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# Breathing Shadows

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Joel Allyn

*This is the first story I have ever gotten so close to, I can't figure out if it's any good or not.*

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1

I was four years old when my brother Aaron was hospitalized. He was close to eight at the time, and in perfect health. What I put down here will be a mosaic of what I remember, what I gathered in the years since, and some other things I just had to guess at. What I do know is enough to excuse what I don't, but I'll have to be content landing somewhere between dramatization and memoir.

From what I've been able to put together, the...well I suppose first I need to decide what to call them. I've heard it said that Aaron was having hallucinations or waking dreams, while others called them visions, or even demons, I think I'll settle on something else entirely. When I got the call they'd found Aaron next to our father's body, covered in blood and rocking back and forth, I finally came back to Springfield. When I got to see him, 'breathing shadows' was how my brother explained them to me, just before he slit his wrists. We'll just use that for now and move on.

There was no detailed explanation given at the time, I just recall one day going to a building in the city and coming home without Aaron. I know now that the shadows were breathing for some time before a stay in a mental health facility was recommended. At the time however, the explanation provided by our mother was that my brother had horrible nightmares and had started to see things which weren't real. I saw things that weren't real all the time, and it was then and there I decided to never ever share with my parents anything that scared me. I

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certainly wasn't going to risk getting sent away for a few scary dreams or because of the monster that might be lurking in a closet or under my bed. When I started seeing the shadows come to life and what came out of them, I never said a word. Though, I barely spoke at all when Aaron was away, I simply clung to my mother's leg like a little koala bear and hid my face in my hands. I don't remember that myself, I just remember being terrified and alone, fearing that if whatever Aaron had seen was real, then perhaps it was upset my brother was out of reach and had come back for me. Strange, looking back now, how close that was to the truth.

The place they sent Aaron to was called 5J. It was located downtown, on the fifth floor of a building tall enough that birds went around it instead of over. We made the trip in our '84 blue and white Astro van, filled with suitcases and silence. As we entered the city, I recognized the spiral lollipops which dotted the top of the baseball stadium. Our father took Aaron and I there a few times, and during the night games when the White Sox would hit a homerun those lollipops – one for each color of the rainbow – would light up and spin, shooting sparks everywhere. As I looked at those wondrous things sitting there dull and motionless under the harsh afternoon sun, I thought, *they sure are ugly in the light*. I tried to show Aaron but I don't think he heard me. He just kept staring out the other window.

We exited what I then called 'the fast way' shortly after passing the stadium, a short while later we were hauling Aaron's bags into 5J. After getting visitor badges from the front desk we took an elevator to the fifth floor. We traversed a long carpeted corridor, bordered by floor-to-ceiling windows on the left side which let in the afternoon light, and a gift shop and cafeteria on the right. At the end was a set of locked double doors with an electronic number panel beside them. We hit the call button and waited. I don't know what I thought was going on

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but I still hadn't really grasped what was happening and it wasn't until much later, when only three of us left, that it finally hit home. When we did leave, without my brother, I spent most of the ride back staring at the empty seat beside me where Aaron always rode, where he belonged, crying as quietly as I could.

As we were shown around I noticed the walls in the hallway were painted with huge, thick stick figures. They looked like the featureless MEN and WOMEN on bathroom doors at play. Painted all different colors, they were frozen at play with one another or tossing balls around with blank empty faced dogs. The vague figures had no discernible faces, but all the same you could tell they were supposed to be having a good time. They were supposed to be happy.

Aside from a few offshoot rooms, the inside of 5J consisted of two parallel hallways lined with doors, with a shared TV area in the middle acting as the joiner in the letter H. I have no idea what was behind most of those doors, but I discovered behind one of them waited the room where my brother would be living on and off for the next four years.

Even after years on a steady diet of anti-psychotic cocktails, using Aaron as a guinea pig for every new wonder drug, they were unable to stop the shadows from breathing while the boy was at home. The treatment was far worse than the symptoms. They inflicted far more damage on him than any amount of scary images ever could, especially if, as they claimed, they were just hallucinations. Unfortunately there are few creatures as desperate as a parent with a sick child, so when someone offers a lifeline they seize it without hesitation. But what is the antidote for the cure that fails? Why, another cure of course. What then, if the next one fails as well? Well, have no fear of that, for as long as there was money for treatment, cure after cure after cure kept coming down the pipeline, showing no signs of stopping and each new remedy promising success where its predecessors failed.

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We visited 5J twice a week on Wednesdays and then on Sundays when dad would come along. We drove the forty-five minute route countless times, and though I hated the long car ride I always looked forward to those excursions. During those brief retreats Aaron was with us again, I had my big brother back and for a little while, we were once more a complete family. Back at home we spoke of Aaron as often as some families do about a deceased child. The pictures of him around the house and his empty lower bunk were the only evidence of his existence. Our folks only mentioned him when I asked them – and I quickly learned not to – when my brother was coming home for good.

I missed him of course, but that was not the sole reason I asked. You see I could only tell Aaron about what had started happening, that'd I'd started seeing things forming in the shadows, things that weren't there.

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The first time we brought Aaron home was six months after we'd first dropped him off, and it lasted a little longer than a week. I was ecstatic as we fell back into our old habits. We rode bikes together, swung on the tire swing in the backyard, tied robe belts around our heads and played karate, shot across the slip-n-slide, watched *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Pete's Dragon* and Michael Jackson's *Moonwalker* a few million times each. We even attempted to dig a hole to China, taking occasional breaks only when commanded to by mom, who was insistent that growing boys needed food and sleep. It was during this cruelly short reprieve that my father first attacked Aaron.

We had spent the day raising the usual amount of hell, and then after dinner played for a while before hopping into bed. We lay there in the bunks making each other laugh – not much of

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a challenge back then – until the space between crude jokes and fart noises grew ever wider, and at last we fell asleep.

I woke to a sudden thunderclap. After the door slammed, I heard our father stumbling through the door, long after his shift had ended. I'm still not sure if he found a mess or possibly just tripped on something, but whatever it was it threw him into a fury, and he stormed straight for our room. I had one foot back in a dream when dad burst through the door and ripped Aaron from his bed, dragging him screaming into the hallway. Dad remained silent. I don't think it was what he did that frightened me – he always went after Aaron because he was older - but the silence with which he did it. That silence drowned out my brother's weeping. Aside from the smacking noises the only sound was our mother yelling, running to the rescue just as she would for years to come. Ever the intermediary, and just-too-late guardian angel.

