

Tunguska

The night before their trip, Nora fell asleep listening to the clacking of Brian's keyboard in the next room, the occasional whirr of the printer as he downloaded articles from his Usenet group. The next morning, she doubted he had slept at all--by the time she woke up, he was dressed in a too-small t-shirt and cargo shorts, and the coffee pot was full. At seven thirty, he was waiting in the living room, his backpack and thermos piled near the door. While she showered, she wondered what kind of man he would be if he could focus this kind of effort into something more lucrative: what if he spent those overnight hours on job boards, or woke up before dawn to apply for fellowships? She inhaled the steam and let it out with a sigh; she already knew the answer.

These trips had become an early-summer tradition for them, beginning with their tour of Dealey Plaza just after their senior year of college. Since then, Brian had dragged her to various sites connected to his favorite conspiracy theories: Camp Hero State Park to gawk at a radar array; a week in the southwest visiting towns connected to extraterrestrials; now, this day trip to Shoreham, New York to explore the abandoned grounds of Wardencllyffe. For years, Nora had paid for these excursions with the stipulation that they take a real vacation in addition to their conspiracy tourism. She told herself they were traveling, at least.

“I found maps, old photographs, schematics...it's a shame the tower isn't there anymore.”

Brian handed her a manilla folder of printouts as soon as they got in the car, but she barely needed to flip through the dossier: he would tell her everything about the place while he drove.

“What happened to the tower?” she asked.

“The government claimed German subs might use it as a landmark, or for secret communication, which is utter bullshit. Why would German subs attack Long Island? They just needed a reason to destroy it before Tesla gave everyone free electricity.”

As Brian’s hobby transformed into an obsession, Nora grew fluent in the language of conspiracy die-hards: someone was always “claiming” something, or “the evidence didn’t bear out,” or else “they knew people would believe that.” Brian often described things, without irony, as “bullshit.” Early on, she picked up on one particular verbal tic: if there was information the public wasn’t intended to know, then “they” were responsible for it. Who were “they”? That depended on the conspiracy: the government, the banks, the church. They were legion, nefarious and all-powerful.

“But wasn’t it a weapon?” she asked. “Maybe that’s why people were concerned?”

“Well, sure, it was used as a weapon once. But anything can be used as a weapon. Cars kill people all the time, but nobody is shutting down General Motors. There’s a profit motive.”

Nora listed in her head things that couldn’t be used as weapons: stuffed animals, hair clippings, gum wrappers. She stayed silent. There was nothing more exhausting or fruitless than arguing with a conspiracy theorist. Brian merged onto the Southern State Parkway.

“Did I tell you we hired a new bartender?” Nora asked.

As the restaurant manager at the Library Hotel in midtown Manhattan, Nora had spent the past three months attempting to increase business in the lounge. Only in the last month had the general manager allocated enough money to provide an acceptable salary, and Nora hired a specialist in classic American cocktails. Their building was turn-of-the-century, and Nora believed guests would be drawn to pre-Prohibition drinks in a speakeasy-inspired environment, dim and quiet and bespoke. During his interview, the new bartender mixed Nora an Old Fashioned that convinced her to hire him before the ice had melted. Nora planned a big event for his first night, with punches and live jazz. She would spend the next few weeks calling media outlets, attempting to get a write-up in the papers or on food blogs.

She explained all of this to Brian, unsure that he was processing any of it. He was hunched over the wheel, eyes darting from the highway to each of his mirrors. After a few seconds of silence, he asked, “When does he start?”

“Two weeks,” she said. “I thought you might want to come to the party with me. Dry-clean your suit and have a night out.”

“That might be good,” he said.

It was more of a commitment than she had gotten the last time she asked him to accompany her to a work event. Before the Christmas party, he had responded with a shrug and they spent the rest of the night arguing. The holidays found them at their worst, every year: Brian’s family situation was too tense for either of them to handle, but he insisted on returning to Maryland to visit his parents and brother, leaving Nora to decide whether to remain in New Jersey with her own family or accompany him for three days of denial and tense silence. This

past year, they had spent Christmas apart for the first time in six years; soon it would be separate vacations, the slow attrition until one of them chose to leave.

