

A Truth Stranger Than Fiction

Prologue

There's this world I need to explain, It's all about human nature and the excitement and disappointments that surround it; more importantly though, it's all about human connections. This world is a living and breathing thing that so happens to be home to a host of other living and breathing things. With that being said an unsettling amount of variables encompass the inevitable interactions of said beings.

We as humans galavant through life not knowing or caring to understand that everything we do has an effect. Our emotions and reactions are tied deeply into how we look at people and how we speak to them and with that being said we resonate and react accordingly. There's this unexplainable connection that we have towards each other that once severed can lead to insurmountable darkness and sadness.

The deception of we, the death of them all, the abstract melancholy that seeped in from a partnership that knew no bounds.

See there's this story I need to tell, it took me through every emotion possible, my soul laid bare for the world to see. One too many times I suppose the world faded to black and I found myself lost in the endless mire.

This fiction compromised me.

Chapter 1:

Monday through Sunday is all the same. I open my eyes and the sunlight bleeds into my skull forcing me to make calls and exchange words with people who care about me. The rhythm is both intoxicating and infuriating. Can we just get to my favorite part already? My boss is a visionary turned new age mafiosa with the finesse of a cat walking the same fence for the millionth time. Every other day he calls me up at the same time and I collect his money or steal the ideas of his rivals while taking heed not to betray his trust. My close friends Mahgi and Marcus fill in the gaps in between the espionage and thievery. They connect me to the city's innerworkings in a way that interests me personally and professionally, maybe to a fault at times. For about three years this has been my cycle. I Wake up and engage and then I close my eyes again as the day ends, but lately it's been harder to abide by that pattern. It's like I'm

getting restless when I shouldn't and that causes me to fight the cycle at times, but I know I can't give in, it's not time. Luckily I know why today feels different so I close my eyes and I give into the cycle for the last time.

Chess, he always wanted to play chess. I never knew his name, but he learned mine. As I flew down the elevator of my loft that had no rhyme or reason to how it picked up passengers I could practically feel him wanting to get at least one good game out of me before I went on my way. A freak gust of wind bombarded my frame as I opened the lobby door that would lead to the street prompting me to secure my belongings as I waited for the wind to stop being such a show off. Spring was definitely in the air and the city of Atlanta basked in the tepid temperatures.

I casually walk across the street to Woodruff Park to meet with my chess buddy. The entire park is this living breathing dichotomy. On one end college students and random residents of the immediate area occupy the park; picnics and calisthenics are the norm for them. The other end if you're an unrefined onlooker houses a darker demeanor. Men without homes pile the area looking to do their mind some good with a game of chess.

You would think in this day and age areas such as this would be considered a blight that was long ago removed, but still it persisted. Atlanta, much like the rest of the world had become entranced in making everything look as stylish and seemingly futuristic as possible. Vivid colors splashed over the landscape of everything in sight. Buildings could shift color on a whim, cars cruised down the street without touching the concrete and not much impeded your way on the sidewalk if it wasn't human or a hologram trying its damn best to stroke your ego in an era where social media was the conduit for nearly all conversation. Sometimes at night I like to think the city looks like someone took the physical embodiment of Blade Runner and ripped it open from top to bottom before slinging its neon colored entrails all over the city. Brick no longer was a form that housed the outer shell of a building's carcass, grays and drab streaks of concrete were all but abolished from the design documents of man. The only thing that still remained untouched by the hands of man was the sky, God's sky couldn't be altered so easily. Whether light or dark the sky never failed to mesh with the world. Pastel like colors marooned themselves to the world dome today serving as the perfect backdrop.

The world sort of resides like its comfortable with itself for the first time, 2038 flexes its culture and technical advances recklessly, and for good reason. The medicines a cure all, the day to day is infinitely intoxicating and most importantly the view is amazing.

The old man who I simply referred to as an old man sat waiting in the taint of the looked down upon side of the park.

“You gonna stand there staring at me Jaden or are we gonna play?” He said this with a bit of playful venom that I wasn’t accustomed to.

“Of course I am, I always have time for at least one game.”

I was never great at chess, most games consist of me surrounding my king and queen with rooks and bishops in the hope that something good would come of it, I always lost. I never mind losing at most anything though, I don’t get enjoyment out of it, more so I find excitement and self satisfaction in the joy of others.

The old man’s joy was an honest and pure joy. His smile lit up the rest of his wrinkled and liver spot filled face as he moved his knight in position to take out my most valued of pieces.

“Well you lasted a bit longer than usual, but I don’t think you're really getting any better.”

The loud blare of his radio was somehow drowned out and suffocated by the intensity of everything that chess was. After losing the game the rushed words of the woman on the other end of the radio that looked just as new as the day he probably bought it came rushing back in.

“It’s been over eight years and still we don’t have a decision, These are our people. Their lives matter...”

The chrome nods of the radio hummed and buzzed as her voice faded off and a sort of jazzy instrumental took over that sent the prudish atmosphere into a bit of a happy go lucky tizzy.

I took my time standing from the riggidy old lawn chair he had provided me. The legs were duct taped and moving in it an inch out of it’s own comfort zone could set off an untrusting creek leading to the eventual downfall of any man or woman brave enough to sit in it.

“Ha, i’m good at other things. Why do I need to get better at chess for us to enjoy it?”

The old man's frozen smile widened as he sat back in his seat while I continued with my speech.

