

The Ghost of Sandpiper Court

Except as may be otherwise stated in this Section, Extensee shall forfeit all rights and interests in the Celestial Plain and/or related Plain(s) in the Afterlife prior to completion of covenant paragraph 7, page 2: Fulfillment of Purpose. Extensee understands and agrees that Executor may use the terms “Contract,” “Golden Document” and “Extension” interchangeably. Executor holds Extensee liable for completion of covenant paragraph 7, page 2 and releases Extensee of deadline restrictions within the Afterlife. Extensee agrees to enter Nothingness upon completion of covenant.



As a fresh, naive ghost, I fell for the illusion of truth. I wanted to do the things that mortals had imagined us capable of: to linger and “emanate presence” (what humans called “hauntings”); to possess the body and soul through invocation; to photo-bomb pictures of mortals at bar mitzvahs and weddings, my blurry, effervescent figure carved into the background.

Most of all, I wanted to make “contact.”

“Contact is not a thing,” Phil said. “Focus on your Purpose.”

Ten years ago, at my time of death, I was having an out-of-body experience, floating above the bed, looking down at my wife Samantha who was sleeping next to... *me!* A pale corpse, wide-eyed, mouth agape. My dead hands on my dead throat.

I ascended up, up, until my head surfaced above the ceiling. I thought that I would float towards the night sky, but Phil grabbed me by the heel and kept me from “crossing.” I looked down between my feet to see my corporeal form, stiff as stone.

“Here.” Phil handed me a square parcel wrapped in metallic gold foil. It was tied with a pretty pink ribbon.

“What’s this?”

“Don’t ask questions,” he said.

I unwrapped the parcel: silk pajamas in a blue paisley print.

“Put them on,” he said. That’s when I noticed *his* pajamas—soft, buttery silk, white as snow. The garbs of a well-established Messenger. The uniform that gave him clearance to access the Celestial Plain.

“But...”

“No buts.”

I reached for my glasses and flinched as my fingers disappeared into the nightstand drawer.

“What on dead earth are you doing?” Phil said.

“I need my glasses.”

“No, you don’t.” He was right. I could finally see the minute cracks in the bedroom walls, the picture frames on the fireplace mantel, the pronounced “M’s” etched into the palm of my hands.

“Put on the damn pajamas,” Phil said.

I did as I was told.



Phil concluded the following:

1. That I had died prematurely, robbed a few years’ life by a Luden’s cough drop that had lodged itself in my throat, deprived me of breath and caused my heart to stop beating. Phil’s sidenote: *Why did they make those Luden’s cough drops so damn big, anyway?!*

2. That unbeknownst to me, my life had been devoid of meaning. That I had failed to make an impact, to leave my mark on the world.

3. But that in spite of my shortcomings, I might experience purpose in the Afterlife.

A substantial portion of Phil’s report, which he submitted to the Manner of Death Department, criticized my role as a high school guidance counselor. He argued that I lacked the “buoyancy” required for a position that granted me a great deal of influence over eager young minds and that I didn’t do enough to help my students navigate the perils of coming-of-age. That I failed to galvanize them, to inspire them.

This caught me by surprise! I thought I had been quite good at my job. I thought I did well in absorbing my students' collective angst, day-in and day-out.

"No, you didn't," Phil said.

To prove his point, Phil pulled a Ghost-of-Christmas-Past on me and transported us to a memory. As a Messenger, his *core* (I'll get to this later) was much more powerful than mine. When he burned it, it gave him the ability to erase the objects that surrounded us in a particular room, to reduce our setting to a quiet darkness.

We were at my old office at Glendale High, 1994. Samantha's portrait was beside the placard on my desk that read "Peter Lima," and in smaller letters underneath: "Guidance Counselor." I had hung posters on the walls, album covers from 70s rock bands. Electric Light Orchestra's *Out of the Blue*, which showed a UFO swallowing the aircraft from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. And Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*: a glass prism dispersing a ray of light into a rainbow. I thought the posters would make me appear relatable, that upon viewing them my students would understand that I was "cool."

"Do you remember this?" Phil asked. We were hovering near the ceiling of my former office, my former, *alive* self sitting at the desk. Across was a girl in a chair. She was crying, blowing her nose into a Kleenex. The girl had short, kinky hair, a dark complexion, a large mole protruding from her neck. What was her name? Angie? Agnes? Agatha?

