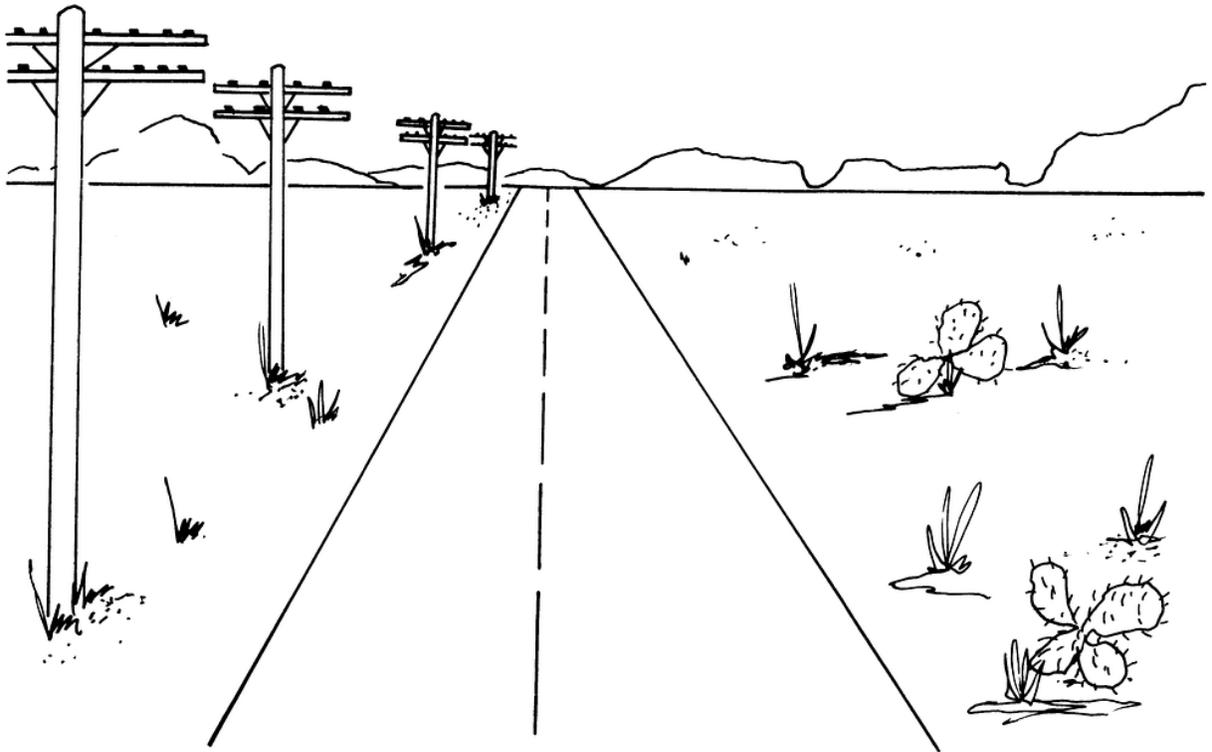


**A Series of Short Stories**

**Jesse McDaniel**

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## 1. The Backstreet

A ball soared from two courts away and bounced off Lawrence's head. The courts were packed for a Tuesday.

"What the fuck?" screamed Lawrence in his thick Jamaican accent.

The basketball game stopped. Defenders broke their athletic position. Two jaded men, barely recognizable to Lawrence, walked toward center court in the direction of the flying ball. A stale fog spread over the court. The fog opened up as a man dressed in a black turtleneck with a tan-colored leather jacket appeared. His large afro barely fit under his brown Du-Rag. He didn't look very welcoming. The park lights sparkled off his gold necklace. The other man had a black trench coat with a cigar tucked between his fingers; he hobbled over with a walking cane clenched in his other hand. It was a very noisy day as cars zipped by the park. Lawrence was zoned in on his play, so nothing could distract him. Bystanders sitting on bleachers close by scattered as they had a feeling that trouble just appeared. Lawrence was the last person on the court as all players in the game fled. There was a sense of urgency that missed Lawrence. Without hesitation, Lawrence walked toward the direction of both men. He wasn't scared. Lawrence couldn't afford to be scared. The man, seven or eight years older than Lawrence, created a good tempo with each slam of his walking cane.

