

## Population: One

“Where is she? Where is she?”

“Ennis, she’s gone. It’s okay. It’s morning now.”

“Huh? Momma? Is that you?”

“No, Ennis. It’s Mrs. McCarthy.”

“But Mrs. McCarthy, your voice... Oh, Mrs. McCarthy, where is she?”

“She’s gone, Ennis. Don’t you remember? She come through the fog, like the rest of ‘em, come to take somethin’ from you. You was chasin’ after her, Ennis, like a madman, but I saved you. Don’t you remember, Ennis? It was she who took your eyes.”

“Yea,” Ennis says, and sighs.

But the truth is, that ain’t how Ennis remembers it. In his memory, last night, he was chasin’ after some woman from the next town over, just like Mrs. McCarthy says. He heard her yellin’ ‘hello,’ and he seen her fightin’ her way through the fog, and somethin’ in his stomach leapt up and he had to go. He was on his crutches, on account of the ghosts had already stolen one foot and one calf, just like they’d stolen one arm and his penis. But in his memory, the woman wasn’t ‘comin’ after him,’ all vicious and hungry, like Mrs. McCarthy says; she was lookin’ for him like you look for a lost cat, seemingly lost herself. And it wasn’t her, the woman from the next town over, who swooped down all ghostlike with her hair all wild and stole his eyes: in his memory, the last thing he recalls seeing... It was Mrs. McCarthy.

That same morning, there’s a town hall meeting about the intrusion of ghosts from other

towns and what to do about it.

“You see, the ghosts keep comin’ in from here, here, and here,” says Mr. Borowski, Ennis’s boss at the leather mill. “You see this, Ennis?”

“Can’t see nothing no more, Mr. Borowski.”

Ennis’s finger is taken and planted at several locations on the map, though the absence of texture means this still signifies nothing.

“So what I’m’a propose we do, we gotta up the fog quantity, keep these ghosts dizzied. But we also gotta put one of us at the graveyard at all times,” Ennis’s finger is moved to the map’s center, “And we gotta guard it.”

“I’m with you as far as the fog, Mr. Borowski, but I can’t see as protectin’ the graveyard’s the most important thing.” Ennis shifts his neck to trail the new voice, which is Mrs. McCarthy’s.

“And why’s that? Just to disagree?”

“No, it ain’t ‘just to disagree,’ thank you very much. I just ain’t think the most important thing’s the graveyard, not to them ghosts, and not to us.”

“The graveyard is where Ennis gets his power.”

“That’s true. But what them ghosts want is to acquire flesh, and the way they do that is by takin’ pieces of Ennis. Graveyard don’t matter to ‘em, no way, no how.”

“Why don’t we just ask ‘em what they want?”

“Say again?”

This was Ennis, who spoke. He speaks again: “These ghosts, from the other towns, why ain’t we just ask ‘em why they comin’ around?”

There’s a notable silence, after which Mr. Borowski and Mrs. McCarthy resume their

discussion.

“Okay. We’ll booby trap here, here, and here, for now.”

Ennis’s finger is no longer on the map, not that it would matter.

“And up the fog.”

“Yes, ma’am, we’ll up the fog.”

That night, after Mrs. McCarthy has helped Ennis undress and get into bed, Ennis pulls at the tin can that he has on his nightstand, the one whose string leads to Martha’s house.

He rattles it, to see if she’ll rattle back.

No dice.

“Hello?” He puts his mouth to it and whispers. “Hello?”

No response.

And now that he’s signaled, she won’t come by tonight, neither. She only comes by when he doesn’t signal, and when he does, she makes a point of seeming, well, dead.

He drops the can on the nightstand and thinks back to his memory from the other night, his last sighted memory. Awful strange, how Mrs. McCarthy claims it was the woman from the next town took his eyes, but that ain’t what he remembers. And you know what’s strange, too? Now that he don’t have his eyes no more, why is he hearing Mrs. McCarthy’s voice as his Momma’s? At the town hall, he heard Mr. Borowski’s voice as his Poppa’s voice too. There was no difference between them, almost as though...

Suddenly, he hears a voice in the fog.

“Hello? Hello?”

It's the woman from the next town over.

With more spring in him than he's known all day, he leaps from bed, assembles his crutches, and goes, still in his pj's. He finds his way to the door and swings it open and he's out, in the cold and wet with the woman.

"Hello?" There's a hill, here, on which his truck sits dormant, and that leads down to the center of town and the graveyard. He tumbles down it, vaulting the divots by memory.

"Hello?" He's close to her, now. Maybe she is interested in the graveyard.

"Hello?" he says back. "Hello? My name's Ennis. Who are you?"

No answer.

"Hello?"

"Ennis, what in the hell are you doing?" This is Mr. Borowski, whose voice only assumes this same tone when Ennis pounds a piece of leather off-target at the mill.

"I'm lookin' for that woman. She come around here, didn't she?"

"Yes, yes she did. And that's why I came out here with my gun, to scare her off."