The reasons were later explained to me, numerous times in fact, why our father went after Aaron like that, there were several excuses provided, but I think the fact that I don't recall them speaks volumes to how I perceive that, and all subsequent beatings. Even if there was a reason, there was no reason.

I thought I'd never get back to sleep; I laid there staring around at the sparsely decorated room, looking over all the trinkets we'd brought back from walks through the forest and the old shoes which lay untied and dirty next to pair of clean laced converse. Everything was illuminated under the soft glow of our *Ninja Turtles* nightlight. I kept wondering if dad would be back for me, which sometimes happened, but the next thing I knew we were waking up for breakfast. Nobody mentioned what had happened the night before and the way we all ate in comfortable silence made me think perhaps it had all just been some terrible nightmare. I had put all the

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things I'd seen and wanted to tell Aaron about out of my head, I was just glad my brother was with me again, safe at home.

Later that week, after three sleepless nights in a row full of breathing shadows, Aaron was shipped back to 5J. This torturous cycle repeated so often over the years I can't recall now if it was dozens or hundreds of times. I only remember my naïve hope that each time would be the one that stuck, and then the disillusionment which followed every time it didn't.

For years all of this was gone from my mind, or at least buried under enough clutter that I didn't notice it and that was just fine. But sometimes, late at night as I pace around or lay staring into the abyss, I can still recall in detail what I saw some nights when our *Ninja Turtles* nightlight flickered out.

One day, as the summer sun hung above us and the humidity still slept, Aaron and I swung side by side on a creaky playground. Resting in that comfortable eternity between the previous school year and the next one, I took in the sweet sounds and smells of a world in bloom and decided it was time to get it all out in the open. Still though, I wondered if maybe I was just crazy, or had somehow made myself see what I thought my brother saw. So before I shared what I'd seen, I needed to know *exactly* what it was that Aaron saw. I needed to be sure. Show me your insanity and I'll show you mine. Besides confessing to our mother in terror, he shared the visions only once that I knew of - confiding in his best friend and getting made fun of and called crazy for his troubles - so his reluctance was understandable. Even after applying my secret failsafe weapon - which was saying 'please, Aaron' over and over again - he still wouldn't budge. I realized I'd have to give a little to get a little.

"I saw something too," I said.

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I expected him to hit me, yell at me for making fun of him, or just walk away. Instead, his swings pendulum motion stopped and his gaze darted up from his shoes. Then, after a few seconds, something changed in those green pools and I saw cracks spread throughout the dam, I knew it was coming.

“What did you see?” He asked.

“Y-you first,” I said into my chest. I doubted he’d honor my request, but my slight stammer earned me enough pity for a pass and he went on.

“Fine, but you can’t tell anybody, ever. Okay?” I nodded my head. “I’m serious. Promise, Eric.” I did. His eyes scanned for any eavesdroppers, then fell back on me. They told me he wanted to tell me, to tell anybody, I saw that but I still saw doubt in them as well.

“I swear,” I said again.

After another quick survey of our grassy surroundings, he licked his lips, seemed to contemplate exactly what to say or maybe just how to start, how to communicate the impossible. He decided the best way to start was slow, but as he let it spill out his speech quickened and he grew more and more excited. By the time he finished, he sounded frantic and kept looking around as he spoke in clipped whispers, as though he expected men in white coats to drop from the sky and haul him away in a butterfly net.

“I...I saw something...there’s things in the shadows, or they *are* the shadows, made up of shadows, I’m not sure. I don’t know if it’s aliens or what. But the shadows are alive.”

He looked at me with a silent plea. What he saw in my eyes must have comforted him, because once it was clear that I accepted this most basic foundation, he let the floodgates burst.

“At first they would just move a little, when the nightlight started messing up. Then they started turning into stuff. Hands, then arms, but *not* monsters, I’m not dumb and I would have

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known that was just my imagination, like mom always says. But then I started to see a boy. That scared me real bad, but what scared me most was when I finally made myself get up and I turned on the lights and...and..."

"And he wasn't gone," I finished.

Aaron's eyes shot open even wider, which I wouldn't have thought possible. He looked manic, "Yeah, but how-"

"Because he didn't go away for me either, not until I called for mom. Then he went back into the wall, I guess," I said.

"Yeah! He always stays until I scream! He moves his mouth sometimes too but I can't really hear him right. God this is great, we gotta go tell mom I'm not crazy"

It was great, it all lined up, it all felt right and it was time for me to know for sure if what we saw had truly been the same or not.

"Aaron, what did the boy look like?"

He looked away again, the excitement draining from his face, "I don't really know," he lied.

I knew then we must've seen the same thing. He was still worried I'd think he was crazy, that I could buy a boy stepping from the shadows and back through a wall, but not this last bit.

"He looked just like me, didn't he?" I said, perhaps a little too confidently.

My question was not met with the expected reaction. There was a deep surprise on his face, and not one of joy at finding a kindred spirit, but one of a new confusion and perhaps even disappointment, almost a hurt look.

"No," he said, and then almost whispered something else.

"What?"

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“I said no. He looked like me.”

We sat there on stilled swings with a heavy silence unbroken between us, and then without saying anything we got up and rode home for dinner. I often wonder how different things may have played out had we ever talked more about the shadows and what might lie beyond them. Had I dared to go to our parents, to tell them the truth and explain that Aaron couldn't be crazy, not if I saw the things that weren't real too. But I never did, for fear they'd just send me away too. Within a few days of that conversation I was alone in our room again, and the shadows were once more alive.

My brother and I never spoke of it to each other again, not until over twenty years later, when he was arrested for killing our father.

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No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't seem to reconcile the sedated man before me with the boy who'd sat swinging and whispering secrets with me all those years ago. Yet my denials were dismissed by the name clearly printed on the plastic bracelet bound to the man's wrist. Maybe they just mixed up my brother's id bracelet, I thought. Or perhaps they'd just arrested the man they found rocking beside my dead father and *assumed* he was Aaron, or maybe he even claimed to be. But certainly the broken wiry thing before me, which looked as though it were some famished junkyard dog who had long ago gone mad from a life of constant fear and severe beatings, was not my big brother.