"Tell Jaxson he owes us. \$4,000 to be exact. We need that by the end of your basketball season," the words slid from under his thinly trimmed mustache. A ball rolled over from a different court. It appeared that there was still a game being played out of range of the commotion.

"Over here" yelled a distant voice.

Lawrence picked up the ball and stared at it.

The man pointed his green, wooden cane at Lawrence, "...and when the money is absent, when we can't find him, we will know where to find you, Mr. Basketball Boy." The man's partner stayed quiet, almost seeming uninterested in the conversation, while his partner talked. Veins in Lawrence's lengthy arms hardened as he squeezed the ball. Lawrence was mad that someone was taking away from his playing time.

"I will be sure to let him know," Lawrence stifled.

"We know you're a good kid, but your brother needs to be more careful with our money. We haven't been able to find him, it seems like he's avoiding us or something," the walking cane swung closer to Lawrence's face.

"He's not me though..." Lawrence replied nonchalantly.

"4,000 bones, and hey, good luck on your season-opener Friday."

The cane lowered. The quiet one pulled out his Zippo lighter to light his partner's cigar.

The man chimed in at the last second, "We'll be back,".

He made sure to sneak in a few words before they disappeared back into the fog.

A distant voice yelled again

"Over here. Over here." Lawrence threw the ball back at the voice.

When Lawrence wasn't playing basketball, he was thinking about his future. As Lawrence walked the rough streets of Harlem, he was often reminded of his home back in Jamaica. The deteriorating apartment buildings in Harlem resembled better versions of old Jamaican shacks. The buildings were smushed next to each other. Every floor of the apartment building had over 30 rooms. Each floor was home to a wide array of families. Regardless of race or ethnicity, if anyone lived in Lawrence's building, they were struggling to survive. Much like Lawrence, most of the kids in Harlem grew up poor without much guidance. Those who had money - basically, middle-class white families - lived on the outskirts of the ghetto. They had enough money to live somewhere nicer. Lawrence could only dream of a comfortable and consistent life.

Lawrence's apartment was on the 14th floor of a brick building located in the Lower-East Side, New York. The apartment building looked sad as gravity pulled it to the ground. It was obvious that the city officials could care less about the buildings in the ghetto. Out of sight, out of mind, I guess. Lawrence's building did not have a fire escape in front of it, so chips in the brown brick covering the outside became more and more noticeable as the building aged. The summers were hot and the winters were cold in Harlem. Thankfully, Harlem got little snow, so Lawrence could play ball outside just about year-round. Harlem got little snow, until the Winter of 95'. For three months, the snow temporarily masked the hideous appearance of Lawrence's apartment building. Snow buried bikes and barbecues scattered on the building's community lawn. Lawrence hated the cold, but others didn't mind it. They weren't the ones playing basketball outside. Drug dealers and street dwellers challenged the cold weather, never missing an opportunity to make more money. The drug dealers of Harlem never slept and were on call 24/7. The dealers, who sold drugs at the park Lawrence played at, took notice of his game. They left Lawrence alone; they respected him and his skills on the basketball court. Lawrence played at the infamous Rucker Park seven days a week. He was 17, yet he impressed all the oldheads. He could 360 dunk with ease. Most of the dudes playing at the courts called him "Bunnies" because he could jump so high.