I had called her to my office to discuss her poor grades. Somewhere along the conversation, we careened towards a new subject.

"How far along are you?" I watched my former self ask her.

"Six weeks," she said.

"Do you know who the father is?"

Phil shook his head. *Dude, what kind of question was that?*

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't know what to do," the girl said.

“Listen,” *What was her name?* “You have your whole life ahead of you,” my alive self said.
“Don’t throw it away because of one mistake.”

“Would you agree that you were out of depth?” Phil asked me.

I shrugged my shoulders.



To combat the pervasive boredom I suffered in the Afterlife, I spent hours flying above the Hollywood Hills in Southern California. (I liked to fly at dusk when the sky was a pink ombre.) When I blasted into the sky, I raised my right arm and curled my left bicep. Phil called me “Superman.”

When I wasn’t flying, I hiked through Coldwater Canyon in search of coyotes. Prior to my departure from the Living World, I feared these creatures that prowled the hillsides of LA, their irises reflecting the headlights of cars going up and down the canyon roads. But in the Afterlife, I welcomed their company, exuberant that they could sense my interdimensional presence. They would indulge me in staring contests and this made me feel *alive*.

For a long time, I believed that Samantha was my purpose. Back home at Sandpiper Court, we’d sit on the couch and watch the eight o’clock news. She’d forget to close the balcony door and a cold breeze would sweep in. When she dozed off midway through the program, she’d shiver in her sleep. I’d fly to the linen closet in the hallway to fetch a blanket, consistently failing to realize the futility of that gesture. Ghosts were nothing more than ineffective, translucent beings. When my wife shivered, her teeth chattering like she was naked in the Arctic, I had no choice but to look away and endure the shame of my helplessness.

Because I am dead, I can appreciate the awesome responsibility that parents must feel. Samantha turned seventy this year. Her frailty reminded me of an abandoned hatchling fighting to survive, to find its way home. Certain fatherly instincts kicked in when she struggled to complete the simplest tasks. I longed to hold her steady when she bent down to pick up the things she dropped—the mail, the apartment keys, the salt shaker—but my fingers went through her body like air. When

she cried alone in the kitchen, I wished that I could make the ivy hanging from their macramé baskets reach out their leafy tentacles and embrace her.

Mortals will never comprehend solitude the way that I do.

After years of failed contact, I pretended to have full-blown conversations with Samantha. She'd water the parlor palm in the living room, speak to it like the child we never had. I'd pick up on pieces of the conversation and added color where I saw fit. *My, my, how you've grown*, she said to the parlor palm. I replied, *Yes, indeed. A true lady*. And when she burned her fingers on a hot dish, she said, *Dammit, Sam, why do you always do that?* And I replied, *Because you do too many things at the same time and you get distracted*.

It was most painful at night when her weeping broke the dead silence. She cried herself to sleep whispering my name, *Peter, Peter*. I lay in bed with her.

Shhhhh, I'm here, my love. I'm here.



Ghosts can hear the sound of fading heartbeats from a great distance. They were like conspicuous tribal drums thudding from a jungle-island at night, warning of mortals on the brink of death. When Samantha departed from the Living World, I hunted these sounds, hypnotized by their pulsating rhythm. They beckoned me like church bells on a Sunday morning.

Near a 7-Eleven on Hollywood Boulevard were several tents pitched along the sidewalk. In those tents were Betty, Mack and Zeke, AKA “the homeless crew.” (Phil said the correct nomenclature these days was “transient” instead of “homeless person,” but I liked to keep things old school.)

I watched Betty like a curious child beholding a new, shiny object. She'd stick a needle into the purple, throbbing vein of her forearm. A dark gold and syrupy liquid flowed from the syringe into her bloodstream. She lay on thin bed sheets over thin pieces of cardboard on the harsh pavement. At first, the drug would offer her a sense of euphoria, an escape from reality. But when the

high was over, she'd beat her face with a walking cane, or vomit in her lap, or scratch at her skin until she drew blood.