They held him in some strange hospital-prison combo where everything, including any furniture, seemed to be carved from a solid granite block, and from the front desk to the solitary cells, the place held an ephemeral but ever present air of urine over it, like a rotten halo. The path I walked to where they had him was an unfamiliar and yet all too familiar one. For though it was

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the first time I had been to *that* room, I had been to that room countless times before. Where in another room once there was a bed and a dresser and even a writing desk for the boy, there was now only a toilet, a sink with a mirror over it and a stretcher for the unconscious man bound in dreamless sleep.

Some time after the doctor had explained all the rules and the guard left us alone, I called this stranger my brother's name.

"Aaron," I said, but he didn't stir. I broke one of the many rules and took his hand in mine, and then broke another as I leaned so close my lips nearly touched his ear. I tried again.

"Aaron, it's me, it's -"

Before I was able to even get my name out, he tightened his grip. I jumped a little but smiled, and as my cheeks curved upward, to my astonishment I tasted salt, "It's okay, man. I'm here."

I'm not easily moved, and never really felt any regrets about leaving my family behind me and not checking in the rear view mirror as I raced away. Eighteen years had been more than long enough in their company, and I had all my elegant looking but hollow reasons which crumbled over time. But I truly believed if they all just vanished that perhaps they'd take all the memories with them. As though by ignoring a bull in a china shop I expected it not to break anything and just tip toe away peacefully. As that single tear slid down my cheek I realized that even memories you've neglected for years can be in pristine conditions when they rear their heads again.

My big brother grasped my hand, just another scared grown up boy like me. Aaron's eyes opened halfway and glanced around until they fixed on me, then he tightened his mouth in what

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was either an ugly smile or a cringe of pain from the stab wounds, they were deep and the doctor said Dad nicked an artery in the struggle. If this were a play or movie or a mystery novel, he would have whispered some cryptic remark, some message from beyond the boundaries of sanity. Instead, he just looked around with empty eyes and it broke my heart. Then his eyes closed and his grip slackened again.

During the years Aaron was shipped back and forth, I spent a lot of time alone in our room. Of all the things I did to keep myself busy, one activity sticks out now more than any other, a little game I developed called *push through*.

Mom never missed an episode of Oprah, which since we only had one TV, meant I never missed one either. Once, while fretting over a pile of bills, she had an episode on where they were discussing something that caught my attention, so I ate my Mac and cheese and I listened. What I took away from the conversation with the physicist that was on was that none of us are truly solid, but are in fact made up of billions of things called ‘Adams’. I figured they had named the things after the guy from the Bible story, which made perfect sense at the time. And not only us, but everything was made of these Adams, from animals, houses and cars, to pop bottles and skyscrapers, things that are long dead to things that have yet to be. The Earth, Moon and even the Sun were but a collection of small pieces held together. *Nothing* was one solid piece, he explained, not even light, or shadows. The man on the screen also said that one day we may learn enough about manipulating them to simply focus hard enough and walk through walls. This last idea excited me and though I wasn’t sure how, I knew it would help to explain the breathing shadows.

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Of course having a child's logic at the time didn't help much. On one of Aaron's home visits, we got to go see *Back to the Future* and after that I'd become convinced that the boy I'd seen, which was apparently not the one Aaron had seen, must have been me from the future. This idea - like the one that preceded it, which involved body snatchers - dominated my every thought for the next week. Until, one day in the shower, I realized if it was a time traveler, we wouldn't be the same age. It also didn't explain why my twin from the shadows had black hair instead of blonde. I groaned so loud at the realization that mom popped in to make sure I wasn't hurt.

So, after ruling out time travelers and pod people and armed now with this new knowledge that neither I nor the shadows, or the wall the boy crept through, were solid, I took up a new hobby. The approach - based around the entirely legitimate scientific methods of 'that-guy-on-Oprah' - which I worked out for *push through*, would look like this in a simple three step instruction card:

1. Stand roughly one to three feet from wall with your feet together. (Adjust depending on height)

2. Extend arms straight out with palms parallel to wall, then lean forward and place one or both palms flat against wall.

3. Close your eyes, or focus upon the space where your hand(s) is against the wall, then focus only on your breathing and visualize passing through the wall, to the other side.

Repeat daily, for hours on end.

It's an odd way for a kid to pass the time, I know, and certainly not the most complex or effective method for separating yourself at the quantum level, but I thought it was pretty clever at the time. And with enough practice, patience and perseverance I saw no reason why it wouldn't work. Later, after leaving home, I would catch myself sometimes with all my weight leaning

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against a wall and I'd jerk my hand back as if I'd been burned with no idea why I'd done it. But back then it was cathartic. And it even worked a couple of times.

The more time passed, the less Aaron seemed like himself. I never stopped being excited for the visits to 5J, my loathing of the drive and the place paled in comparison to the love for my big brother. Each time we returned though, he seemed to look more and more like he fit in with the other patients, more comfortable. I don't recall any names from inside 5J except for the unforgettable walking cliché, Big Mike. A behemoth, Big Mike was a bald 'nurse's assistant' who towered over everybody, pure intimidation, and looked like he couldn't have ever possibly been little Mike. Mike never scared me though; nothing in that place ever really scared me. It was only my brother's eyes that frightened me - they looked different, dimmed somehow, like a candle flame on its way out. Back then I couldn't comprehend what the difference was and just thought they were slowly driving him crazy. I think now that it was with all likelihood the spark of hope that he would leave that place, first diminishing and then dying out completely. Of course he did come home eventually, just much worse for wear.

Aaron just got worse over the years, and the cost of treatment kept increasing. Mom raised money with a few homegrown fundraisers, but the time came when my parents just couldn't afford the rent at 5J anymore. They brought him home, and it stuck, but they left a part of my brother in that place. Or maybe he really was just crazy all along and I was too young to know any better. Maybe I'm crazy too, and maybe none of what we saw was real. I wonder sometimes, I know what any psychologist would say and their assessment might be correct. Perhaps it was just our way of dealing with our abusive father, just being too imaginative coupled with a desire for escape, or a million other possibilities before our shadows begin

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respiration. I've considered and entertained an infinite number of possibilities. But then I always end up thinking about the tuft of somebody's hair our father held in his death grip, black hair.