“That's the problem with most people in general sometimes, we always want progression, content is a word for a reason. Can’t we just let some things be as they are it doesn't always have to be so one sided. I’ve seen men drive themselves mad from wanting too much, I mean don’t get me wrong I want it all, but being great at chess is something I can do without.”

The old man didn’t say much in response. I could tell he was just happy to have riled me up in a way. I did my normal procedure when leaving him, I set my chess pieces back to their starting positions while simultaneously dragging the lawn chair back under the table. Though there were a lot of chess players out he wouldn’t get another game, I was his only opponent.

My next stop was Five Points Train Station, if you were a local there was something legendary about the area. Four entrances and the outside of each gave off a different vibe. It wasn't exactly a good or great vibe, if anything I would say you knew what to expect if you visited more than once.

The most populated side aside from the entrance that sat across the casino had to be the entrance that stood directly in front of Broad street. A flood of people could be seen on a day to day basis wasting their time there, well at least that's how I always saw it. The loud and trash littered Broad streets off kilter roar has never had a commanding enough tone to entrance me, but it's fun to look at in passing. The pigeons confident strut across the sizzling Earth alongside the small time drug transactions boost clout for those who look with virgin eyesight. In the spring you could feel the tension biting at your heels while you walked the jungle. The heat balked at the wind likely evading an often needed synergy.

It took no effort for me to take the meekest entrance into the train station. The inside of the train station was a direct descendant of everything surrounding it; Busy, oftentimes crowded, and dirty in the most authentic of ways. The northbound train came quickly to ferry me to The Cove, a place where twenty somethings live when they feel like squandering an entire check in order to live somewhere fancy as a means to boost their status in a social circle that can never be satiated. I had left my headphone receiver for my communicator and the sound on the intercom is something I dreaded, I would hear the same set of words, once in English and then in Spanish. If I knew one thing about the train it was that the seat closest to the doors were for senior citizens, the relay of words in Spanish could only add to the monotonous dread that the intercom induced on passengers.

The cart I was in was relatively empty aside from a mother and her kids. She didn't know I knew they were her kids, this is how the game is played. The girl sitting behind the rather large and intimidating woman began to make a move towards me only after receiving very discrete instructions from her mother. The little girl dragged her feet across the train's metal floor and only lifted her head up once she was sure she had all of my attention. The sound of her feet scurrying across the floor were blocked out by the train forcing its way out of the tunnel we had been traversing the past twelve minutes. There's a devil in the details you see, she made sure to only speak once she was sure the sound had subsided and my attention was still evident.

"Excuse me sir." I plopped my head off the window astutely and gave her a look of pure stoic pity as she continued. I had heard this type of speech before, but she'd never know, this is how the game is played.

“Me and my family have nothing and it would really go a long way if you could give us anything towards getting a room tonight.”

On the outside she was quite good at this, she looked sad and her near pathetic mannerisms enhanced the look of grief that bombarded her face. The inside was different, fear was bubbling over inside of her as she spoke and stood there ready to not exist for a moment as if to find reprieve in the act of nothing. I gave her mother a long hard stare as I pulled four balled up dollars from my pocket that I so lazily failed to enshrine into my wallet. Despite what I knew the exchange was comforting. Giving always feels good, you could be pure poison and the act of helping someone could make you feel different, if only for a second. Also most people only carry around cash if they plan to give it to the homeless or a family member. Physical tender has become something of a rarity these days, most stores won't take it.

At such a young age that little girl shouldn't be filled with so much confusion. She'll never forget this moment, when she gets older the thought of it all will affect her. Whether it be positively or negatively I couldn't tell one way or the other. I just know she didn't ask to be here.

If you're riding the train alone there's always this undead vibe that you give off. Whether you realize it or not you usually look miserable or incredibly reserved traveling alone. Most of this decayed sense of movement was caused by the Data syndrome complex. Suffice to say the more we look at the screen the more we droop and drop, even worse is the hallucinations that plague a little less than one percent of the toddler generation. If you partook as a kid you stand a chance to be infected. The effects were targeted and not taken seriously, but if you had a working brain you could tell that the hallucinations were permanent and the slowed sense of movement and self has become something that requires therapy to heal.

For really no reason other than to look or feel the exact opposite of what I just described I rushed off the train once reaching the station. It was still early, the sun's once humble presence began to rage across the landscape prompting me to remove my shirt for the world to see. Being six foot one did me no justice when my frail and skinny torso was what you got once the clothes came off. Luckily my tank top stayed on as sweat dripped from my body only to near sizzle once meeting its defeat at the hands of the concrete.

My friend Mahji likes to compare my height to giant lego bricks that aren't set into their grooves correctly. According to him I stood at a tall eight lego bricks that swayed lanky.

I was on my way to Marcus's place. He was one of those people I mentioned earlier, he has a really nice apartment in The Cove, the only difference between him and most others is that he doesn't work for a check. Marcus could be best described as someone whose entire essence lay dipped in subterfuge. Everything he does is to his own benefit and if it seems like it's not then

you're not paying close enough attention. Even knowing that I wouldn't call him a bad person. He's a broken mess of a person who found a way to get what he wants out of life, there's something respectable about it all.

I ring his doorbell off and on for over a minute with no results, strangely enough this didn't matter; My foot has always been an excellent catalyst for gaining attention. It doesn't take long for him to open up, no one likes getting their door kicked.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" He said as he opened the door not caring for an answer at all.