When they met, in their junior year of college, there was something about Brian's hobby that Nora found charming. It was an eccentric diversion, before the late nights and invite-only chat groups. In the wake of their trip to Texas, Nora worried she somehow catalyzed Brian's transition from well-adjusted conspiracy hobbyist to the type of person she described once, in a phone call to her mother, as a "paranoid nutjob."

Neither she nor Brian had ever been to Texas, but he had majored in history and Nora in hotel and restaurant management, so she pitched a post-graduation trip to Dallas, then to San Antonio and Austin. They would tour Dealey Plaza and the Alamo during the day and eat what the state had to offer at night.

The morning after their visit to the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, Nora woke to find Brian on the balcony of their hotel, a full ashtray and a cold cup of coffee on the glass table. The pages of the open notebook in his lap were covered with long sentences and diagrams; the top of the right-hand page read, "Bay of Pigs: April 1961."

"What's this?" She reached for the notebook, but Brian shifted away, shielding the page.

"It's part timeline and part proof," he said. The balcony faced east; in the long pause after he began his explanation, Nora caught glimpses of the sunrise reflecting between glass towers. She extracted the second-to-last cigarette from the pack.

"None of it adds up," Brian said. "The official record defies physics. And possibly human anatomy, but I don't know as much about that."

“You always thought there was more to the story. You said the autopsy report had more questions than answers.”

“It’s worse now that I’ve been there. I built a diagram of this place when I was thirteen, you know. I used fishing line to mark possible trajectories, but even then I didn’t *feel* it the way I did yesterday.”

Nora hadn’t felt so much as remembered, standing in what was the Book Depository, the way her mother described that day, Nora’s grandmother insisting, “They killed him for being Catholic.” Histories and counter-histories.

Later, Brian called that morning a “revelation.” The doubt he had cultivated since his junior year, his shaken faith in the study of history, blossomed into something invasive and toxic. Nora believed, at first, that it was just disillusionment, his sense of cause and effect shaken.

When they toured the Alamo, Brian talked about the conflicting theories of Davy Crockett’s death, and the confusion about where the ashes of the dead were buried. Nora liked him best like this: knowledgeable and curious instead of distrustful and miserable. He could highlight the way different historians approached the same subjects in the same way that Nora could explain the differences between Memphis and Texas barbecue.

They returned home after another three days, and Nora started her first job, assistant to a restaurant manager at a steakhouse on the Jersey City waterfront. For a few months, they fell into a routine; she would work, Brian would fill out applications for graduate programs, and at night they would go to movies or plays or restaurants, half-broke but managing. Nora let go of that morning in Texas and convinced herself that they were moving toward stability. That was before

his brother returned from his first tour of duty, though; before Brian's weeks-long disappearance and arrest.

"There it is." Brian pointed to a building set back from the road.

From this distance, Nora saw windows coated with grime, a squat building overgrown with a thicket of weeds and briars. Brian drove another half-mile, pulling into a diner's parking lot. There were protocols to follow when it came to visiting abandoned or forbidden sites: always go in on foot; you could take photographs, but stealing is prohibited; security guards were to be avoided, never confronted. Nora was unsure whether Brian had stumbled upon these rules on one of his message boards, or if he had created them himself after breaking each one.

"Did you read any of that stuff?" He asked while they hiked back.

"I skimmed, I guess."

Nora focused on walking between the white line on the pavement and the flooded gully that ran alongside it, while Brian marched down the middle of the lane, looking like a tourist with his backpack and camera strap.

"It's pretty incredible," he said. "There are documented letters to the editor of the *Times* where Tesla talks about blasting an area with an electric beam. He called it the 'Peace Ray,' because he thought if this weapon existed, no one would think about going to war."

"Sounds familiar."

"Well, he was an idealist. He couldn't have predicted mutually-assured destruction. Anyway, he tried to test it out on the north pole, but he missed. Overshot it, and bam! Blasted Siberia. It's a straight shot from here to Tunguska."