Arleen, the migrant woman who took Lawrence in, kept Lawrence away from Harlem's darker side. Arleen, being the old-school mom she is, expected a lot from Lawrence. She had already raised one boy and wanted to do it right this time. Arleen didn't want to lose another kid to the streets. It was hard to keep any young kid from the shady things that happened in Harlem in 95'. Just about everyone sold drugs, but they had to. They had to do anything to feed their families. Lawrence was in the middle of all of it. A resident, three doors down from Lawrence, smoked crack four times a day. Arleen and Lawrence knew because harsh smells from the smoke maneuvered through the air ducts creating a burnt smell throughout the floor. Another resident, all the way down the hall, sold cocaine to other apartment residents. Customers met him at the Big n' Tall store

down the street, posted on the corner. Everyone knew this. Lawrence's next-door neighbor preached at the church near Lower Manhattan for thirty years. He lived a clean life, yet he struggled to survive just like the others. No matter what Harlem residents did as a job, they always ended up in the same project in the same apartment building. It seemed impossible to get out. Lawrence wanted out.

Lawrence was very tall. In the eighth grade, he was 6'3. He was now 6'8. Lawrence made Arleen seem child-like when they stood next to each other. Lawrence always knelt to avoid hitting his head on the door frame when he entered the apartment. One day, while trying to avoid the door frame, Lawrence's face nearly grazed a wooden jar nestled in the corner of the room near the door. The jar sat upon a wooden table that went up to Lawrence's shoulders. The jar was one of the few things that Arleen brought over when she migrated from Jamaica to the United States.

Lawrence stared at the jar and started to remember a story Arleen told him their first night in America. He remembered Arleen saying that Jamaica started to become a place of war and chaos. Fleeing Jamaican residents, healthy enough to make the trip to the United States, left with only a basket full of items. Lawrence vaguely recalled surviving two Somali raids. When he was 14, Somali pirates ramshackled Trench Town. This was the second time Lawrence experienced this. They went into people's houses and took everything. The residents of Trench Town were nervous about another attack. Political tension between the two countries became worse. The struggle for residents to survive Somalia's five-year feud with Jamaica fueled Lawrence's desire to be successful in America. Word quickly spread of a third raid, so before that happened, Arleen left Trench Town and took her family with her. Elderly residents and small children stayed in Jamaica while those healthy enough fled. Fortunately, all three of them were healthy enough to make the trip. The plan was to get to America, no matter what. After reminiscing over the jar, Lawrence shifted his focus to a framed picture sitting next to the jar. The framed picture was of Lawrence's mom knitting in front of their home back in Trench Town. The picture was black and white; it seemed to be a much simpler time. Arleen was wearing a red bandanna dress. Lawrence remembered Arleen giving him a history lesson on the photo, so he was familiar with every detail regarding that day back in Trench Town. Whether it was the picture or the jar, Lawrence drew incredible inspiration from those sentimental items. Each time he left the apartment to go to school or Rucker Park, he would run his fingers across the jar and would whisper a prayer to it as he left.

On a cold winter night, a breeze broke in the window and hit Lawrence's exposed feet. No blanket was big enough to cover the entirety of Lawrence's body. After being woken up by the unforgiving wind chills, Lawrence flipped over on his back and realized

he couldn't go back to sleep. He grabbed a basketball sitting next to his bed and started shooting it into the air. This was something Lawrence did often. Whether in Jamaica or Harlem, Lawrence perfected his craft: basketball. Lawrence loved two things: basketball and his mom, Arleen. That was pretty much it. Since Lawrence had the liberty to decorate the room the way he wanted, Lawrence stapled up Dr. J, Magic Johnson, and Wilt Chamberlain posters on the wall. The NBA players replaced East-Coast rappers. Lawrence liked Hip-Hop, but not nearly as much as Jaxson. No matter how bad the streets of Harlem were, the apartment felt safe, at least when Jaxson wasn't around.