My first move upon entering is to raid his fridge before making my way to his living room. It always amazes me how well furnished his place is. The white walls fail to clash in any negative way with his red and blue furniture, it all just sort of works. Paintings line every wall of his living room and the small dining area that leads to the patio, if there's a wall there's a picture to compliment it. Some he bought and others he took himself and blew up, if you ask me and no ones usually asking their mostly terrible to look at. Especially the giant painting of some naked disco chick from the seventies, at the least her afro was well tamed, the less said the better on her other bush. His upstairs bathroom houses the only painting I have any kind of affinity for. It's a picture made by Culture Tech; the painting is unique in that it near constantly manages to move the paint molecules around creating an effect that's hard not to look at. Reds, blues and purples slush around the square frame like a meek wave trying to escape from the ocean to the sand.

I finesse my way onto his couch until I'm stretched out completely from head to toe.

"So how have you been?" I say as I begin to sip on the bottled water I confiscated from his fridge.

He is in no way impressed with my ability to avoid choking while consuming liquid as I lay back first on his excessively red couch and let my mind fish for thoughts while he spoke.

"I'm fine, you know most people check on friends with a call via communicator. But you just come unannounced and start kicking doors like you have no home training and didn't you tell me you had a data drop to collect."

This guy stayed busy, he scolded me while packing drugs into a travel bag. He was right to question me about the data drop though as my boss had been calling and he was wired. The blitz of communicator pings from him had become so prevalent that I had to mute him and all other notifications for fear of losing grip with my own wants and needs. Those data drops could wait, especially since I refused to connect my brain waves to someone else's in order to gain

encrypted data. My boss didn't know that and neither does the guy I pay to play data dump for my pickups.

"I hate small talk over the phone, I like to actually see people while we speak about whatever we're conversing about."

He let my speech continue while he took it upon himself to down the small amount of cheap wine he had been cradling between his thumb and right index finger.

"I mean I love technology it's great, but sometimes I feel like--"

Marcus pointed his empty glass towards me, the small brown drip of alcohol that remained swirled the glass. I had become entranced and silenced.

"There's someone at my door."

Chapter 2:

The world stood still for a moment. It stood still in preparation for the calamity that was its very next move. Wood chips flew forward off the door in heed of the schlage locks bending momentum. The front door shot off into the room and I saw every hinge pop, every screw come undone. There was no time to react, demons in the form of men had us trapped. This wasn't the first time I had a gun in my face, but it was the first time I felt the certainty of death riding my coattails.

I couldn't move, I couldn't speak, hell I could barely think. I, much like Marcus had succumb to the beck and call of the masked men in all black. They shoved us onto our knees and awkwardly positioned us side by side in front of the red couch. No one spoke at first, the three men seemed slightly rattled. They had kicked a door down and forced two grown men to their knees with pistols and even still I could see the adrenaline wearing thin as reality kicked in for them. No mask could hide something that sight need not be a part of, I could feel it.

The soon to be assailant in the middle removed his mask slowly. While doing so he took his gun and casually maneuvered it from one of Marcus's shoulders to the next as if knighting him. The large pistol flowed through Marcus's dreads in a manner that could only be seen as an act of annoyance. The black cloth-like mask slid off the intruder's bald head in a more satisfying manner than it had any right. He continued to ignore my presence instead opting to stare deep into Marcus's eyes. There's not a person alive that can convince me that he wasn't looking back at himself through the reflection. You don't kick down a door and force men to their knees with such stoic aggression unless you plan to do away with them when it's all said and done.

"We're gonna make this real simple for you Marcus. You're gonna pay us what you owe us and then you're gonna decide who dies here today." He said this while grabbing a handful of dreads.

I could see the fear finally seeping into Marcus's face. His mind was racing, sweat dripped despite the A.C. and madness encased his hands. A lot can be said about a man whose fingers tremble in midair. Marcus's head was cranked back as if he was about to be dipped in water for baptism. The awkward positioning caused his fingers to remain suspended in a space without mass. That along with the aforementioned trembling made him out to be a mad man playing the piano with no need for the instrument.

Despite that he still managed to speak.

"What do you mean I choose who dies?"

His question was met with consequences; the cold steel of the pistol whipped his face, Blood shot out of his mouth in an arching manner hitting the carpet awkwardly with what looked like a tooth.

"Did I ask you to talk?" He began to pace back and forth erratically until settling back in his original position between the two other intruders who had yet to speak. They stood there like empty husks devoid of life only still moving for one purpose.

"Marcus, you truly are a selfish man. You prance around the city...my city! You prance around my city like you can't be touched and you believe your actions to be a manifestation of truth. Well surprise, you've fucked over someone who doesn't believe the hype. As a matter of fact you betrayed someone who actually gave an inch of a fuck. Pray tell me the story of Icarus in immaculate detail and I'll counter with the story of Marcus."

Marcus had oddly enough lost his fear. He looked defeated and at the same time he was unbothered.

"The money is in a safe in the closet upstairs in my room. "

"I know where you put your money Marcus!"

Marcus's eyes rolled into the back of his head, I thought he was dying until I realized he was merely donning a look of annoyance.

"Luther if you know where I store my money then why--"

As nervous as I was, the thought of him pissing them off anymore than they already were prompted me to speak.