Mack and Zeke shared their own tent and partook in this kind of ritual, too, but one of them kept watch. Zeke, who had zebra stripes tattooed on the left side of his face, was the more reliable of the two. He fought off the urge to shoot up whenever it was Mack's turn. But Mack often succumbed to the urge and he joined Zeke on trips down Psychedelic Lane. Their euphoria was less of a whirlwind: they lay in the tent quiet as a mouse, with catatonic expressions, and muttered low, hungry moans.

I wanted to welcome new death, to catch it *before* it happened. The homeless crew outside of 7-Eleven was a starting point. I wanted to disabuse new ghosts of fanciful notions regarding the Afterlife. If I could warn them of a Messenger's empty promise of redemption—against illusory claims regarding Extensions, Celestial Plains and vague "Purpose"—I could prevent them from making the deal I made many moons ago.

But like everything else in the Afterlife, "hope" was a chimera that I chugged down like it was the last glass of water on Earth.

For no one can be saved from the phantom world I inhabit.

I thought about the arbitrary language in the Golden Document that I signed:

Executor releases Extende'e of deadline restrictions within the Afterlife.

I wondered if that could be interpreted to mean that I was not, in fact, inhabiting the Afterlife, but rather living some kind of hell.



"It's time you learned something," Phil said. We were sitting on the roof at Sandpiper. A thick smog veiled the Downtown LA skyline on the horizon.

"Close your eyes," he said. "Think of something 'nice.'"

That was easy. I thought of *her*.

"Now, 'burn your core.'"

In the space our hearts once occupied was a *core*—a white substance the shape and size of a bouncy ball. When us ghosts “burned” it, the energy it released propelled us into the skies. It allowed us to walk through walls. It enhanced our olfactory and auditory senses so that we might track down looming deaths like vicious hound dogs. The process was similar to nuclear fission in that our diaphanous ghost bodies were merely reactors containing this powerful core, volcanic in its intensity.

But the greatest power it offered was the ability to “bend the wind.”

“It would behoove you to use this gift sparingly,” Phil warned. But I didn’t listen.

When the Cohens from 4B celebrated Hanukkah, I blew out their candles eight days in a row. And when little Mikey from 3F blew bubbles in the garden, I bent the wind to push those bubbles into the spines of a cactus (they went, *pop!*). And when the landscape technician from American Nurseries visited Sandpiper on Tuesdays, I manipulated the wind from his leaf blower and reversed his efforts of clearing the sidewalk of fallen leaves.

In hindsight, I should have listened to Phil. My wind-bending performance at Sandpiper raised questions among the residents, especially Mrs. Davis, the property manager, who attributed the “strange winds” to paranormal activity. As a result, she hired a purported Romanian white witch named Lavinia.

Lavinia was a tall, lanky woman with long, silver hair, a crooked nose and unshaven armpits. She spoke witchy Romanian words in the gas meter room, the electrical closets and throughout the carpeted hallways of the apartment community. At first, I scoffed at her “cleansing,” her attempts to rid Sandpiper of “malignant energy,” but the cleansing proved to be formidable. The smoke from her burning sage permeated my core. It reduced my appearance to its thinnest layer of transparency. Phil said that he could barely see me after the witchcraft, that Lavinia had drained the blue from my eyes, replacing them with a dull gray for the rest of my ghost life.

If I could impart a few words of wisdom to other ghosts, I’d say, “Don’t underestimate a white witch.” Lavinia’s cleansing had a kryptonite effect on my powers and for a while I couldn’t fly through walls, or smell death, or command the wind. I found myself at the mercy of gravity like a true mortal. It took years to rebuild my strength, to burn my core once again.



According to Phil, when ghosts coexisted eons ago they had succumbed to barbarism, battling each other to reign over undefined territories. But in these modern ghost times, to keep order, we were confined to perimeters that spanned a one-mile radius, the perimeter itself shaped like the lid of a cake stand—a hazy dome which, at its upper limit, prevented us from ascending to the stars.

“One perimeter, one ghost,” Phil said. He warned that if I ever got close to the dome wall and wanted to touch it, *don't*. When I asked him why, he said, “Don’t ask questions.” (For all of his translucence, Phil sure lacked transparency.)