The apartment was about half the size of a classroom; it was better fitted for two people than three. Fortunately for Lawrence, he didn't have to share a bedroom with his brother, Jaxson, anymore. When Lawrence's older brother, Jaxson, graduated from Harlem High School, Lawrence was able to make the once-shared room his own. The room did not properly scale to Lawrence's large body. When Lawrence slept on his bed, his feet hung off of it. Anyone could tell that Lawrence and Jaxson were brothers; they walked and talked almost identically. The difference was that Jaxson was short, stocky and Lawrence was tall, skinny. Jaxson barely went up to Lawrence's shoulders but Jaxson weighed at least twenty pounds more.

Winter was coming to an end, but there was still snow outside, which allowed Lawrence some downtime to watch basketball games on TV. Realizing this, Lawrence searched endlessly for a public station broadcasting any NBA games. He was like a fiend looking for his fix. He knew Wednesdays were the best day to catch a double-header, so at least he had that going for him. He could always count on the television's lower channels. If channel one, two, or three did not broadcast games, sometimes the higher channels would intercept live feeds intended for the ESPN New York network. He flipped to channel 77 and was onto something. He could hear noise, but there was still a fuzzy screen. He adjusted the television's mangled coat hanger antenna to fix the distorted screen. The search was over and Lawrence found a game to watch, well hear for now. He tuned in just in time to catch the announcers counting down to the game's tip-off.

After a few minutes of wiggling the homemade antenna, the screen displayed a watchable version of the Lakers-Celtics game. Lawrence went to the kitchen and grabbed some cereal. He returned to the couch. As he watched, a cornflake dropped and splashed up milk. He couldn't take his eyes off the game. When Lawrence watched NBA games, he would miss his mouth every time he cereal. Basketball dominated screen time entirely now that Jaxson was not there. Jaxson would always fight over the TV. Lawrence wanted to watch basketball and basketball only. Jaxson would pull the older-brother card and use that to his advantage. Whether Lawrence liked it or not, the same VCR copy of Slick Rick's rap battle would play over and over again. At Least Jaxson mixed it up and watched Boyz n the Hood or Juice starring Tupac once every so often.

While watching the game, it was impossible for Lawrence to not notice how easily Magic Johnson dribbled the ball. It was truly hypnotizing. Lawrence loved how he would dribble behind his back and then throw a no-look pass to a cutting big man. Magic Johnson was 6'9, only one inch taller than Lawrence. Magic Johnson was a person Lawrence wanted to be like: a successful basketball player. Seconds slipped off the clock and the buzzer sounded. The game cut to the halftime show where Magic Johnson talked about his life as a child growing up in the projects. At this point, Lawrence's face was about 6 inches from the screen. He was captivated by Magic's story, which was similar to his. Magic went on to talk about how he barely had any support growing up. Times were tough and food was scarce. Magic's story spoke volumes to Lawrence and showed him that someone raised in similar circumstances could be successful.

The halftime report ended and the third quarter was starting up. Before the ball was inbounded, Lawrence's focus was broken by Arleen.

"I have something for you," Arleen delightfully said as she walked in the door. A smile was carved into her face.

"From who?" Lawrence said while maintaining focus on the television.

"The NCAA, they are coming to your game Friday,"

Lawrence stood up quickly and jumped toward Arleen. "Man, I cannot wait, been waiting forever for this chance to show everyone what I got," Lawrence said, rubbing his hands methodically.

It's almost like Lawrence knew that a better life was in his future. Arleen has not seen Lawrence this happy since the first time he walked into her classroom. It brought back memories to Arleen of her teaching days back in Jamaica. Arleen taught young adults grammar when she lived in Trench Town.

"Magic for three to win! No one saw this coming!" the ecstatic announcer on the television declared.

Lawrence immediately snapped back to catch the replay. The short conversation between Arleen and Lawrence was a positive one, a conversation that rarely occurred. Arleen went to her room and Lawrence went to the couch. The excitement of Magic hitting a buzzer-beater to win and the good news he received temporarily took the life out of him. Lawrence passed out on the couch with a ball next to him.