"Why don't you stop talking Marcus? Let them get your money and let's be done with this."

Luther grimaced at me, I didn't know what to expect of him with his temperament evacuating a multitude of emotions a mile a minute. It was obvious he cared for Marcus, but my attempt at calming the aura of murderous intent in the room did no one any favors. Not me, not Marcus, not the two demons who had yet to speak and certainly not Luther.

"Nice try, but one of you dies today. We were getting the money regardless of your cooperation, one of you...is going to see God today."

My heart began thumping uncontrollably, his words were powerful and they without a doubt held true. He asked my name and I obliged him, at this moment in time he was God.

“Jaden, do you know why your friend over there isn’t nervous anymore? Or hadn’t you noticed that his trembling hands had ceased and his calm demeanor had returned? I’m sure you know Marcus almost as well as I do by now. He caught onto what I said earlier, but it seems like you have yet to. I don’t decide your fate today; he does, the person that you came to check on today is going to let you die to save his own skin.”

There was barely a break in his words until he decided to stop speaking. Despite the persona he was showing physically I got the feeling that this was a man of great intelligence. Or maybe my fear wanted to make him out to be whatever would calm my nerves in the moment. But in the moment nothing could calm me my heart still pitter pattered heavily like a metronome set to its highest BPM. His words didn’t hit me immediately but once they did it made me think. I did know Marcus well, I knew him well enough to know that he couldn’t look at me because at this point it was all business, the deal was done. Internally I was pissed.

“What did you do to these people!?”

He remained silent and unconcerned, did I not even deserve to know that much? I was about to die for his sins and he could honestly care less at this point he had found a way out. His muted temperament left me weak and wanting in my final moments, I expected more. I experienced no flashbacks to better days. I didn’t want to cry or blabber on as a means to let my final moments be tainted in cliches. At that very moment I just wanted Marcus to Die. I wanted him to perish for being exactly who I always knew him to be. A tragic childhood and a different view on life because of it doesn't shield you from my ire once my life is involved.

I stood and didn’t flinch when Luther positioned his gun my way. I wasn’t content with dying for someone else's mistakes. The world needed to move me to action, but in the end all it did was spring me to my feet. Marcus followed suit while backing back towards his couch until the rear of his legs made contact. I listened as he sat and let the couch engulf him. I could feel him staring at me, I wanted to look back but my body refused the thought.

Luther laughed ever so slightly before cocking his gun back, the sound stifled my breathing. The two men beside him who had remained silent began to walk upstairs as I watched God caress the trigger of a man made tool.

“Jaden.”

I was looking in his direction but in no way was I staring at him until he called my name. Luther's intensity was unquellable, the situation at hand was something he basked in; taking life for debt owed was a tall task to carry out. I’ve never seen a being more capable.

“Jaden the next time you're in a fucked up situation like this do not fail to act.”

His words confused me for only a moment. He pulled on the trigger, but not before smiling cynically and moving his hand to the right. Three bullets scurried out the mouth of his gun loudly almost like an uncanny roar. I didn’t turn my head quickly, instead I opted to listen as the

bullets entered Marcus's body. Maybe I was listening too hard, but I swear I could hear every bullet enter his skin, travel through his bloodstream and crack bone. His eyes were still open when I looked...so absent from reality. The tear stains lining his cheeks were the only thing I still found confusion in.

The two men who never spoke had made their way back downstairs with the safe and failed to look in our direction as they walked out of the door. Luther rather impressively and maybe even sadistically still kept his eyes off me and on Marcus as he backpedaled out of the room.

I stood there for a few moments in order to stare at Marcus, he wouldn't get a funeral, no one would claim him. Anyone that once mattered to him will have forgotten about him long ago. This was the least I could do for him despite my disdain for it all. The world had chewed him up; hell it grinded him all through the machine's conveyor belt, what came out should not have gotten as far as it did. In the end I will always admire that about Marcus.

Chapter 3:

The train ride back down to Five Points station was long, overdone and quiet. The length was enhanced due to me purposely ignoring my stop and going a few stations down to the end of the line. I repeated this when going back north until the rest of my day turned to night and the sounds I couldn't hear became more legitimate as the various train carts penchant for emptiness alluded to an increase in refinement. I got the message to get off when my cart arrived at Five points for what had to be the 20th time. I could hear the comm blare on about how it wouldn't be back up.

The station had a serene peacefulness to it at one in the morning that I always admired. The greek god esque statues that sat perched around the inside of the station usually helped to enhance the aforementioned peacefulness. That wasn't the case today though, their eyes were usually absent from reality but for some reason I could feel their lifeless marble eyes following me as I made my way out. The city of Atlanta surrounding my immediate area seemed to always lose its energy at this time of the night. Drones floated above the streets and buildings shining down rare blips of light. Strangers who had yet to find their way home meshed obnoxiously well with the homeless who took no shame in sleeping on and under signature landmarks. The giant lit up Coca-Cola sign spiralled around and around serving as an unnecessary nightlight for those who slept without homes. For me it was a well needed guidepost home.

After only two minutes of walking without much thought I had arrived back at my loft. I couldn't enter it though, it lacked the feeling of comfort that home should have. I didn't feel the need to sleep, the thought of closing my eyes for an extended period of time in the hope of seeing tomorrow's sunlight did little for me.