One morning, when I was flying two thousand feet in the air, I came upon a winged migration. There were hundreds of sandhill cranes passing through my perimeter, traversing the pacific flyway from Patagonia to Alaska. I joined their flight path and gawked at their majestic beauty. Their feathers were the color of blue lavender, the underside of their broad wings a bold onyx. Their necks were long and fine and on the crowns of their heads were red spots like warpaint.

On our second or third date (what also seemed like eons ago), Samantha asked me what kind of creature I would like to be reincarnated as. Not being an aficionado of the animal kingdom myself, I asked if I could choose to become a plant instead, like the Joshua tree or a prickly pear cactus. I knew that I belonged in the desert and much preferred to photosynthesize, to sustain myself with sun and dirt. After stating that my answer was perfectly acceptable, she described her “next-life” animal as a bird—but not just any bird—the ballerina of birds. All neck and legs and shimmering color. Something as bombastic and as beautiful as those sandhill cranes.

When I returned home, I found Samantha lying face-up on the living room floor. She was heaving as if she had just run an Olympic marathon, with one hand pressed against her chest and drool hanging from the corner of her lips. Her eyes were bloodshot, arrested by a crippling fear.

It was time.

I commanded my fiercest wind yet, burned my core to a crisp. I pulled torrential gusts from the polar vortex, lassoed and dragged it my way like a rhinestone cowboy. In theory, my plan was simple: I would knock over the tall grandfather clock, topple the floor lamp with the stained-glass lamp shade, fling the paintings that were hanging on the walls in their heavy, brass frames. I would cause each of these things to thud and shatter over the hardwood floors. I had to warn Mrs. Gargani, our downstairs neighbor, of my wife's departure. I would not let Samantha perish without a sound.

Hours later, I was kneeling beside my wife's cold body with my fingers interlocked behind my head and my elbows touching, as if shielding myself from a great sense of deplorability, from the shame that washed through me like a wild river.

I had failed her.

"Peter," said an emerging voice. He appeared in the expected white pajamas, in his usual, unceremonious way of appearing.

"Not now, Phil."

"What are you doing?"

"Leave us alone."

"C'mon, Peter. She's crossed."

"I don't want to continue." I begged Phil for leave to Evaporate from the Afterlife, to enter Nothingness like we had agreed upon.

"But the contract..." he said.

"Don't," I cut him off.

The last thing I wanted to be reminded of was "Purpose."



"The wife passed away peacefully in her sleep," Mrs. Davis lied/disclosed to Laretta Cooper, the new renter AKA my new roommate.

"And the husband?" Laretta asked.

"Mmm. The husband not so much."

When I first “met” Laretta, I noticed a lot of color. She was wearing rainbow leggings, a pink sequined camisole (with no bra underneath), purple open-toed espadrilles, gold hoop earrings and blue eyeshadow. She was twenty-two, standing five-foot-one, with thunder thighs and large, low-hanging breasts. She wore her hair like Diana Ross in *Lady Sings the Blues*, a white gardenia behind her left ear.

“Dang, this place is *lush!*” Laretta said when Mrs. Davis showed her the apartment. They were going from room to room, Laretta’s bulbous eyes scanning the entire space. “I’ll take it!” she said.

Laretta moved in an air mattress from Target, towels and linens from Big Lots, a twenty-dollar coffee table from Ikea and a loveseat from Jennifer Convertibles that had a removable floral cover. She painted a blood-red accent wall in the bedroom and piled on large pillows against it to use as a headboard.

She called herself a YouTube “influencer.” On the desk that she placed in the dining area were makeup kits and trinket dishes in the shapes of seahorses and corals. On the dishes were press-on nails and small containers of brush-on nail glue. She kept a laptop on the desk that she used to record videos of herself painting her nails while monologuing her tumultuous string of romances. She would then upload the videos onto her YouTube channel called “The Nail Diaries.”

I didn’t understand what “vlogging” was, nor what kind of “influence” someone like Laretta could hold over the masses. My generation *worked* for a living. We sweat salty beads from our brows in order to put food on the table. We soaked our calloused feet in buckets of milk. My wife had been a court reporter, a seamstress, a librarian, a valued citizen of the world.

But in this modern age, it seemed that all one had to do for a living was to upload YouTube videos and wait for the view count to tick up, up, up until it went “viral.” Upon loading new content, Laretta would refresh the webpage repeatedly while slurping on a bowl of ramen noodles, little stars in the place of her eyes as the count exceeded one, two, three thousand views.