That part of the folder she had seen, the photographs and artists' renderings of the Tunguska Event: a broken forest, trees that looked like they had been snapped by a strong gale. Except each tree had broken away from the same point, waves of destruction radiating from an epicenter. It was eerie, rather than horrific, only because the area had been devoid of life before the blast. If the explosion had occurred in a populated area, the death and chaos might have been on par with Hiroshima or Nagasaki. She could see the appeal of believing the destruction was the result of a scientific experiment gone awry. It was too terrifying to think that the Tunguska Event was the result of a natural occurrence; that meant it could happen anywhere.

The edge of the property was marked by a chain-link fence. Nora had expected something more foreboding; she spotted some barbed wire, but there was a gap of at least eighteen inches between the coiled wire and the top of the fence. She could easily scale it and slip over if she needed to. Brian put a finger to the metal, and Nora was surprised by her disappointment when she didn't hear the crackle of electricity, the hum of power coursing through him. They walked along the fence until they found a spot where it had been broken and peeled away. Brian snapped a picture before squeezing through.

Before she followed him, Nora paused for a moment and considered that this could be the time they were caught--maybe Brian had lost that fear because he had already experienced it. But for Nora, the prospect filled her with trepidation and something akin to exhilaration. She would never admit this to Brian, but as she slipped through behind him, she knew her heart was not beating faster only due to fear. She listened as they trekked the hundred yards between the fence and the building, but besides the snapping of twigs, the only sounds were Brian's breathing and the click of the camera as he snapped photographs.

Nora pushed through the underbrush first, and called back, “It’s prettier than I expected.”

The huge structure, styled after an Italian palazzo, was overgrown with vines, some of them creeping up the small tower in the center. A few of the arched windows were boarded up, tagged with graffiti, but some were still intact, as though vandals respected the power of this place, the charge that still lingered in the air after years of disuse.

Brian caught up and walked until he reached a bronze plaque near the door and ran his fingers over the letters.

IN THIS BUILDING
DESIGNED BY STANFORD WHITE, ARCHITECT
NIKOLA TESLA
BORN SMILJAN, YUGOSLAVIA 1856--DIED NEW YORK, U.S.A. 1943
CONSTRUCTED IN 1901-1905 WARDENCLYFFE
HUGE RADIO STATION WITH ANTENNA TOWER
187 FEET HIGH (DESTROYED 1917), WHICH
WAS TO HAVE SERVED AS HIS FIRST WORLD
COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM
IN MEMORY OF 120TH ANNIVERSARY OF TESLA’S BIRTH
AND 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE U.S.A. INDEPENDENCE

A raised relief of Tesla’s face in a circle at the top left, and an embossed image of the tower on the right; even recreated on such a small scale, Nora thought it must have been a wonder, an otherworldly sight for Tesla’s neighbors on Long Island. Brian snapped several photographs in quick succession.

“I can’t believe it’s still here,” Brian said, awe in his voice like he was witnessing a miracle. He touched everything, his hand moving from plaque to front door. Nora couldn’t resist placing her palm against the worn wood, and they were both surprised when the door swung inward a few inches. Nora glanced at Brian and raised an eyebrow, and he answered by pushing the door open wide enough to accommodate them. Nora went first, and Brian closed the door behind them.

When Brian's brother Joseph returned from Iraq, they drove down I-95 to Maryland to welcome him back. Within a few hours, the entire family had realized the boy who left--reckless builder of rope swings, architect of Fourth of July light shows, obsessive Romero fan--was not the same one who returned. Joseph's entire body was hunched, his eyes sunken and ringed with dark circles. He smiled when he saw his brother, and laughed when his father cracked jokes, but spent the rest of the day silent and morose. That first night, in his childhood bedroom, Brian told Nora he would have to stay a little longer. He held a tomato-shaped pincushion in his hands; the room had mostly been converted to a workroom for his mother's hobbies.

"I have some days off saved up," he said. "Maybe I can help him readjust to civilian life."