Lawrence snarled as he shifted positions. His eyes opened slowly when Jaxson finished tapping his chest. As one can imagine, Lawrence was confused. He didn't know who was robbing him of his sleep. After a few blinks, Lawrence started to make sense of the situation as he recognized the short figure hovering over him. Jaxson proceeded to fling sweat from off his head on the couch nearly hitting Lawrence. Jaxson back-peddled from the couch to the front of the living room. He was now blocking Lawrence's view of the second game on TV. Rubbing his eyes, Lawrence sat upright. The television shook as

Jaxson stomped back and forth. Jaxson's partially zipped red Gucci jacket nearly looked crimson from the wear-and-tear. Scuffs covered the jacket as tears ran along the sleeves. A rustic, gold chain rested on the outside of Jaxson's cotton-covered black t-shirt. A blind person could see that Jaxson looked rough. Jaxson only visited the Apartment when he needed money or when he needed clothes that were left behind.

Now that Lawrence was sitting up and awake, he zoned back into the TV. He tried to look through Jaxson.

"Yo, move, I'm watching the game," Lawrence commanded.

The television shook even harder as Jaxson's pace increased.

"I can't believe he's gone," Jaxson blurted uncomfortably.

He took a blue bandana from his back pocket and dabbed the sweat from his forehead.

"They just took him, pulled up to the curb, and snatched him. They didn't say nothin', just took him".

Jaxson nervously patted his hair. This was the second obvious sign that Jaxson was nervous.

"Chill man, took who?" Lawrence said in a low voice, almost a whisper.

"No one... You wouldn't know. You wouldn't understand. You don't understand. You have it good here. Moms love you. The block loves you. You don't know what's going on in these stre—," Jaxson said aggressively.

Before Jaxson could finish his sentence, Lawrence interrupted him.

"These streets? You know we grew up in the same conditions, now move, stupid head," Lawrence started to raise his voice, "don't drag me into your problems, Jaxson. Now move!"

Jaxson was still pacing, surely causing a ruckus to the people on the floor below. Lawrence knew not to bring up what happened a few months back at Rucker Park. At this point, Lawrence almost forgot about his encounter with the two money-seeking thugs, but he knew Jaxson would go overboard if that was brought up. After Jaxson paced in front of the TV for a few minutes, Lawrence was fed up.

Lawrence raised his hand and started pointing to the door, "leave, bro. You have done enough,".

Jaxson whipped his head toward Lawrence, "Fuck you and forget your stupid ass basketball. You don't care anyway!" Jaxson's voice started to trail off as he walked toward the front door.

Jaxson threw his hair pick across the room and kicked over a lamp as he left. Just like that, Lawrence survived another visit from his brother.

What Lawrence and Jaxson didn't know was that Arleen heard the entire conversation as she had been sitting in the apartment's hallway waiting to enter. Jaxson ripped through the door and hid his face as he left. Jaxson didn't want to disappoint Arleen anymore than he already has, so he tried to hide his identity. Arleen knew it was

Jaxson. How couldn't she? She raised Jaxson. A tear ran down her face as her head rested against the concrete wall. Arleen was tired. She was sick of this happening. She lost all hope and knew the only thing that could save Jaxson was himself. Arleen never forgot that Jaxson received high honors in the Jamaican school system. She also never forgot how Jaxson changed when he started High School in America. Arleen walked into the apartment and her room; she threw herself on her bed. She closed her eyes and started to reminisce. A voice popped in her head and started talking:

Things were very different. I never expected Jaxson to be a gangbanger, but in a place like Harlem, it was one of the more popular occupations for misguided kids. During his senior year at Harlem High, his first year in America, he started hanging with a crowd nicknamed The Heavy Loaders. I knew he was in trouble. Students of the school called them that because when those boys brought pistols and large amounts of money with them to school. Their pants sagged from the weight in their pockets. Instead of carrying a bag full of books, Jaxson started carrying a bag full of drugs. Jaxson started to feel accomplished. Lawrence could never understand why his brother was doing this. I didn't either. I didn't know why he wanted to live like this, especially after escaping such a dangerous place. Jaxson wished for a life of luxury. Jaxson was attracted to cheap thrills and spendy habits. The nice jackets and shoes they all wore motivated Jaxson to start selling drugs and making money. I saw him change slowly. Lawrence was just a Sophomore when his brother was a Senior. When Jaxson found the streets, Lawrence found the basketball court. Lawrence started to experience success on the court. This happened around the same time that Jaxson started selling drugs. The Harlem Hurricane's basketball team made it to the Finals of the State Tournament Lawrence's first year there. It was the first time Lawrence felt accomplished. Lawrence would go on to make it to the Finals his Junior year as well. Lawrence was a man amongst boys: a true artist on the court. Lawrence was on top of the basketball world. Lawrence's Senior season came around and his scoring total, assist total, and block total doubled in numbers compared to his Junior season. At this point, Jaxson has been out of the house for a few years doing God knows what. Because of Lawrence's skills on the court, he became heavily recruited by big basketball universities. Members of the community would show their support as an influx of basketball fans packed the gym every game. Lawrence stayed focused and found something that kept him out of trouble: basketball. The game of basketball was a saving Grace as, in a way, it saved Lawrence's life. Lawrence didn't talk much until basketball practice came around. He was a leader on the court. The court seemed to be a place where he could 100 percent be himself. Unfortunately for Jaxson, he didn't have a place like that.

It was the night before Lawrence's last home game of the year. Lawrence was preparing for the game of his life. Scouts from Clemson, Syracuse, Yale, Georgetown would be in attendance, so he was practicing for his life. It was a cold, gloomy night.

Frost covered the outside of the windows; a fog immersed the school. The school's flagpole popped its pointy top through the layers of fog. The school's pipes hissed. A single light illuminated the dimly lit basketball gym. The court lacked life; the bleachers were set up, but empty. Whether before or after a game, Lawrence was in the gym putting shots up. For him to practice eight hours ahead of the game wasn't unusual. The big game could not come sooner. Lawrence knew that his mom would be there. Arleen never missed games. She insisted on sitting at baseline every time. She loved watching Lawrence perform. Arleen would scream and shout each time her son made a basket or stole the ball. Arleen was his number one fan. Jaxson used to be his second biggest fan. Lawrence's hard-working mindset never left him and he knew he had to bring his best game to the court on Friday. The game was the first step into getting into the state tournament, so a lot was riding on Lawrence's shoulders. Bringing a championship trophy home meant everything to him and the community; he had a chance to be someone and escape Harlem's unforgiving cycle.

\*swish\* Another shot snapped the net. The whipping sound echoed throughout the empty gym. For the entirety of Lawrence's Sophomore and Junior years, Jaxson would rebound for him. Jaxson rebounded for Lawrence until his Senior year. That year, Jaxson moved out and to a different apartment building. One day, Jaxson didn't show up. One day became several. Lawrence stopped expecting him.

A shot sprung off the back of the rim and rolled down the court to a side door. Lawrence walked over and reached down to grab the ball. As he looked up, he was shocked to see a police officer entering the gym holding a flashlight. Lawrence hated surprises, big or small, especially ones that came from strangers. The cop sported a buzzed haircut with a hat so tight a vein appeared on his temple. He looked like a marine. Lawrence didn't know if he was in trouble. Maybe the cop thought he was approaching Jaxson. Before a word left the officer's mouth, he pulled out a few papers from his front pocket. As he was doing this, he never stopped shaking his head. He was holding a few crumpled papers. The papers never stopped rattling. Murmurs escaped the officer's lips. Lawrence could tell that bad news was coming his way.

"I hate to tell you this now, but Jaxson was reported missing last night," the cop's mustache absorbed snot running out his nose.

Lawrence fell to his knees and pressed both palms against the locker in front of him.

"Please... why?... Why now? this can't happen, not today," Lawrence whispered to himself.