“You’re just jealous,” Phil said. “She’s quite the entrepreneur.”

When Phil said this, Laretta was recording a video of herself “twerking” upside-down against the wall, her phone propped on the fireplace mantle eight feet away, the camera pointed straight at her.

“You’re right, Phil. I’m *so* jealous.”

One night, while Laretta was vacuuming the walk-in closet, she found a polaroid of Samantha and I stuck between the wall and the edge of the carpet. We were at the Borghese Gardens in Rome when the picture was taken surrounded by dozens of stone pines that looked like little green clouds on wooden sticks. We had flagged down a fellow tourist who was kind enough to take the picture. And while we posed, I was grinning at the camera lens as Samantha gave me a peck on the cheek.

I thought Laretta might dump the polaroid in the trash, but she slid it underneath the coffee table glass along with other pictures she had arranged into a collage. (Thank you?) I guess she wasn’t so bad. (I hated it when Phil was right!)

Later that evening, Laretta fell asleep in the adirondack chair on the balcony. There was a fake lash on her cheek, most likely detached from the glue at the edge of her eyelid. I closed my eyes and manipulated an easterly. I used the wind to lift the fallen lash from her face and blow it over the balcony railing. I watched as the lash spiraled towards the earth below.

Laretta awoke, spooked and trembling as if narrowly escaping the final, gory scene of a nightmare.

“Who’s there?” she said.

I froze. *Can she see me? Can she feel my presence?*

“Is someone there?” she whispered.

Yes! I’m here! Peter!

She took a deep breath. “I must be losing my damn mind,” she said. And then she walked away.



Delawrence was Laretta's new boyfriend. They met at the covered parking garage at Sandpiper Court. That night, Laretta left the apartment at 2AM and rode the elevator to sublevel B where she liked to smoke long Capri cigarettes of the menthol variety. She discovered him there, alone, among the rows of parked vehicles. He was in the process of removing the tires from a matte-black, 2016 Dodge Charger. She noticed his broad shoulders and freakishly long eyelashes. He had a scar on his nape; perhaps a sharp knife had done the deed some time ago.

When he turned to face her nonchalantly, an unlit cigarette was dangling from her lips.

"Got a light?" she said in a soft, seductive voice. He smiled.

They headed back to the apartment, rolling the tires towards the elevator vestibule. They left the Dodge propped on cinder blocks like it was a piece of art.

Some time passed and they delighted in sharing uncommon intimacies. For instance, one would blow marijuana smoke into the other's mouth and vice versa, and they would seal this odd ritual with a kiss. But when they argued, they fought like vultures vested in the same carcass, snapping their beaks at one another. They smashed ceramic plates and hurled drinking glasses across the room and I would dodge those flying objects instinctively, forgetting that they would pass right through me.

It turned out that this ultraviolence was merely foreplay. They concluded their heated exchanges on the blow-up mattress where they "made love" like porn stars. (I can't bring myself to describe exactly what they did in bed, but just know that there was a *lot* of spitting.) On several occasions, Delawrence wrapped his fingers around Laretta's throat and squeezed and sometimes I'd notice a vacant gleam in her eyes when he was on top of her, like she would rather be practicing her twerks or decorating fake nails with glitter polish.

I imagined that Laretta was one of my students at Glendale High and that we were sitting in my office surrounded by those 70s rock posters. I said to her: *Listen up, young lady. Don't let these fucktards who call themselves "men" ruin you. Got it? You hear me? Life is too short.*

I mean, it really is.

Take me, for example. A long time ago, Samantha and I were at a pharmacy perusing the Colds and Sinuses aisle. We were looking for cough medicine. I had the kind of cough that felt like my heart was being squeezed with each breath. I preferred to handle these things “organically,” to let nature run its course until I was well again. But something had to be done, Samantha insisted. She grabbed a box of Luden’s “Supreme-Size Great Tasting Wild Cherry Throat Drops” from one of the shelves in the aisle.

Later that night, I choked to death.



Three months into their courtship, Delawrence convinced Laretta to abandon the Nail Diaries vlog, promising her financial security with the fruits of his new labor. In return, she would only need to assist him, he said, and asked that she put her finely manicured fingers to use by packaging cocaine into bricks with cling wrap.