Around the corner Fludd Gate's Pizza and Wings stayed open much later than any other place in the area. The instant my mind thought of the place my body went walking towards it with a determination that didn't seem to be of my own volition. The lights from the restaurant lit the dark side street up creating comfort the closer I got to it. The door was propped open with a sign which I thought was awkward at this time of the night. While entering I did a quick look around the place, but failed to take in the details of anyone's face.

"What'll ya have?"

"Fries." Despite my near insatiable appetite it would just be fries. I needed the cravings to stop, but I didn't care if my lust for food was fully satisfied.

"Are you done?"

"Huh?"

"Well you asked for fries and have just been standing here. I kind of want to order too."

I turned to face her before uttering a word. Her dark brown skin and curly hair that seemingly danced at her shoulders as she swayed from left to right left me near entranced.

"I'm sorry I was daydreaming a little."

"At two in the morning?"

I laughed a bit before turning back to the counter to complete my order.

"All right that'll be two dollars and fourteen cents."

I reached down into my pocket and my mind began to race, the finish line being the realization that my wallet was at home. All that remained in my pocket was a rail card and the empty space those rare dollars had created from earlier.

"Actually I'm gonna have to--"

"It's fine I can pay for your fries." She said this while making her way to the front counter whilst shoving me to the side playfully.

"Can I add some wings to that order?"

I gripped my elbow rather tightly while watching her command the situation. My left to right sway induced servitude for her charity.

We sat across from each other at the same table where she was insistent upon sharing the fries she had bought me. She was beautiful, maybe the most gorgeous girl I had ever seen, but her table manners were fucking terrible. She draped her hand over just about every fry until her entire hand had dragged down towards the bottom most fry which she took, she repeated this ritual until satisfied; it was obviously some childhood form of fry grabbing that she had failed to grow out of.

“So what’s your name?”

“It’s Melissa, what's yours?”

“I’m Jaden.”

She paused from eating to gaze up at me. The way she looked at me was as if she didn’t get a good enough look at the counter and only now did she have the time. I had taken all of her in immediately, every stare afterwards was just me over indulging in her beauty. Watching her lips and eyebrows set and rise as she chewed showed how deep down the rabbit hole I had fell.

“So what’s a guy like you doing out this time of night and don’t just say it's because you're hungry, that’s almost always bullshit.”

“Can’t a guy just be hungry late at night?”

She stared deeper into my eyes before speaking, “Not with eyes like that.” Then went back to scarfing down my fries.

“Okay then why are you here?”

“Huh? No no no, I buy the food and I ask the tough questions.”

“A friend of mine passed today so i’ve just kinda been wandering.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She said while moving the food to the left until there was nothing between us.

“No one deserves to die young.”

“Well to be honest my emotions wouldn’t be so conflicted if I knew that to be true. Three years should be long enough to know but i’m not sure,”

“Sounds like you need to get your mind off it for a little while.”

“Yea that's the objective.”

For a split second my mind went nuts with wild thoughts as I gazed at her in a lewd manner. I instantly regretted my stare and thoughts while hoping she hadn’t noticed them. There was no way for me to really tell though...Melissa had a way of letting her eyes wander while still being really engaged in conversation. Her eyes were shifty, but not so much that it looked overdone, they frolic naturally through speech and the act of nothing.

“You live close by?”

“Yea I do, like right around the corner really.”

She stood quickly before speaking causing her seat to slide back flipping over. She didn’t seem to mind the commotion it caused, people stared and she simply kicked the chair back up with her foot which gave me a better view of her wrist which housed a multitude of numbers that swirled around her skin and only formed a sequenced line once I stared hard at them. They showed a countdown timer that was days before reaching a finish. I pointed at them as she

started at me, but she simply grabbed me by the arm and walked me out as people continued to stare and make waves.

On the way there she asked me if there was anything interesting to do this time of night. Normally I would have taken her words at face value but she was different. The only place I could think of was the roof which provided an above average view of the city surrounding it. Normally it's closed around this time, but the front desk attendant always gave me free reign of the place.

After a few moments of awkward tugging the roof was ours. She rushed past me not stopping until she reached the guard rail that would prevent her from reaching the true edge of the roof. There were neatly placed chairs, but she opted to use the railing as a seat, I joined her.

"So," She said while pulling a mid sized bottle of rum from her purse.

"You drink?"

I laughed a bit before responding. "You drink rum?"

"I mean it's not my first choice, lets just say it would have gone to waste if I didn't take it."

"Alright well let's get started."

We didn't say much at first after we started drinking. I watched her take in the nights sky as the vice filled bottle of rum continued to disappear. Not much lived in the streets this time of night, but the lights that rested over the surrounding area did a good job of enticing our eyesight from so high up. That spiraling Coca Cola sign still remained the most familiar and eye grabbing piece of visual entertainment for me.

"Hey Jaden what did you mean earlier when you said three years should be long enough to know, but you weren't sure. I know I was supposed to be getting your mind off it, but I think that's a weird thing to say."

The alcohol had taken over in a major way for me. I shouldn't have felt right divulging any more than what I had told her earlier, but words have a way of spilling out when your body needs to make way for more rum.

"Well lets just say that up until the last moment I may have felt he deserved to die."

I stared at her hard while saying what I said, I needed to see the look of disgust in her eyes. To my surprise she met my look with sympathy.

"Why did your feelings change at that last moment?" she said while twisting around on the railing until her body faced me just like her head had been.

"It was the tears that dried up on his face."