"She's gone?"

"Go back to bed, Ennis."

"But--"

"Go back to bed."

The next morning, while at work, Ennis overhears Mrs. McCarthy and Mr. Borowski talking about him.

"I ain't think he's in it for the... for the mission."

“What you mean? He’ll get onboard; he’s just confused, is all.”

Ennis lines up a piece of leather, raises his mallet, and lets it fall. He raises the mallet again and lets it fall. The good thing about leatherwork, he can do it all by feel.

“I agree that he’ll warm, Mrs. McCarthy, but where you and me differ is... I don’t think he’s happy, here, in this town, with all of us. I think he’d rather let those ghosts get him than stay.”

Ennis thumbs the leather, checks whether he should move to the next piece, decides to give this one another pound.

“Oh, he’ll figure it out, Borowski. He knows we the ones protectin’ him.”

That night, in bed, Ennis thinks of something he ain’t thought about in a long time.

It’s the resemblance of Mrs. McCarthy’s and Mr. Borowski’s voices to his parents’, that brings it on. That and... when you’re blind, and there really ain’t nothin’ to do but remember or imagine, eventually you start to drift through the gallery of your own life, like clicking through projector slides.

And what Ennis remembers is... It’s from a long time ago, before his parents were divorced.

He’s on the floor, having just gotten back from an elementary school science fair at which he won first prize. He’s spreading out his project, trying to recreate its splendor for when his father walks in.

His father walks in. He kneels. Ennis gets up.

He waits, but his father doesn’t say anything. Ennis feels about to explode, the

anticipation is so huge.

“Well, what do you think?” he finally coaxes.

“You ain’t no artist, that’s for sure,” his father says, and stands. His knees pop.

And that’s it. Ennis’s father goes to get his tools and go to work and Ennis bends down to clean the thing up, though Ennis can’t remember what he was feeling in that moment.

He hasn’t thought of that since he moved to this town to work for Mr. Borowski and rent from Mrs. McCarthy, started dating Martha.

Suddenly, the door to outside swings open and footsteps skate in.

He should have known she would come tonight, since he didn’t call her.

“Hey there,” she giggles. She slides into bed with him.

“Hey,” he says.

“How’s my little One-Eyed Jack?” she mocks, laying her hand on his forehead.

“Ain’t got no eyes, Ms. Martha,” he says.

“Oh, it talks! We’ll have to take care of that in short order.”

She begins fumbling around below his waist, and he wonders why he does this to himself: why he keeps coming back to and accepting someone who gives him slivers of joy, but whose real prerogative seems the vastness of a dark eclipse, the overbearing time during which he puzzles her cryptic affection and pines for consistent regard.

In the morning, Ennis is found in the graveyard with a bundle of dynamite in his lap. His knees were taken in the night, so he’s wheelchair-bound.

“Hey, Ennis, what you doin’ there?”

“Oh, Mr. Borowski! Hi, how are you?”

“What you got there, Ennis?”

“Oh, uh, this?” He can’t decide whether to conceal it or brandish it, but goes with the latter. “This? I was just headed over to the next town over, blow up them ghosts.”

“You’re in the graveyard, Ennis.”

“You don’t say. I coulda sworn I was rolling uphill, not down, but I guess with your eyes gone, your whole equilibrium’s messed up, right?”

“Ennis, let’s go to town hall.”

He feels the bundle lifted from his lap, and Mr. Borowski slides behind the wheelchair and begins pushing him to the meeting house.

“Really, Mr. Borowski, I was in the wrong place, I swear.”

“That’s alright, Ennis.”

“I didn’t mean nothing by it.”

“I understand.”

In the town hall, battle lines are fortified and renewed, this time without even the pretense of Ennis’s involvement.

“Ghosts are still gettin’ through, as evidenced by Mr. Ennis here’s now missin’ his knees.”

“My solution? Let’s double up them booby traps where we put ‘em before, and add new ones here, here, and here.”

“Who’s that?” Ennis pipes up. “Mr. Borowski, you talkin’ to yourself?”

“That’s Clyde. He moved in here just last week.”

“Strange: you guys sound just like each other.”

Another small silence, seemingly protocol when Ennis speaks.

“Anyhow, yes, I agree we got to add booby traps in those locations. Only thing I’d couple with that is that we should think to build some walls, here and here.”

“Walls?”

“Yes, Ennis, walls.” This is Mrs. McCarthy. “In addition to making it dangerous around here for those ghosts who do crawl in, we should also prevent them from seeing inside in the first place. Walls, Ennis—them ghosts won’t even know you’re here. Which reminds me: one more procedure, boys: how’s about we up that fog?”

That evening, after rattling the tin can something fierce, to deter Martha, Ennis sits to thinking about his Momma.

It’s like his memory of his Poppa from the other night, in that he wouldn’t have thought of it if not for his having no eyes, and the strange resemblance of...

What’s really resemblant is that just like at the town hall the other day, he remembers having a clear idea in his head of what he wanted to do, and getting the message ‘no.’