And so Laretta sat on the living room floor, The Notorious B.I.G.’s “Juicy” playing from the iTunes library on her phone, canvas bags filled with white powder leaning against the legs of the IKEA coffee table. She used a rectangular aluminum dish that she placed on a kitchen scale to fill seventeen ounces of cocaine. But first, she lined the dish with cling wrap both horizontally and vertically and pushed down on the inside corners with her long fingernails until the cling wrap was smooth and flat on the bottom. Then she scooped the white powder from the bags with a spoon and dumped it into the dish until it weighed half a kilo. The last step was to stretch the cling wrap that was hanging over the rims of the dish and interlock them to form a tight brick.

When she first sampled the product, she took a “key bump”—a pinch that she collected from the tip of her apartment key. Over the next few weeks, however, she increased her dosage and began snorting lines of coke using a rolled dollar bill as a straw. Delawrence didn’t mind. In fact, there were times that he joined her.

One afternoon, while Laretta was alone in the apartment stacking brick after brick of cocaine, she snorted a little more than usual and developed a nosebleed. She was sprawled on the

couch, her pupils rolled into her skull, the white of her eyes turned yellow and red like a tequila sunrise, her tongue hanging and dripping saliva like a tired dog.

I noticed that she had left the balcony door open. And that the canvas bags on the floor were *also* open.

So I closed my eyes and burned my core.



When Laretta awoke and saw that the canvas bags were empty, she thought that Delawrence was playing a trick on her. Did he return to the apartment while she slept? Did he hide the cocaine to teach her a lesson?

She searched the apartment with erratic urgency: the drawers underneath the bathroom sink, the totes in the bedroom closet, the containers in the pantry. It wasn't until she stepped out onto the balcony that she saw the succulents and sansevieria in the communal garden below blanketed in the white powder. And on the other side of the garden, the drug had turned into pasty clumps when it soaked in the swimming pool. The clumps undulated in the slow current like pieces of an iceberg floating out in the arctic sea. At sixty dollars a gram, the garden at Sandpiper Court was suddenly worth thousands.

When Delawrence returned to the apartment hours later, Laretta was trembling with fear. He grabbed the canvas bags from the floor, threw them at her, accused her of sabotage. He flipped over the coffee table and drove his fist into the round mirror hanging on the wall. Glass shards fell to the floor and drops of blood dripped from his fingers onto the wooden planks.

She tried to placate him in a soft voice; a slew of sweet nothings. *Baby, I didn't do it. Please, listen to me. I can explain. It was the wind. It had to be the wind.*

Delawrence squeezed her throat with his hands and pushed her against the wall. She tried to free herself from his grasp, to pry his fingers, but he was overpowering. When she dug her press-on nails into his skin, they simply snapped and fell to the ground.

The sounds that escaped her thinly parted lips were all too familiar. Gargles from the back of the throat like bubbling lava. Loud thudding from the heart, which reverberated in the ears, warning the host of its slowing tempo. It reminded me of *me* the night of my departure, when I was too disoriented, too weak to nudge Samantha who was sleeping on the other side of the bed, so close yet so far.

If only my wife could have stirred that night! If only she could have beaten on my chest, helped me to expel that godforsaken cough drop!

When Delawrence let go, she fell on her hands and knees and gasped for air. Her cell phone on the fireplace mantel was ringing loudly, incessantly. Delawrence grabbed the empty canvas bags from the floor and walked out of the apartment. Laretta coughed and coughed as she struggled to get back on her feet. When she saw that he was gone, she reached for him. Her voice was coarse and hollow. *Baby! Don't go! Don't go!*

She started for the door dragging her feet, reaching in supplication.

Why? I wondered. What was the true drug at work? What impelled her to desire him? To follow him thusly?

As she inched towards the door, reaching, I closed my eyes. The wind came to me like a sworn squire ready to do my bidding. It swept through the apartment like an invisible dragon, yanking the sheer curtains from the brass rods in the living room, hurling Laretta's phone from the fireplace mantel twenty feet away. When she made it to the door she was still reaching for him, but I twisted the wind in her direction and when the door slammed shut, it caught her fingers in the jamb. She screamed like something in the wild that had been struck by a hunter's arrow. And I flew towards her intent on releasing her fingers from the door jamb, forgetting that I would pass right through her.