"Sounds complicated."

"Maybe, I just really can't explain it all."

"I understand that and I'll just say this, could you forgive him? Whatever he did to you to make you feel like he deserved the death that came to him could you forgive it? Could you forgive it if he was still alive and he did everything in his power to fix what he had done wrong to you? If the answer is yes, then I think you should forgive him. I understand that it just happened and you're still feeling all of it, but there's no reason to sulk over the bad deeds of a dead man."

The air between us was awkward for only a millisecond before she hopped off the railing both woozy and tipsy.

"So you gonna invite me to your place or what?"

"I mean I guess so...you'll have to excuse my slow response. No girls ever made it this easy for me before."

She laughed immediately prompting an internal sigh of relief from me.

It's moments like this that make you wonder why there's so many damn keys on your key holder. The rum made a few seconds feel like an eternity. Nothing was more satisfying than the sound of my door opening. Melissa once again skipped past me as I opened the door for her. I watched her survey my home almost nonchalantly. She pranced around my living room and kitchen with a tipsy swagger and a look of intrigue that startled me excitingly. The odd dance came to a conclusion when she backpedaled into my bedroom flailing over onto my bed.

Her proceeding action was to laugh extremely loud, her voice echoed around my loft ever so slightly. I barely got my ass to touch my covers before she pulled my shoulder down towards the bed. At that point we were shoulder to shoulder and our eyes were gazing up at the ceiling. As our arms rustled up against one another I felt more at home than I had in a long time. The ceiling was very high up, but that didn't stop me from creating an imaginary path out of the paint chips that were freeing themselves from the bonds of the still solid white.

Everything grew eerily quiet for a moment. The room began to exhibit an echo chamber like persona whilst my body began to float only if I closed my eyes. Eventually the feeling got the better of me and all I did was close my eyes. A few minutes later and I awoke from my sleep to find Melissa still staring at the ceiling. She didn't move and I could barely tell that she was breathing, she was far removed from her current situation but she wasn't asleep. I attempted to gain her attention, but she interrupted the motion with speech.

"Jaden I kill people."

"What?"

"I haven't been doing it for a long time, but it's the only part of my life lately that has structure."

She sat up and leaned her body against my wall. Her eyes went slightly mad with movement, she was near ferociously waiting for me to respond.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"I'm serious," she said with the most earnest air of believability.

“I think I am too. Or maybe not. My calculated nature goes right out the window when alcohol gets added to the mix.”

“I feel like you don’t believe me.”

“Well you should feel like that. You’re drunk and you don’t really know me like that so I doubt you would tell me such a secret.”

She laughed at my response almost sarcastically--no her laughter was drenched in sarcasm and even still I felt no pressure. I felt no fear or reluctance to continue laying beside her. The warmth of her body next to mine kept me as calm and as at home as it did before she started speaking about murder.

I hadn’t noticed initially, but she had finally gone to sleep. Her body slid over towards mine with the aid of the white wall until we were in a similar position again. Two mummies in the same coffer sitting upright. The rum still held my body captive and therefore closing my eyes still felt like zero gravity. Without a second thought I let the deep dark void of space send me to sleep. At that moment I was truly okay, just existing made sense.

Chapter 4:

She was gone, I woke up to an empty bed and a fragmented disposition. She left a light note on the door, it simply read thanks for last night; Her phone number lined the bottom of the note. I lazily rubbed my finger across the portion of the electric note with her number and transferred it to my communicator on my wrist via biometrics. I tossed the note towards my living room window and it disintegrated once touching the sunlight. Culture Tech was really a cursed gift.

Not even two minutes into eating my cereal and my door slams open. Vivid thoughts of the day before came rushing in but my body and mind remained calm. I stared forward...what now I thought.

“So you just leave your door unlocked now?”

It was Abel, my neighbor from upstairs. Since I moved in I had made a habit of bothering him at least twice a week and to my surprise he usually returned the favor.

“So you just make it a habit of opening my door without knocking?”

He ignored the chance to answer my question instead opting to make himself some cereal as well. I wasn’t looking forward to eating with him, the way he chewed annoyed me. You don't have to chew your food 44 times before swallowing.

“I have a habit of jiggling door knobs before knocking and your’s was just open. You should have seen my face when the door creaked open.” He said while pressing three fingers on his lips. “How southern of you I thought.”

“Yea the way my door is set up she couldn’t lock it and leave.”

Abel began slowly dunking his spoon into his cereal and milk without scooping anything out. I could only assume he was substituting a hand motion or a pen tap with the dunking motion.

“You had a girl in here?”

His surprise left me slightly annoyed.

“I mean don’t get the wrong idea, I’m happy for you. It’s just you seemed to have a lack of interest for them as long as you’ve been here. It’s not like you didn’t like them more so you didn’t have time for them.”

Sometimes I wonder if Abel is in love with me. It’s weird for me because affection is a game that you’re forced to play with everyone you come into contact with. We’re all vying for each other’s attention which loads up the possibility of a deep level of intimacy that defies gender or preference sometimes.

“I guess all that’s true,” I said while emptying my cereal.

“I feel like sometimes you need that certain person to occupy a specific moment in your life and if it all works in that instance then you have a real chance to grow.”

“She must have really gotten your mind off Marcus last night.”

Marcus...damn I truly hadn’t thought about him since the rooftop last night.

“You heard about Marcus?”