Brian was still working in the Princeton archives. He had originally been hired to build a database of Woodrow Wilson's correspondence, but the department had since acquired several other collections of papers, so the temporary position became full-time for over a year. Nora had grown used to the regularity of their lives, saying goodbye at the train station every morning before they caught trains in opposite direction. Whoever got to the station first at the end of the day would buy two coffees for the walk home.

That Sunday, she drove back to New Jersey, promising to return for Brian when he was ready to go home. After the first week, she was certain he had used all of his days off--a week of unanswered messages and panic later, when the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department called her at work, she chastised herself for thinking first about his job. Instead of driving to Maryland, Nora bought a plane ticket to California and a cashier's check to pay his fine.

“What the fuck,” she said to him on the plane, the first words she had spoken since the Sheriff’s office.

“He’s not going to readjust,” Brian said. “He just would mutter and wander all night, but he kept shutting me out. All I found out is what he was up to over there--disarming IEDs.”

“What does that have to do with California?”

“He kept saying he was just another pawn. It didn’t matter if he lived or died, if anyone did, because it was a game that a bunch of rich men were playing. Toy soldiers in a sandbox. Have you heard of Bohemian Grove?”

“Just from what the deputy told me.”

“It’s a secret boys’ club. Reagan, Nixon, Bush--these fucking plutocrats go to the woods every summer and spin their webs. They decide how things are going to go for the peons, and everything plays out exactly how they plot it.”

“You just left Joseph with your parents?”

“There was nothing I could do for him.”

The police had allowed Brian to keep his camera, but even when Nora flipped through the images, she couldn’t reconcile them with Brian’s claims. She saw a stage, a mossy statue of an owl, photographs that looked more like a summer drama camp than a secret lair of vast corruption and collusion.

Brian’s trip vaulted him to overnight celebrity status in the conspiracy community: one of the few to penetrate their inner sanctum and return with evidence. There was something strange going on in those woods, and his photos were further proof. Their distrust was validated, and that was reason enough to continue the pursuit.

Some days Nora felt like his chaperone, especially when she resigned herself to following him on more trips. At least she could prevent him from doing anything insane, she told herself, but how long was she willing to do that? Other days she would get off the train to find him waiting at the station, a coffee in each hand, a flag waved from enemy territory to extend a cease-fire.

Inside, Wardencllyffe was an abandoned cathedral. Nora had expected it to be damp and sepulchral, but early light streamed through the tall windows and caught motes of dust as her and Brian's boots disturbed them. Their voices echoed off the bare walls, and Nora, in spite of herself, had a feeling of sanctity--this was a building constructed out of belief in an ideal.

"This used to be open," Brian said, pointing to the ceiling. "You could see all the way to the top, but when the building was repurposed, they divided it into two floors to rent out more space." He aimed his camera forward and took a picture of the room, the flash startling Nora as it illuminated the area. Nora spotted the stairs to the attic.

"Want to take a look?" she asked.

As Brian snapped pictures, he explained why the facility lost its funding. "You can't meter wireless electricity," he said. "Once the power companies found it, no one would give Tesla another penny. He could have changed the world, but instead they discredited him. It didn't take much to present him as a mad scientist."

The attic was stuffed with scraps from the building's better days. Several window frames were stacked in a corner, as forgotten as the rest of the facility. Brian said there were once Tesla coils downstairs, huge power generators that had been dismantled. She had seen photographs of

these enormous machines, crackling with lightning while their creator stood nearby. The basement was empty now, everything sold to pay off debts.

“The tower, too,” Brian said. “They sold the metal by the pound, like scrap wire.”

Nora imagined the old woman who came to the restaurant once a week to rifle through the recycling bins for bottles and cans--anything that could be returned for a deposit or traded to a scrapyard for cash--here, filling her cart with priceless scientific equipment and shuffling off. She resisted this juxtaposition of her own world with Brian’s, but often found herself indulging in frustrated attempts to reconcile their interests. Once, on a trip to Rachel, Nevada, they ate lunch in a tourist trap called the UFO Café, and as Brian ordered the Flying Saucer Burger and Nora the Cosmic Club Wrap, she considered how someone had developed this concept, hired the staff and chosen the retro space-age decor. Did she have a doppelgänger here, resigned to the fact that her clientele was exclusively UFO chasers?