And suddenly the light around us faded and soon darkness enveloped us and I wondered before losing consciousness, *Have I entered Nothingness?*



When the light faded back in, I couldn't tell how much time had passed since Laretta's and my denouement in the apartment. I squinted at the intensifying brightness, my pupils maladjusting to the white fluorescence of overhead hospital lights. I felt oddly human in this new environment. For one, my color returned. My hands were fleshy and when I made a fist I felt powerful again. I touched my face—the leathery, dry skin, the gross hairs on my brow and the sharp jawline. For a moment I thought, *I'm alive!* But when I pressed my hand to my chest, I knew that an essential piece was missing.

I wasn't alone in that room. Laretta was lying in a gurney by the corner. She was gazing out the window at a gang of cawing crows perched on a telephone line. Her right hand was covered in a cast.

Next to Laretta was a woman sitting in a chair. *Who was that?* My vision was blurry. I was once again the old man before his untimely demise.

“Here,” Phil said. He came from behind me in a royal stroll that would not hasten, not even if the world were on fire. I looked at the thing in his hand: the spectacles I had kept in my nightstand drawer.

“Put them on,” he said.

I did as I was told.

“Look,” he said, diverting his eyes towards Laretta.

I could see clearly. There was something familiar about that woman in the chair. Short, kinky hair, a dark complexion, a large mole protruding from her skin at the neck. I *knew* her. What was her name? Angie? Agnes? Agatha?

“Althea,” Phil said.

“Althea,” I echoed. Yes. Her.

“You kept your side of the bargain,” Phil said.

“She didn't listen to me.”

“Well, it was shit advice, Peter.”

“She had the baby.”

“Yep. No thanks to you.”

“Wow. I’m... I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Phil put his arm around my shoulder. “It doesn’t matter anymore,” he said while leading me out of the room.

“What will happen to them?”

Phil shrugged. “Time will tell.”

We went down a desolate hallway. The lights above flickered and buzzed with life. At the end of the hall were double doors that were wide open. And beyond them, pitch-black darkness.

Phil cleared his throat and pulled the Golden Document from inside of his pajama shirt. He spoke as he flipped through the pages: “The Manner of Death Department would like me to recall paragraph 7, page 2, ‘Fulfillment Of Purpose.’”

“Is that it?” I said.

“Is what it?”

I pointed to the end of the hallway. “Nothingness?”

“Ahem,” Phil continued reading. “Except as may be otherwise stated in this Section, Extende e shall forfeit all rights and interests in the Celestial Plain and/or related Plain(s), yada yada yada. Extende e agrees to enter Nothingness upon completion of covenant.” His eyes met mine. “Do you understand?”

I nodded. “I understand.”

He stuffed the agreement back into his pajama shirt. “So then,” he said, “ready to cross?”

I looked at the blackness ahead. “I’m ready,” I told him. And it was true: I *was* ready. I was old and tired and alone. I had no reason to fear Nothingness because I *had* nothing for a long time.

“In that case,” he said, “on behalf of the Manner of Death Department, we would like to state otherwise.”

I knitted my brow, confused. “What?”

“Our agreement was for you to enter Nothingness *unless* we stated otherwise in that section. Get it? I’m stating otherwise.”

“So I’m not going to Nothingness?”

“You’re *not* going to Nothingness.”

“Am I staying in the Afterlife?”

He pointed to the end of the hallway. “Why don’t you get closer and see for yourself?”

As I approached the void taking skeptical baby steps, light began to fill the expanse beyond the double doors, brightening gradually like a warm, eastern sunrise. In the distance was a plain of ankle-length, neon-green grass that swayed in a gentle breeze. I could make out a figure in the distance. A silhouette against a backdrop of orange hues. She drew closer to the entrance of that celestial portal.

“What are you waiting for?” Phil said.

I turned to face him. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

She was standing by the doorway, splendid and beautiful, the woman I had loved in the Living World and throughout the Afterlife. Perhaps it wasn’t that I had nothing, but rather *everything* because of her. And there she was again, reaching, reaching.

So I went to her.