“I mean it’s all on the news, it seems like he got it bad.”

“Yea he did.”

Abel could feel my reluctance to speak about it all, his silence after realizing it was satisfying.

“Well I only met him once and I could tell he was trouble, but I knew if you were hanging around him he had to have some redeeming qualities.”

A long stretch of silence endured itself out until he changed the subject to this girl whose attention he had been vying for. He was planning on introducing himself in person for the first time today. His nervousness was on full display while describing her in detail to me for what had to be the hundredth time. He opened my fridge and grabbed for nothing and moments later he found himself with my canned goods in his hand; He juggled them with a lack of skill that failed to inspire even a smidge of admiration despite the conviction displayed in the attempt. Eventually they spilled out of his hands before denting themselves on the marble and wood meshed floor.

He explained to me that he planned to introduce himself at a party in midtown later on tonight. He made sure to tell me about the place at least once a week. Abel carried himself well in the business world, his knack for repeating key information over and over in immaculate detail never failed to amaze and annoy. With that being said him snagging four entries into a private rooftop party at the Garden in midtown didn’t surprise me in the slightest.

“Okay Jaden the party starts at eight so i’ll need you to show up with that new girl of yours.”

He always spoke like everything was such a certainty. It wasn’t something that I admired, it often came off as a weakness. Sometimes you have to shroud your words in mystery to give the allure that the world truly moves for you even if it's a damn lie.

“I’ll call her and ask if she wants to come.”

“Alright man sounds good, well thanks for the cereal.”

“Wait!” I commanded.

“Have you even spoken to this girl that you’re going to see today?”

“Well Jaden you know I haven’t...in person, but that’s just the way the world works now.”

“How so?”

“Me and her are friends on social media as you already know. She sees me as this funny guy that comments on a lot of her posts. We have messaged back and forth a few times and we've both been in each other's company through holoscape. I know that isn’t exactly the same as being there in person but it’s the next best thing and it’s a legit way to get a feel for someone. I feel like this private party is the perfect opportunity to make my move.”

I guess that makes sense in some weird way I thought.

I wasn’t any good at chess, but at least I knew how to play. What he was doing required a skill set that I outwardly lacked. He could slowly win her over on the digital landscape. Supporting her in the comment section of a livestream, liking her uplifting posts and commenting at just the right time to assuage stress in a world where depression was constantly at the forefront. Social media has brought us closer together and distanced us at the same time. He could gain her favor without seeing her in person for weeks. It’s a weird disconnect that in a way transcends the way we as people are conditioned from a young age to interact. Until it’s not.

Abel left so quickly after speaking that I couldn’t tell if he took my bowl with him or not. I guess his speed of exit was only half the reason. I spent the last few moments of our time together fidgeting with my communicator in an attempt to input her phone number by memory despite it already being locked in. I zoned her and she answered awkwardly on the third ring, I couldn’t tell if she was busy or just always sounded so rushed over the phone.

At first she politely declined my offer leaving me with terrible thoughts of playing third wheel to a situation that had no right to work based on the scenario Abel had created. I was savvy though and after a few moments of detailing my friend's dilemma and letting her know the exact location of the event, I found myself with a situation.

After getting dressed the thought of the party clouded my mind. I started up my uber app but fought against it. I was already working on a budget and still had a few days worth of trips on my weekly bus card remaining. The bus that would take me east of Atlanta wasn’t far from my loft.

It was about one in the afternoon, which meant the city surrounding me was teeming with life. Georgia state students crowded the city streets which meant multi layered clothing and odd walking patterns was all that I could see for a time. The students meshed well with those who could be seen rushing back to work after lunch. You could practically see the energy being lapped up from under them as the future passed them in new age fabrics.

The bus was packed and loud, some guy took it upon himself to educate everyone on the importance of climate control. He was loud, not all the way there and if you lacked headphones there was no escaping his impressive vocal range. The muddy textures emanating off his voice had a way of oozing off into your earlobes. It got so bad that I had a hard time telling if I was being touched or talked to. His aptitude for jester like antics knew no bounds I thought, Candler road couldn't come quick enough. I made my way through the crowd of people that wouldn't be getting off at my stop and made contact.

I was in East Atlanta or southeast of Atlanta if you let those that care too much tell a tale that matters so little. I wasted no time going to the mall that stood in front of me. My connect was in there or should I say my headache. Maghi stood at no more than five five, but his charisma towered over most. Per usual he was in the food court waiting for me. As I walked in the food court which was modest in it's offerings I found him spending his precious time pestering a mandarin express employee.

"You really have a two sample limit?"

The employee didn't respond with words, he was so annoyed that he found himself shooing Maghi away with his hands. Maghi turned to the clutter of seats in the food court and after seeing me he sat discreetly. There's about a decade of age between us and Mahji was at that age where your ignorance and brilliance blended perfectly.

"Why are you trying to bum free food when you have money in your pocket and credits on your card?"

For no reason other than to appear taller than me he stood back up as I sat.

"Because Jaden, it says free samples."

"Actually It says free sample and besides their pulling the sample from the...you know what Nevermind."

I immediately stood back up and followed him to the back exit of the mall which led to his car. His 2010 Chevy Impala looked like it had been through a war, at least the rims were well taken care of. I could say the impressive shine from the rims took away from the peeling paint and unnatural rust from the car but I'd be lying.

"Aye man take your shoes off before you get in."