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"Dad killed mom."

I was daydreaming, far away from the cell when Aaron's voice snapped me back. He was looking at me with wide eyes, though there was finally some recognition and a hint of sanity in them. The room was cool but he was sweating and kept licking his lips. Just a terrified boy whispering secrets on a swing set again. I asked what he meant about mom, but he ignored the question and kept going.

"It is you right? It's been so fucking long. I actually thought it was you before. Thought you'd dyed your hair, it was all black." He grabbed my hand hard, but was smiling now. "It came back, the breathing shadow. He *saved* me."

"Yeah, it's alright, it's me. How are you doing, can you tell me what happened?" I said.

He pushed his head off the hospital bed, looked around the cell and then his eyes fixed again on me.

"I finally understand, Eric. I get it now. I'm not crazy, and neither are you. You said you saw *you*, I remember that, thought maybe you were a pod person or clone or something but you said it, you remember?"

"I remember, but I think -"

"And I thought you were lying but you weren't. I saw you too," he dropped his voice down to a whisper, but only for the next few words, "You killed dad. You must have come through the shadows, through the wall. Dad was going to send me away so I told him I knew that he killed her and I was calling the cops to tell em. I'd dialed already when he came at me, so I

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dropped the phone and grabbed the knife, but he got it from me and he was gonna kill me. He got me down and was choking me and the knife was right above my eye and I was passing out. But then you were there and you yanked him off of me. I saw you two wrestling, and before I went out dad ripped out a fistful of your hair and then you stabbed him, over and over again.”

I did my best to stay collected. They’d told me about what he’d been on about, “Okay, that’s enough Aaron. I’m sorry for whatever happened, but I wasn’t even in the state until yesterday. I am here to help you, and I can afford the best lawyer, but it’s looking pretty bad right now. You alone in the house with dad’s body, no forced entry, a missing murder weapon, and nothing else to go on but some hair clenched in dad’s fist. So you need to tell me the truth. What happened, who else was there, and where is the knife?”

“I told you, you stabbed dad and then you took the knife and-”

*“I wasn’t there!”*

“No you weren’t, I’m sorry. I know that, I’m not that crazy, Eric. It *was* you though, your shadow. Mines been gone for years, but yours still visits me. You don’t get it - I didn’t either until I talked to him. He’s not a monster, but he’s not a boy anymore either. They aren’t made of shadows like I thought, they’re like us. The shadows are just the doorway they use, but I think only they can use it. I tried following you, the *other* you, to escape through the wall but I guess only they can go back and forth.” *You’re wrong about that*, I thought. “It was your shadow from next door that first showed up when mom died, and told me dad shoved her. I think it’s like in *Peter Pan*, when his shadow gets away and he’s got to sew it back on, but these are more than just silhouettes copying us, they’re like breathing shadows, with their own lives. I *know* how it sounds, and I know what they think. *You* gotta believe me though.”

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“I do.” I said. I was as surprised as him to hear the words come out, but knew at once that they were true.

“So it *is* real?” He said.

“I think so.”

He smiled at that but there was something in that smile that made me uneasy, something off. Despite my efforts to help, to comfort him, it wasn't enough. He was convinced that he'd be locked away no matter what, that even if he was innocent - and I believed he was - they'd put him in a padded cell or worse and throw away the key for sure. He figured with his history and all the stuff he'd been saying about doppelgangers coming through the wall they'd have no choice. Even the mention of being sent away again so affected Aaron that our father had adapted it as a disciplinary tool whenever his son didn't do as he was told - it was this extreme method that finally drove my brother to threaten turning my father in. No matter how many times the cruel trick was used, the threat never felt empty to my brother, each promise of imprisonment left him crushed under the weight of his terror. It was like threatening to bury someone with crippling arachnophobia in a bathtub of spiders.

That night, when I went out to get us some burgers, he smashed the mirror over the sink and used a shard to slit his wrists. When the guards entered the room, they saw he'd drawn a large rectangle in his own blood, a complete crimson doorframe with a little circle in the middle. He was screaming and pulling at the small circle, shouting the same thing over and over again.

“It won't open! It won't open!”

5

For years I had been able to dismiss what I'd experienced as boy, to file it away as just some vivid waking dream. Without my family around, most of the memories really did just fade

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away - the stubborn ones that stuck around were buried. But just driving back through my home town did something to my defenses, and as I listened to my brother that day all of the solid walls and barriers I had carefully constructed over the years dissolved like wet newspaper. I remembered Aaron being dragged from the room and beaten, which I hadn't thought of in forever. I remembered another instance when I had jumped on our father's back to try and stop him from choking Aaron with soap, after he'd cursed during a beating. Everything terrible and terrifying came flooding back. I felt a sting in my right hand as I recalled when my father had broken a plastic spatula over it. How he had held it out of sight under the table until I was sitting, then brought it down in a red blur, how it snapped in half over my hand. I even saw the spatula itself again in detail, a faded red plastic with dried egg flakes on the tip. It all came back, everything I'd managed to put in deep storage was trudged out and unpacked, until I was face to face with the memory I'd buried the deepest - the time my game had worked, the time I had pushed through.

The night it happened my twinner, for lack of better term, had appeared again that night. Same process as always, first the nightlight going haywire, the shadows flickering as if in candlelight, then the shape of an arm coming out of the void. More and more of it seeping into our world until my breathing shadow was standing there in the room, less than three feet from the solid (though not really solid) wall where he'd just come through. I'd made up my mind to try and speak to him, but before I could he turned around as if he'd heard a noise behind the wall, then rushed back through it. I tried to follow, but at first it was like Aaron had said and I couldn't, but the wall felt different to me somehow, softer. I kept my palm pressed against the plaster and started focusing. I stood there, imagining the Adams that made up the wall parting,

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pictured myself pushing my hand through them as easily as I would through a concentration of air bubbles underwater. I felt the barrier start to open.

