door and starts to follow Leonard down the hall, passing by the front pages staring up at him. The stacks are about hip-level. On the left books are lined up, filed neatly like a never-ending shelf that curls into the sitting room. The papers on the right are lined with small vases, recipe cards, empty spice bottles, and the like, as this section leads into the kitchen. Sticking out of the stacks of newspapers are sticky-notes marking the end of each month of news. The nearest one is labeled May 99'.

“Would you like some coffee, Detective Glockles? Two sugars?” Leonard glances back at him.

“No, thanks Leonard, I’m trying to quit. I’d love some tea though.” He smiles politely.

“Sugar?”

“A little, thank you.”

Leonard chuckles. “It’s so nice you remember your manners, so few young men do these days.”

“My mom would have my hide if I didn’t say my please’s, thank you’s, and yes sirs.” Glockles shakes his head. Leonard laughs.

“I’m sure your mother raised you well.”

They turn into the kitchen and Leonard starts to make a pot of tea. There are eight teapots on the far counter, three of which have broken spouts and two are missing lids. He selects a white pot with blue, pink, and orange flowers and places it on the

stove next to a bucket of stale fried-chicken, likely leftovers from lunch. He then fills the kettle which is already sitting on the stove. The burners click as flames sputter to life, licking the charred steel. He crosses the room to a cabinet without a door which is filled to the brim of tea boxes. There are several Lipton's, and the rest are a completely random assortment.

Glockes scratches his neck. "You must drink a lot of tea."

Leonard furrows his brows as he draws out two packets from a purple box. "No, not particularly. Is blackberry fine?"

The Detective nods. Leonard sets the bags into the pot and checks on the kettle.

"That'll be a minute. Let's sit down and you can tell me about your case, hm?"

The sitting room has three bergère armchairs with clawed feet and floral embroidery. The cushions are yellowed, flattened, and threadbare, and armrests are practically worn to the stuffing. The Persian rug is in a similar condition. The small chandelier is mostly obscured by the many bookmarks hanging from it, so the room is dimly lit. The lack of light might cause you to overlook the bookshelves until you realized there are none; books have arranged to imitate shelves, and more books shelved between them. There are glass cases of bugs, feathers, a cat skeleton, pressed leaves and flowers, pinecones, acorns, and other preserved treasures of nature. Glockles looks over the extremely outdated world map as he fiddles with one of the toy cars. He sets it down next to a miniature bird cage with fake bird locked inside and takes a seat.

"I saw in the paper you were promoted, and that you were given a new car."

Leonard eases into his chair, removes his glasses, and sets them on the wooden side table next to three other pairs.

“That’s correct.” Glockles nods. “Of course, it’s all thanks to you, Leonard. Cold cases go cold for a reason, I could’ve never thawed those suckers without your help.”

Leonard waves his hand and shakes his head. “Detective, I have the facts. You take those facts and arrange them into a perfect picture of the crime, how can I take any credit for your honest detective work?”

He shrugs. “I just wish I could find a way to repay you, is all. Maybe bring you groceries or... mow your lawn.”

Leonard grins. “You can’t cut dead grass, my boy. Besides, I like your company.”

The Detective grins back and then grows more serious.

“Well, this case is... it’s tenuous. A girl was found shot in the woods in 92’, a kid in seventh grade, gunshot wound in the head. The killer was profiled as an adult male, possible family friend, which I don’t buy. The girl’s mom has been marching every year, trying to get her baby’s case solved. Thing is we never found a bullet, whoever did it must’ve taken it, so we don’t even know what kind of gun or anything. No footprints, tire tracks, nothing.”