I looked back and smiled at the sky before turning back to respond. "Fuck no."

He hopped in his car almost begrudgingly, "Well at least wipe them off on the concrete."

He almost always came off as sarcastic to me in moments like this, but he was dead serious. I pretended to scrape the soles of my shoes on the ground before entering his car. The car struggled to crank as he turned the key, it hissed off and on with an air of uncertainty. He pulled off just as soon as the engine found a stride.

“Why are we leaving the parking lot? I just needed some weed from you and I know you have it on you.”

“Just weed? You're so boring sometimes.”

He punched his glove compartment a few times until it finally opened. He reached his hand far back into it so far back that light failed to touch the area where darkness encroached. Out from the darkness came a perfectly rolled blunt that he wasted no time in lighting.

“Come on Jaden I just want you to smoke with me for a little while.”

He had what I came for clenched between his left hand and the steering wheel and he wasn't trying to give it to me at the moment. One would wonder why I even go to him for drugs when everything under the sun is legal, but to me that's simply “*Blah-Blah*” talk. What I've come to find is that the stuff you can get for free is oftentimes cheaper and more fulfilling when you get it from an uncertified source.

“You want me to do drugs with you in the most conspicuous car on Candler road?”

“Ah ah,” he said.

“We've been driving for a few minutes and were on a different street right now, don't worry we'll be fine.”

“You can't guarantee that!”

“Nothing's guaranteed,” he shot back”

The fumes from his blunt began to take over the car after a time. I don't know the exact moment I went from tense to relaxed but I can guarantee that it happened seamlessly, like most anything once weed is involved. At some point during passing him back his blunt I came to the realization that he was driving me around the same streets. Strange thing is we were getting closer and closer to where I didn't want to go each time. We passed Columbia High School more times than I could remember. I remember kids skipping class in one instance then in another instance students were leaving to go home. Every other time we would pass the highschool we would make a turn to this neighboring street. Maghi got closer and closer to where we had no business going each pass through. The times we didn't go into the neighborhood we found ourselves on pseudo main streets that looped back to the high school. At one point we travelled up to downtown decatur, an immediate disconnect was always noticeable. Despite being only three miles down, the culture was a lot different and the energy that popped out was a bit more welcoming.

If you asked me which side of the spectrum I preferred more I'd honestly come out undecided. Mahgi spent the better part of our trip downtown trying to convince me of it's flaws and false

promises. His love for his neighborhood was admirable, but not his want for it to stay the way it's always been. I tried to change the conversation for even a moment despite knowing he'd force it back up before I got out. Sometimes I like to think he values the struggle more than anything else.

"So it's been around a year you don't have long before you're getting pulled over constantly for not getting your tires changed to hover format. And besides, doesn't it feel weird driving around with your car 2 feet lower to the ground than everyone else?"

"It doesn't."

"You sell drugs they can see everything going on in your car from so high up."

"I'm discreet," he said this while smiling at me with his pearly white teeth. I swear he showed them off like he was brandishing a claymore at times.

He wouldn't get his tires switched to their hover counterparts until it was too late, but he could purchase Culture Tech jewelry and trinkets without a second thought. His white teeth were encrusted with tiny diamonds that shifted around his perfect chicklets while he spoke. His dreads which hung down to his shoulders holstered a multitude of jewelry that glowed and moved as he drove me around. If you looked at him at just the right moment the jewelry would do what is called a paring alignment. The colors would all shine white and they would move in perfect unison throughout his scalp not unlike a snake slithering through the grass.

Despite the new age gymnastics his jewelry jumped through the past still latched onto him. A bracelet that has been passed down and refitted for generations lay on his wrist all rusted and worn down. The story goes that it was his fathers then his moms and then his moms mom and from there the story gets a bit muddier. Giving a family member an heirloom is like attempting to eternalize something that represents you. You're tossing eternity into the future and hoping you'll acquire a piece of forever.

Mahgi didn't like talking about things he should do, only what he wanted to do. It was an admirable thought process I suppose. And at the moment he wanted to annoy drivers by sending false navigator icons to the control panels of their cars in an attempt to distract them enough to cause a swerve or haphazard press of the breaks leading to confusion and annoyance. Most cars come with control panels built into the dash that allow drivers to send messages to other drivers in order to ensure safer driving conditions. Mahgi's control panel was hacked, he was able to send obscene pictures and messages to users causing confusion, but never enough to cause a crash from my experience. I can't say it wasn't fun watching people swerve and stop out of nowhere due to Mahgi's interference.

After the conversation had subsided we found ourselves passing the high school again. He turned onto the side street once more and before I knew it, we were exactly where I didn't want to be. We parked in front of a set of houses deep into the neighborhood. The house that I dreaded most sat slightly further apart than the others. It's white porch fought a losing battle with the red brick design of the rest of the house.

"Mahgi what are we doing here," I asked.

“Well Chandra’s in there and she wants to meet with you about what happened with Marcus.”

I explained to Mahgi that I didn’t want to meet with Chandra but he explained to me that it was better that I met her now. The alternative was her coming to meet me when I was around someone I cared about. As we walked up to the porch Mahgi went on to explain that he got me high to calm me before I met with her. Mahgi could be a fucking idiot sometimes, if anything I was paranoid and the opposite of composed.

We didn’t need permission to enter, three out of sequence knocks and a turn of the door knob was all that was required for entrance.