My hand pushed further into the wall as it began giving little by little. I felt a tremendous excitement but did my best to stay focused. I kept my eyes shut, felt the fingers of my right hand passing through something as hard as a marshmallow, and as solid as wet sand. I pushed my arm in all the way up to the shoulder, hesitated before putting my head through, but only briefly. I wasn't worried, *Alice* had always been one of my favorites and I was anxious to see the other side in all its strange wonder. I took a deep breath and followed my white rabbit through the looking glass.

The actual wall itself couldn't have been more than two feet wide, but I must have pushed through at least five feet of thick mush before I felt my hand come out the other side. It was like being pushed through a tube of toothpaste, and as I passed through fireworks must have been going off, as I saw small bursts of electric light dance over my eyelids. When I got all the way through, my ears popped and I saw I was back in my room, or a mirror image of it anyway. Though after a brief survey, a few of the differences were clear. There was only one bed instead of bunks, a shuttle poster instead of a Michael Jackson one, but the most obvious giveaway was the boy staring at me with his mouth open. I did not see him as he usually appeared, as a vague form cloaked in darkness, my candlelight silhouette. I saw him then as a fully formed boy, and wondered for a moment how I appeared to him, if perhaps I was his shadow instead of the other way around. We were almost identical, if it weren't for his black hair, we'd be twins.

I tried to say something but my voice sounded muffled in my own ears. My twinner couldn't seem to hear me either, so the two of us just continued staring at one another. I didn't know what I had expected to accomplish, but all at once the sheer terror of the entire reality

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shook me to the core. I lost my nerve and wanted only to be back in my bed, safe under the covers. Everybody knows nothing can get you under there. It's one of those ancient unwritten laws of childhood, passed down wordlessly from one generation to the next. As I fled back through the barrier wall I heard his muffled voice calling out from behind me, but I never looked back. Once I was in my room I wanted to turn on the light but had been 'corrected' enough times to know what I'd get if I did. So I just hopped into bed, pulled the blanket over my head, held it there in a vice grip and closed my eyes as tight as I could. My heart pounded in my chest, my throat and both of my temples, and I wished over and over for everything to go away, to stop and let me forget it. After a little while, it did.

Aaron was home for good a couple of weeks after that. Between then and when I moved out a decade later I never played *push through* again and I started sleeping with earplugs and a blindfold on. If what I saw wasn't real, then I didn't ever want to see it again, or I feared the terror would overwhelm my better judgment and I'd run to my parents. If it was real, I wanted no part of whatever that meant, it was too much for me to try and comprehend. Something tells me my double was as scared as I was that I managed to follow him through and I doubt if he messed around much with the doorway after that. If the shadows kept breathing after that, I never knew about it. All the other worlds I escaped into after that were in books, and they got me through everything. My love of stories and escapism would later earn me a career.

I buried my head in the sand and in books and saved every penny from every allowance and summer job I managed to get. Every time I was tempted to spend my savings something happened at home which reminded me what I was saving for, escape. On the day I turned eighteen I kissed my crying mother goodbye, gave Aaron a hug as he watched Looney Tunes,

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and then I got as far away from all of it as I could. Over time I've kept myself busy and after enough time and distractions I was blessed to forget almost everything. One thing stuck with me though, and it always nagged at me. I feared I knew the answer already but I couldn't help myself. It's like a sore in the mouth that would heal, but you just can't stop yourself from tonguing it. Why had there been only one bed on the other side? Aaron said he had seen *his* twinner, and enough times to almost drive him mad. So what ever happened to him? Did he die, or just get locked away somewhere for good? I needed to know what became of his Aaron.

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My Aaron didn't die, but his foolish, misguided attempt to open some escape portal paid for in blood didn't help matters much. They said that I'd upset him, and that even though he had asked for me nonstop since regaining consciousness, my visiting privileges were temporarily revoked. Even knowing I was doing him no good being there, I felt awful leaving him alone in that place, but I had an idea where I had to go and what I had to do.

Before I left I let them take all the samples needed to disqualify me as a suspect. They said it was all formalities and that they had good reason to believe there was a third person involved, just needed to find that damn knife. The blood they found belonged to a member of our family, they said, but the blood type was O negative. Both Aaron and I are A-negative and Dad was B-positive. The bloody fingerprints they'd found on the wall weren't any of ours either. They inquired over any missing siblings, or perhaps a twin and I had to smile a little when I said no, not in this world.

I realize only now as I write this that my father's body was in a morgue somewhere during all of this, but I never even thought to ask to see him and besides the details of his murder

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Aaron and I didn't mention him. We cremated the remains sometime after I got Aaron out and we scattered the ashes. That was that.

I drove around for a while, telling myself I wasn't sure of how to get back to our old house. In truth I considered more than once just hopping on the fast way and getting the hell out of town, but as much as I wanted to bolt I couldn't bear the thought of abandoning Aaron to fend on his own again. When I got to the house I'd once escaped I stood for a while on the sidewalk, allowing my eyes to fall over every foreign familiar detail. The yellow and red leaves from the oak trees were scattered everywhere, and the recent storm had left them pressed against one another. The gutters were overflowing with wet leaves, some had been there so long they'd turned black and I remember having the absurd thought that I would have to help dad clean that up on the weekend. The family house had a large window facing the street leading into the living room, but now instead of the white lace curtains mom had made, the window was blocked with a large piece of cardboard, duct taped in place.

I walked up the long gravel driveway, which if you followed it straight back led to the garage behind the house. I wondered if the tire-swing dad had put up for us was still there. I took the left gravel path that led up to the one story red brick house and when I reached the old red door with its chipped and peeling paint I took the keys from my pocket and saw my hand was shaking. I made it farther than I expected I was going to before I retreated.

Sitting there on the back of the car I'd rented, I had a cigarette while I finished my black coffee. I'd quit a few years before around the same time I switched to tea, but after everything with Aaron and going back there I felt like I deserved a little slack, a treat if you will. I sat for a while refusing to even acknowledge the rundown house. When I did finally look again, I stared

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for a long time. I noticed there was a piece of yellow caution tape blowing around by the front door, a tattered remnant adrift in the breeze.

Why here, I wondered. Cursed Indian graveyard, some grisly murder, some odd warp in reality? I had never even bothered to question that before, never tried to figure out any explanation for the breathing shadows portal, or whatever it was. You typically don't waste too much time or energy attempting to decipher the mechanics of things you don't believe to be real – especially not if you fear they might be, and have gone to great lengths to forget about them. I thought about it long and hard and couldn't come up with anything better than some strange sci-fi clichés. All I knew was that my brother's breathing shadows never followed him to 5J; he only saw them when he returned home. And whether he was there or not, I saw they still stopped in on occasion.