Here it is: after his Momma’s and Poppa’s divorce, Ennis is sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for his Momma to finish packing his lunch. He watches what she puts in. She puts in a ham and cheese sandwich, and a bag of chips, and a Coke.

“Momma, you know I ain’t like that stuff,” he says. What he’d like is a peanut butter and jelly, and celery and carrots, all of which are nearby in the fridge. She’s only putting in the lunch what she would want, not what he does.

“You mean you ain’t like me?” she says.

“Momma, that ain’t what I said.”

“Why you ain’t like me?” She opens one of the cabinet doors, and shifts her big self over so she can hide her face behind it, and she starts making sobbing noises and motions, though he can’t tell whether these are real or fake.

“Momma?”

“Why you ain’t like me, Ennis?”

He sits at the table, in the midmorning light, twiddling his thumbs, waiting for it to be over.

And that’s the thing of it, ain’t it?

Why he’s doing the same thing here, in the town: twiddling his thumbs, waiting for it to be over.

These ghosts will take all the pieces of him until he is nothing but the dumb husk of a man, mutely signaling.

They will make it so that woman from the next town over never comes back and she loses even the interest.

And why will he let them?

Because he learned long ago, from his Momma, and his Poppa, that what he wanted... He learned that he was liked better and things were safer and easier if he just let it die.

But then... His Momma, and his Poppa... Suddenly, he has an idea.

Although his exit isn’t as lithe as it was the other night, because he no longer has knees, he launches himself upright, swivels his legs off the edge of the bed, and drops into the

wheelchair, puts his one hand to the wheel. He rolls himself to the door and opens it and thuds down the step.

Outside, the fog leaps at his face with a viscosity as yet unparalleled. There is no voice of the woman from the next town, and won't be, unless he does what he knows he must do.

Slowly, with both care and silence, he braves the tottering landscape of the hill and makes it to the truck. He swings open the door. He throws himself inside.

Martha's there.

"Where you goin', Bigshot?" she jeers, from the passenger's seat.

"I'm goin' to the next town over," he says. He lifts his dead legs in and sets down the one with the foot, hard, against the break pedal.

"You gon' cheat on me?" she responds, aghast.

"No, I'm'a find out the truth, is what I'm'a do," he retorts. He gives the key in the truck a crank, and after one times, two times, it comes alive.

"I always knowed I couldn't trust you," she says. She feigns tears. "I always knowed you would hurt me."

He shifts the truck into drive and lets it roll, lifts his good leg from the brake to the gas pedal. He thinks the truck was left pointed in the right direction.

"Goodbye, Martha," he says. As the truck begins to move, he feels her dematerialize and slip away, through her seat, through the backseat, through the frame and bed. It wasn't her he said goodbye to, really. Since he lost his eyes, he's heard her voice not as a new or unique one, but as his once-fiancee, Rebecca's. It's Rebecca he's been holding onto. It was she who committed it all to him, then got cold feet, bedded another man just before the wedding. Odd,

how obsessed she seems to have been with testing his love for her, rather than just believe it.

As the truck gains momentum downhill, he hears the expected voices of Mr. Borowski and Mrs. McCarthy. It's likely they're standing before the graveyard in a line, them and Clyde and all the other new arrivals, linking arms to protect what's vital to them.

"Don't do it, Ennis," comes a Mr. Borowski.

"You can still hit the brakes."

"Remember that the graveyard is your lifeblood, your energy."

"Without your memories, who will you be?"

"Free, is what I'll be," Ennis mutters, and he manually edges himself forward and shoves his dependable leg maximally against the gas pedal.

Goodbye, Momma; goodbye, Poppa; goodbye, Rebecca.

May these tires smash open the crypts in which I've trapped you and may we all fly free.

In the morning, a man tumbles from the door of the truck and lands on his knees, pluming up dust. The sun shines through where there used to be fog, giving life to shrubbery. The nose of the truck lies at an angle, its axle cracked into the surfaces of three graves.

The man stands up, stumbles, catches himself against the truck's door and with the arm that he now has back. He blinks awake. He also has back his foot, calf, knees, eyes, and penis.

Using his eyes, he scans the town, and he is more surprised by what he doesn't see than by what he does: There is no town hall. There is no house but his own, which stands a-cant, on the hill, the lone settlement in the valley.

He is a whole man, blood pumping, but he is alone.

But as he looks farther off, up the hill, to the ridge, he sees something else, something which he could never have seen through the fog: out there, atop that ridge and beyond, there is not just one other town, but dozens, perhaps hundreds.

Beyond the ridge, beyond the valley in which he's settled, there lie other valleys, and crossing them, other towns with other people who are just as whole and as alive as him.

Out there, past the recognition of aloneness, there lies the possibility of being other than alone.

The sun is breaking forth in the valley, a bright orange egg yolk that crests on the ridge and spills over.

The possibility of being other than alone...

All you have to do is kill your ghosts and walk to it.