Glockles continues to hash out the details. Leonard listens intently, dry hands folded over his khakis. It’s during these moments he seems beyond his age. Detective Glockles knows plenty of old men, men even older than Leonard, and he knows what a pensive old man looks like, the way their experience weighs in their eyes as they view you through the lens of a long, regretful life. Leonard’s stare is not empty, but there’s no weight, no weariness, none at all. He looks like an impartial judge to the entire history of humanity’s crimes, like he’s seen Alexandria burn, seen famine, seen the rise and fall of kings and countries. Like how the largest trees don’t seem to be fighting the weight of

the sky but fighting to stay rooted to the earth. Last winter Glockles felled a tree behind his house for firewood and tried to count the rings in the stump. It took him about ten minutes to count eighty-seven rings. Sometimes he wonders if it would be possible to count Leonard's rings. He guesses it would take years, maybe a lifetime.

When Glockles finishes his briefing, he waits for Leonard to say something. He stares in the middle distances, his crow's feet curling and uncurling as he squints, relaxes, and squints again.

"Alright, show me." Leonard returns his attention to the Detective and offers his hand, expectant. Glockles reaches into the pocket of his coat and summons an evidence baggy. Inside is a brown button, about the size of his fingernail. He pulls the bag open and retrieves the button, carefully placing it in the center of Leonard's palm. He stares at it, breathes out, and the button starts to glow. A small halo of blue light, pulsating ever so slightly, illuminates the older man's hand. Glockles has lain awake at night ruminating over this very glow. His mind, dependent on logic, on the limits of reality, can't wrap around the source of the light. Ever since he first met Leonard, ever since that fated case led him to those creaky porch steps and that rusted doorbell, the Detective has marveled at it. Calling it magic seems too easy, almost silly, so he has settled on inexplicable, only sometimes going as far as to admit that he finds Leonard's gift mystical.

The light fades and Leonard sighs. He drops the button back into Glockle's hand and shakes his head. For a moment Glockles is worried that it didn't work, but Leonard doesn't disappoint.

"Margaret Albertson," he murmurs. Glockles jots it down.

“Anything else?” He glances up at him, but Leonard shakes his head.

“She’s dead too,” he sighs. “She drowned herself in Bear Lake, near Seward. Seven years ago, April fourth, second page news. Want me to get it?”

Glockles hums and clicks his pen. “No, that’s alright.” He places his notepad back in his pocket. In the kitchen the kettle starts to whistle, but Leonard makes no move to go take it off the burner. He’s staring off into the middle distance, spindly brows drawn together, creasing his forehead.

“Would you like me to get the pot?” Glockles asks. Leonard blinks.

“The- oh, yes, if you’d please.” He rubs his face with his hand, massaging his beard and frowning. “So many things in this one... girl scout cookies, a hair-tie... and so many angry girls before her.” He shakes his head, talking more to himself than to the Detective who’s already heading into the kitchen. “All the people are fleeting but the same problems keep cropping up... jealousy... spite, trepidation... If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my endless life, Detective Sergeant Glockles, it is that humans always die faster than they learn. If they had a few more decades to see, to understand... well, you’d be out of a job,” he chuckles. “Maybe I could start getting rid of things.”

“I still don’t quite understand why you keep all of it, Sir.” Glockles returns to the sitting room with two steaming mugs. Leonard accepts his and blows on it carefully.

“They tie everything down, they anchor all the memories. Minds were not made to hold eternity, but this house-” he smiles at the bookshelves, the ceiling. “-it can store some of it.”

Glockles nods, but it doesn’t make much sense to him. Leonard lifts his mug and winks. He takes a delicate sip then places the mug beside his glasses on the table.

“You’ll be running out of cold cases soon, I expect,” Leonard comments. Glockles shrugs.

“I suppose so, Montana only has so many. I got an invitation from Jersey, they want me to join their force.”

Leonard scans his face and for a terrible moment Glockles thinks the older man knows something he doesn’t, that he can somehow sense how his past will flow into his future.

“I declined, though.” Glockles clears his throat. “I like it here.”

Leonard nods, but his face remains faintly sullen.

“Yes, Detective, this is where you belong.”

He takes another sip of his tea.