A pain in my finger brought me back this time, I muttered a curse and dropped the butt, it had burned down between my fingers. I stomped it out and tossed the rest of the coffee away in the small metal can by the street, on my way back up the driveway. The steady rhythm of my feet crunching on the gravel made me think of a soldier marching to war. When I got to the door, before taking the keys out of my pocket, I fluttered my fingers and then made and released three fists in quick succession. This was a nervous tick I hadn't suffered in years. I took a deep breath, held it, then in one swift motion pulled the keys from my pocket, inserted them into the lock and turned it, freeing the bolt. They hadn't changed the locks, and at the time I attributed that to the neglect that showed everywhere on the house, but I wonder now if my mom kept them the same in case I ever came back. *Our door is always open*, was how she signed the few correspondences we ever shared. Without giving myself time to think about what I was doing I turned the knob, opened the door and stepped inside.

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It had been just over three years since mom died – or was killed – but dad had done a wonderful job in that brief period of erasing her careful upkeep of the place. The thought crossed my mind that it was possible that my mother had just stopped fighting the tide of dad’s filth and let the current take her away, allowing the place to fall into disarray, but I don’t believe it. Her house was her home and she took great pride in maintaining one of the few things she had control over. While cleaning up their own mess, the police made sure not to overstep their duties. The place had been cleared of blood and caution tape and any small numbered evidence cards, but not so much as one ashtray had been emptied otherwise. The rank of stale beer filled the air, and once inside I saw that it wasn’t just the front window which had cardboard over it, every window in the house was the same, blocking all but a faint rim of sunlight outlining the dark obstruction. The chemicals they must have used to clean up the blood left a stinging scent, which when mixed with the beer and stale smoke made me feel nauseous. It reeked like a port-o-potty at a country western concert. I thought maybe I still smelled blood, but of course I don’t have the slightest idea what blood smells like.

After removing the first obstruction I went around and pulled the cardboard from all the windows, allowing the daylight to touch everything in god knows how long. As I walked from the living room into the kitchen I tripped over something. I turned around and saw my dad’s work boots, one lying on its side, both with the laces untied. I don’t know why, but that was the only time I cried for my father. If I’m honest though I think it was really just everything. I was crying for my mom, who I hadn’t really accepted had died until seeing her house in such a state. I was crying for the brother I lost as a boy and for what was left of him, sitting with bandaged wrists under suicide watch across town. I’ve spent almost every day of my life lost in worlds either storytellers or I created, first in my head as a boy then on the page as a man, and spent

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enough time at it to make a decent living. And that worked out well because the more time I spent in the worlds I created, the less time I was stuck in the one which had birthed me. Only as I toured the ruins of my childhood I knew there was no escaping from any of it anymore. No way out, except to quit crying on the kitchen floor like a child and go get what I needed, so this could all be over.

Pulling the cardboard from every window in the house gave me a little more time before I had to enter our old room. When I removed the strip from the kitchen window I saw that the tire swing had been cut down, it was still laying against the back fence where it had most likely fallen when the string had either rotted all the way through or been severed. Cast aside like the used tire it was when we salvaged it, returned to its original destiny, but after a brief reprieve. There was sunlight radiating throughout the house but it was still dark in there, it was as if the place sucked up the illuminating glow and absorbed almost all that it touched. My tour of the old place was sickeningly nostalgic, I even sat at my mom's old piano, surprised dad hadn't sold it already. Once I was out of distractions, I went to my old room.

The door was closed, I opened it.

The silence was broken by a quiet squeak as the door swung on its hinges. Our room looked so much bigger than I remembered it, which I thought odd since things from childhood usually appear as ludicrously small as the desks we sat in at school. When it was Aaron and I, the bunks and a desk filled it up and it felt no bigger than a closet I needed to escape, but when I looked upon its emptiness containing nothing more now than one twin bed, it seemed so vast. The last room of the house cloaked in shadows, I feared I could get lost in there - it was a crazy thought, but not insane.

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I saw the bed wasn't the only thing in the room after all. The *Ninja Turtles* nightlight was still plugged in, and why not, I'm sure Aaron doesn't like the dark anymore now than he did when he was a boy, I sure as hell don't. I bent and flicked the switch and the small bulb illuminated the room just enough to make me feel safe again, if just for a moment. I went straight to the wall, placed my palm against it, and closed my eyes.

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Perhaps it was because I somehow knew it would work, or maybe the barrier had just grown more porous in the years I'd been away, but after just a few moments of stringent concentration my hand began pushing through. I opened my eyes this time and watched the wall devour first my hand, then my elbow, to the shoulder and beyond. I didn't hold my breath this time either, I knew it wasn't necessary. I went through at a pace that had the wall been solid I would have broken my nose, but instead hit only a slight resistance as I pushed through the shadows. My expectations of a wondrous show of lights inside the passageway were dashed. It was pure untainted darkness in there, no light at all. Yet when I closed my eyes for a moment I saw the same sparks I'd observed my first time through. The air was thin and tasted of ozone, like breathing atop a desert mountain after a lightning storm. I put my hand out again and after a few more steps squeezed out the other side.

As I stepped into the room that was not mine, my ears popped again. I saw first that I was alone, there was nobody gaping at me this time. The objects looked as if they'd fallen into disuse but the room had still been maintained, the feeling was similar to being in a closed museum. The old shuttle poster was frayed at the edges and scotch tape had been used to repair a rip, leaving a lightning scar in the middle. Below the poster there were several pictures of Einstein and Newton

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over a desk, the two gentlemen were in such fine company as H.P. Lovecraft (beside his creation Cthulhu), H.G. Wells, Poe, Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick and Stephen King.