"Witnesses say that two men followed Jaxson from Rucker Park to his apartment around 7:30 last night," the officer sighed after he read the information.

Tears dropped from Lawrence's face as he sat defeated on the floor. He never felt lower.

Tears fell for minutes. The officer let Lawrence have his moment before helping him to his feet. Lawrence rose up and immediately slammed his fist against the side door. After punching the door, Lawrence fell back to the ground. It looked like he didn't have control of his body. The officer held out his hand to Lawrence.

"I know you're in a lot of pain, kid, but we don't have much time. Your Mom mentioned that you had an encounter with a few gangbangers a few months ago, so I know you can help us identify these guys. I need your help. We need your help. We have 48 hours to find Jaxson. The perps could flee New York by Saturday." The officer pulled Lawrence back to his feet.

Lawrence finally had enough energy to stand. As they started to leave the gym, Lawrence took a long look at the basketball he was just shooting with. It was like he was never going to see it again. He left the gym with the officer. To Lawrence's surprise, Arleen was already in the cop car.

Arleen looked at Lawrence through the passenger side window and mouthed the words, "thank you". Lawrence opened up the door and slid into the backseat.

"Your game is going to have to wait, Lawrence. Your brother is in trouble and we are still family. We need to find Jaxson. He needs us more than ever," Arleen said in a quiet voice as tears continued to fall from her face.

"Family is family. I can lose a game, but I can't lose a brother. Let's go find Jaxson," Lawrence responded after minutes of silence. The car slid out of the parking lot as the lone light in the gym flickered throughout the night.

## 2. Growing Up

It's been two days and they still couldn't find Jaxson. Arleen and Lawrence grew increasingly worried. At this point, Lawrence could care less about the basketball game he missed; he just wanted to find his older brother. Arleen feared that Jaxson was gone forever. She was used to Jaxson coming and going, but this time, it was different. The street life was foreign to Lawrence, but he knew it well enough to understand that Jaxson was in danger.

After another two days of gathering clues, driving around, and contacting anyone who might've known or seen Jaxson, hope turned to doubt. There have not been any leads. When a black person went missing in Harlem, there was little chance that law enforcement would get involved. Most cops were afraid to go to the neighborhood where Jaxson and Lawrence were from, so Arleen was thankful to have the support of Officer Derek. A lot of people knew the Crenshaw family because Lawrence was a rising basketball star in the community. He was the king of the court anywhere he played. He even led his high school to a title game. So, when Jaxson went missing, the entire city knew about it.

Lawrence and Arleen found themselves sitting next to each other on their worn-down couch. Both sweaty and tired, they both knew they were participating in a waiting game. After several moments of silence, the phone started ringing. Lawrence jumped up from the couch, almost hitting his head on the ceiling. He ran over to the phone and picked it up like a loose ball.

"Lawrence, this is Scott West, a scout from Georgetown University. How are you today?" The man asked.

Lawrence inhaled deeply, "I am alright. Been going through some things, but I am staying strong."

"Good to hear it", the man continued, "I heard about your brother. I think it's terrible that he hasn't been found yet. I have a brother and I can only imagine losing him. Anyway, it's too bad you weren't there to help your team celebrate the big win the other day. They definitely would not have gotten to the title game without you and that is why I am calling you today. I attended a few of your regular-season games and I think you will be a perfect fit for our team. I just need to ask a few questions in person to finalize my offer. What do you think?"

Before Scott could finish, Lawrence chimed in, "Yes... of course. It has been a dream of mine to play college ball and get my degree." Lawrence turned back to Arleen while holding his hand over the phone, "mama... I am going to make it!"

Arleen jumped up and started clapping, "my baby's playing ball. I can't believe it. My baby's playing ball!"

For a small moment, there seemed to be better times ahead. It was nice to see

Arleen light up during this dark time.