They stayed inside for over an hour, prying open rust-sealed doors and rotted-out desks but finding little evidence of the site’s former purpose. Brian flipped through his folder of documents and removed a single sheet of paper. He placed it on the floor near the entrance, turning it to orient himself with the floor plan.

“There should be a back door over there,” he said, pointing forward.

He scooped the map off the floor and handed the folder to Nora before walking in the direction he had pointed. In a subdivided office not on the original plans, they found the door, behind a filing cabinet that shrieked against the floor as they shoved it aside. They could have walked around to the rear of the building from the outside, but Brian’s sense of adventure required him to shove his shoulder against the door until it opened with a loud crack, flooding the office with the first sunlight it had seen in decades.

The only evidence that the tower had ever stood in the spot was the remaining foundation, a concrete hexagon with rusted rebar poking a foot above the ground, steel spared from the scrap heap because it was buried deep enough to ground the tower. Brian kneeled to touch the ground, as though there might have still been a residual charge, and Nora saw him as a supplicant at the tomb of a saint. When he stood up to walk to the center of the hexagon, Nora took his camera.

She backed away, camera to her eye, until she could fit the whole foundation in the from. From that distance, Brian was a tiny figure at the center of the base. This was not far from how the conspiracy theorists thought of themselves.

These trips tended to end with a feeling of deflation, when all of the planning and background research led to heightened expectations that the sites themselves could never match. This hadn't been a bad trip--actually, Nora thought as they ate their lunch at the tower site, the fact that there was a building and something to explore made it more successful than some of their other trips--but whatever Brian came looking for was no longer here. Wardencllyffe was a monument, another loose end that couldn't tell the story he wanted it to. Before they hiked back to the car, Nora wondered what would become his next pet theory: maybe he would return home and begin reading about the faked moon landing, and they would seek out the studio where it was supposedly filmed. She supposed that would mean a trip to Los Angeles. She had only been to California to bring Brian home, and she was struck by a certainty: when she returned to the west coast, it would not be with him.

"You're quiet all of a sudden," Brian said, between the tower and the car.

"Just thinking," Nora said.

Nora closed her eyes and pretended to sleep on the ride home, and Brian didn't attempt to start a conversation. With her eyes closed and the radio turned down, Nora thought of Tunguska. She couldn't say why the image came to her at that moment, but she pictured the flattened trees, the force of desolation radiating from a central point. Imagine the silence that followed that blast: not a normal silence but the complete absence of sound, as if it had been plucked from the air, leaving only the suggestion that a hole had been torn between the physical world and the unseen.

Nora drove back to Shoreham two years later, taking a Wednesday afternoon off from work and retracing the route she had taken with Brian on their last trip together. She passed the building, noticing that Wardencllyffe had not gotten any more or less decrepit since their visit, although she had read somewhere about a group attempting to have the site preserved as a historical monument. She wondered, when she read that article, if Brian was somehow involved with this group; she hoped he was.

She had lost track of him after their breakup: after a night of arguing about their future, he packed his suitcase and left for Maryland. She looked him up once or twice, but he had deleted his social media profiles. Not that she expected to find anything: those were "the easiest way they can track you," according to Brian.

As she parked the car, she remembered his trivia about Wardencllyffe and Tunguska, facts about wireless energy and the Peace Ray that still lingered somewhere in her brain. How long would she retain these obscure facts about every site they visited, these mysteries and speculations? Maybe she would be stuck with them forever, Brian's parting gift.

Nora hiked back to the perimeter fence. Today she carried nothing, no backpack or thermos or map. She moved through the undergrowth, bereft and unencumbered, until she found the gap, still open for easy trespass.

When she reached the building, a brighter spot and four holes marked the spot where the plaque had once hung. She searched the ground to see if it had fallen, but found nothing but dry twigs and dead leaves. She had no evidence, but she was certain that Brian had returned to claim a souvenir of that day. In the years they were together, she had never felt so sure that she knew the hidden story, the speculation that perfectly explained the gaps and omissions.