On the ceiling above the solitary bed, in the space typically reserved for swimsuit or lingerie models, was an illustrated poster that rapt my attention. The drawing was of a door with a rounded top standing on a beach like a lone sentinel. It appeared to be made of an ancient gnarled wood, from the ghost of a tree rather than a live one. Light from behind the door burned through the keyhole and formed a glowing outline around the ghost wood. Etched into the middle of the door itself was a simple sigil, comprised of a triangle with a circle behind it and an infinity sign below it. Suspended in front of the door were two silver six shooters that looked ancient as Excalibur, their barrels crossing to form an x over a red and pink rose with a glowing golden center. Almost the entire rest of the space was randomly dotted with beautiful pictures of the cosmos.

There was a sudden tickle in my nose. I covered my mouth in time but all it seemed to do was amplify the sneeze. I heard someone coming down the hallway and just hoped that it was who I was looking for.

When he rushed around the corner and into the room I wasn't sure it was really him at first, the last time I'd seen him was decades prior and we'd looked so much alike as boys. We were not the same man. Where I now dressed in khakis, long sleeved button ups (usually flannel) that I tucked in, and had grown a little chubby, he had a muscular build, and was clad in converse, Levi's and a plain t-shirt all as black as his hair. My hair, perhaps to rebel against the rest of me, had grown thin, his dark hair appeared to have been recently buzzed but I could still see it was receding just a little. He had a small square bandage on his scalp. He saw me, and smiled.

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He moved his mouth, but it sounded like a grownup from Charlie Brown. I touched my right hand to my ear and shook my head. He closed his eyes for a moment and nodded, the smile on his face growing a little wider as he motioned for me to come closer.

I wish I could say I wasn't scared and that I felt an overriding feeling of determination, that as an adult I no longer felt the terror which had crippled me and sent me running for my blanket as a boy. But just like the last time I crossed into that world, I just wanted to turn and flee back under my covers and wish it all away. There was no herculean task before me. All the worst was over already and I knew it, but still I just couldn't bear entering all the way into his world, because by doing so I'd have to admit that everything *was* real. That would mean that Aaron wasn't crazy and that I'd left my only brother alone with dad and run like a coward for my own selfish reasons. I took a step forward, and then I took another, the one I took after that brought me into a world of smells and sounds I had previously been oblivious to.

As I stepped out of the strange intermediary bubble between our worlds, it was like stepping from a silent train onto a busy city terminal. My ears cleared and I heard the unmistakable Miles Davis coming from the direction of the kitchen. I smelled garlic, pungent spices, and simmering beef that made my mouth start to water. Under all of that were the often intertwined aromas of coffee and cigarettes. There was a dog barking outside somewhere and a garbage truck was beeping out front. He wiped some food off on his jeans then reached out his hand. I recoiled a little on pure instinct, I couldn't help it.

“Are we even allowed to do that?”

He seemed to find my reaction quite funny, I saw, “I think we'll be fine, this isn't some crazy time travel thing. I'm sure of at least that much,” he said.

“Alright, sorry it's just...”

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“It’s just fucking weird! It’s okay man, I get it.”

“Yeah.” We laughed a little together, and I noticed we had the same laugh, “I’m Eric, so, I guess you are too?”

“No, why would we have the same name?” He said.

I shook my head and opened one of my hands like I was asking for change, and couldn’t help but smile. I was a lot newer to all of it than he was.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” he said. “I still haven’t figured out why A is different but B and C is the same. Pretty sure it’s all just random. Anyway, good to meet you Eric, names Henry.”

We held our hands inches apart for the briefest moment of hesitation, then shook.

“Henry?”

“Yeah, I was named after mom’s dad.”

“But grandpa’s name was Herb.”

“That’s how it goes,” he said. “For real though man, it really is great to finally meet you. Here, come out to the kitchen, I’m cooking some chili. You want a beer or something?”

“You got anything stronger?”

We let out another identical little laugh, “Johnnie Walker Black?”

“My favorite writing companion,” I said.

We got acquainted over drinks and some pretty decent chili, it appeared neither of us were master chefs. The kitchen was a mess but not grimy. There were just random parts of electronics and newspapers all over the table we ate at. On the counter was a plethora of spices, surrounding a massive wood cutting board covered in a rainbow of chopped vegetables. Henry switched the record on the turntable to Otis Redding (still alive over there!), then a Beatles record from the 80’s which was awful, some Dylan (died in ‘66 motorcycle crash) and even a

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little Zeppelin. I felt so comfortable so quick, it was eerie. We played the ‘what’s not the same’ game, like a couple of kids trying to circle the differences in two seemingly identical pictures. Of course it didn’t take long before the not so fun parts came up.

“So where is everybody, you stay here alone?”

His face changed and he asked, “Are you sure you want to get into all that?”

“Not really, no, but I think we probably should.” It was true, I didn’t want to know anything, but I felt like I had to ask. It was a compulsion.

“Yeah, I stay here alone. Dad’s long dead, and mom’s gone,” he said.

“I’m sorry. How’d she die?”

“No, she’s still alive, she’s just gone. I think it has something to do with losing one of your doubles from such a close proximity. She went catatonic when your mom was killed.”

“She fell down the stairs, she wasn’t -”

“Oh yeah, were you there?”

“No, but-”

“Cause I was. I came through one night and heard her screaming at him for hitting you two. Then I saw that piece of shit throw her down the stairs. He was laughing at her.”

“Then why didn’t you stop him, why didn’t you do anything?!”

He looked ashamed and didn’t answer for a moment. When he saw I meant to press the issue, he retorted, “Why weren’t you there?” and the answer to both our questions hung there between us. I had forgotten a lot, but not how scary dad could be.

“Sorry. So what about your broth-”

“Did you want any more chili?”

“No, I’m full. It’s just that I noticed-”

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“How about another drink then?”

“Um yeah, sure,” I said, “One for the road.”

He looked up from the glasses he was filling with ice, “The road?”

“Yeah, they’re holding Aaron and he’s freaking out. I really only came for one thing.”

“And that is?” he resumed filling the glasses with a dark amber liquid.

“The knife you killed him with. They’re holding my brother, so-” I started to explain.

“Holy shit, of course. I don’t even know why I took it with me, I wasn’t really thinking.

But yeah, good luck tracing these prints right?” He held up his right hand and wiggled his fingers.

“Yeah, exactly,” I said. He came over with the two clear glasses, spilling a little whiskey on the linoleum. He sat back down at the cluttered table; we tilted our drinks to one another and drank. I knew he wanted me to leave it be, but I had a feeling I wouldn’t be back and the answer was right there available to me, I had to know, “What happened to him, Henry?”

He took a long slow drink, draining half the glass in a single swallow, “Okay.” He took his left hand and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, then grinded his palm over his left eye.

“We don’t have to-”

“No,” he clapped his hands once, it startled me a little. “Let’s do it. Okay, so when your mom got killed I came back and found my mom had started losing her mind, and I mean right away. Within a week she was completely lost, and has been since. I’ve got her up at Georgia Pines. Like I said it’s something about the sudden severing of a double next door, I think if it had been a double that was six or seven worlds away then she probably wouldn’t be affect-”

“Six or seven worlds?”

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“It’s just a theory, you want me to finish? Anyway a similar thing happened when we were younger. From my brother’s notes I’ve figured out that things happen basically the same here and there, but for some reason we are a few hours behind you. See, we were both blessed with the same type of father. So when I was young and crossed over and saw your mom taking a terrible beating - that one Aaron said she ended up in the hospital over - I ran back here and convinced my mom that I had a concussion, and to take me to the hospital. My brother stayed behind to tell dad what was going on, and I thought I had saved the day.’

He topped off our glasses and lit two cigarettes, handing me one without asking, “So after I was done faking dizziness and nausea and headaches and all that, we went back home. I was so proud, until we walked in the front door to find dad face down on the ground, dead of what we later found out was a massive heart attack.’

“When we found my brother I first thought our father had killed a burglar, because I didn’t even recognize him. Both of his arms were broken, his collar bone was shattered, his fucking spine was broken in two places and what was left of the face hanging on his broken neck had been turned into a god damn Rothko painting, varying only between shades of red, pink and white.” His voice dropped and he almost muttered the last words, “I was just trying to help, but instead of putting mom in the hospital for a week, I killed my brother.’

Crying was what I expected next, but he was more like me than I thought. He took another drink and then went on, “And I’m so sorry. When my dad died, yours got worse, and when my brother died, your brother *lost* something. I noticed when I crossed over, like my brother had shown me. After he was gone I kept going, just to be able to look at him, to see my brother again. After I saw you in my room I stopped doing it for a long time and had only risked crossing over again the last few years. But when I saw that drunken piece of shit attack him this

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time, I'd had enough. I was there, I had a second chance, and I wasn't going to let dad kill him again."

"Jesus, man, but you didn't kill your brother. I mean you know that it-"

"And you know what the shittiest thing is, he was the one who found it, he was the one who knew how to use it, probably knew what it was too. Maybe created it for all I know. Said it had something to with a uh, soft spot or something. Kid was some kind of savant, I left all his stuff alone and dedicated my whole life to studying and deciphering that shit, and he understood more at ten than I ever will. More than one world was robbed when we lost him."

We finished our drinks, and went on with some more small talk but all the joy had gone out of the room. I felt bad for pressing it but was glad I had. Henry had buried the knife that would clear Aaron in a plastic bag in his backyard; he said they'd never had a tire swing. We dug it up and then shared one last cigarette together before I headed back. I felt for him, and he felt bad for me I suppose, but I left feeling both lucky and guilty in the knowledge I had gotten the better deal in the end.

He walked me back to the bedroom and as I approached the wall I saw something I hadn't noticed before. Carved into the space where I would pass through, was the symbol which was etched into the door from the illustration over the bed, the one Henry's brother drew. Seemingly scarred into the wall was an infinity symbol below a triangle, with the top point of the pyramid cutting out a pie slice in the circle behind it. Henry and I hugged and said our goodbyes. Then I clicked my ruby red heels together three times and said the magic words.

The cops of course had plenty of questions, and wanted to know how I stumbled upon the murder weapon all the officers had missed. I knew what they were bound to think, but I

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explained that they just must not have looked very hard and that I was out back cleaning up and saw some loose earth where our old tire swing used to be, so I dug it up. And though it's suspicious as hell, what are they going to do? They're small town cops and the case looked pretty simple, I found out later they hadn't even canvassed the backyard. A cop later admitted to me after I'd bought him a few that they had 'just assumed the retard did it'. The blood on the blade is my dad's and it's not my prints on the handle, though I'm sure they might be pretty close. Luckily I was prepared for the long series of questions and got through it alright.

It's been a long time since all of that happened, and as far as we've heard they're still off chasing their third man. After a brief stay and extensive evaluation at a private hotel-like hospital - where I gave a generous donation, could visit every day, and where nightlights were allowed - Aaron was found not to be a danger to himself or others and was allowed to come home with me, and it stuck.

Aaron took up drawing and painting and is quite the natural talent, he particularly enjoys doing pieces with freestanding doors in places they shouldn't be. He did one amazing poster size canvas which I used for the cover of a novel I wrote last year about parallel worlds and fiction becoming reality. There was just something about the image that really grabbed me and though it took some pushing, Aaron let me show it to the world. The image is a couple ancient pistols and a gorgeous rose over a door. There was a strange triangle symbol on the door that looked extremely familiar to me.

Our ending was a much happier one than I'd been expecting when I first got the call from the Springfield Police telling me my father was dead. I was shocked to find I'd inherited the house and Aaron and I still live here together. He kept our old room and I took over the master

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bed. I considered leveling the place but we've made it into a little home and Aaron and I are both happy here.

It wasn't the house or cursed ground after all that had been the issue, and some of our happiest memories were in that house as well. When we have our nightly tea session and watch the sunset together on the back porch, I often find myself reminiscing about us playing on the tire swing, exploring the woods and racing on our bikes. I fondly revisit the times we camped in the backyard or watched fireworks from the roof with mom and dad. As the sun dips below the horizon and the stars and fireflies come out, I find that I almost never think about beatings or creatures void of form birthed from shadows. It's not a conscious effort to bury the past or ignore the suffering we endured. It's just that in that peace, the breeze seems to carry with it only the sweetest of nostalgic songs.

I'm still writing and doing my best to tell stories people can escape into for a while, and I'm still selling more than enough for us to get by. The book with Aaron's artwork on the cover has turned out to be what my agent calls 'a sleeper hit'. The wall might give if I wanted it to, if I gave it a real shot, I might still be able to push through. I don't know for sure though, I haven't ever tried again. No need to go elsewhere anymore.

The End