Lawrence turned back to the phone and focused on Scott's voice, "All I need is your address and we can start the interview process tomorrow. Let's say 7 tomorrow night?"

"Sounds good to me. See you at 7. Thank you, Scott." Lawrence responded.

Once Lawrence hung up the phone, he walked over to Arleen and hugged her. They sat back down and the focus shifted quickly back to Jaxson. Arleen's excitement turned to worry within moments.

Lawrence looked over at his mother and grabbed her hand, "we will find him, mom. I promise."

The next day came. Time seemed to be going fast. The day quickly turned to night and 7 o'clock was approaching. Lawrence and Arleen barely moved the entire day. They spent the majority of the day watching the news. It was 6:45 p.m as their eyes stayed glued on the television. A news story was running about the recent gang activities happening in the streets of Harlem:

"Harlem has seen a spike in gang activity. There have been 20 homicides in the last month. Over 40 people have been kidnapped. Some say it is due to the influx of drugs entering the neighborhoods. How did it get here? No one knows. All I know is that we should all be working to keep these illegal activities off the streets", a voice came from the screen.

Lawrence turned to Arleen, "Do you think that somebody... you know... hurt Jaxson?"

Before Arleen could answer, she was interrupted by a knock on the door. She cleared her throat and said, "Hey, Scott must be here".

Lawrence walked to the door and opened it. BAM The man had cocked his fist back and punched Lawrence in the face, knocking him to the ground. Lawrence looked up and noticed that the man looked just like the one who confronted him at Rucker before Jaxson's disappearance. It wasn't Scott, the recruiter. Lawrence confirmed his suspicion when he noticed the man's thinly-trimmed mustache and brown du-rag.

The man looked down at Lawrence and gave him a cheeky smile, "Remember me?"

Thinking quickly, Lawrence sprung up and gave the man a push, knocking him out of the doorway. After about 20 seconds of wrestling, Lawrence found himself on his back with the man on top of him.

The husky man had his hands wrapped around Lawrence's neck, "I know you remember me and that's why I must finish what I started!"

The man's hands squeezed tighter and just before Lawrence was about to pass out, he heard a SMACK that left the man's body limp on his. Lawrence moved the man's body off his and saw Arleen standing there with her prized Jar that she kept next to the door.

"Are you okay, Lawrence? What a fucking dick!". Arleen continued, "Do you

know this guy?"

Lawrence nodded his head up and down as he could not speak. Arleen reached her hand in the man's pocket and grabbed his wallet. She noticed that there were two I.D.s in his wallet: one reading, Devon Wright, and the other, Jaxson Brown. After Arleen helps Lawrence drag the man's unconscious body into their apartment, they place him on the couch. Both of them were shaking their heads back and forth in disbelief.

Lawrence looked at Arleen, "this guy knows where Jaxson is. I mean, why would he have his I.D.?"

A single tear fell from Arleen's eye, "I don't know, Lawrence. We need to call the police and tell them what happened."

Lawrence ran over to the phone and dialed 911. After a few rings, a man answered, "Hello! Hi! A man just tried to kill me. He knows where my brother, Jaxson, is. Please send help."

The voice responded, "and how do you know that?" "We went through his wallet and found his I.D. He also had Jaxson's I.D. as well. The man's name is Devon Wright".

"Devon Wright?!" the voice sounded surprised. "We have been looking for him for a while now. He has been a prominent figure in the gang community and on Harlem's most-wanted. He is responsible for many violent crimes. We just haven't been able to catch him."

"Well, we have him here. Come before he wakes up."

"Wait... you knocked him out?"

"Not me, but my mom. Just come!"

"On our way," the voice trailed off.

Lawrence hung up the phone and looked over at the man on the couch. At this point, he has been out for 10 minutes now. Arleen whacked him pretty hard, but the man started moving over and groaning. The man started to come to and become aware. He tried to get up. Knowing how dangerous the man was, Lawrence didn't think twice to pick up his basketball and throw it at his head. The basketball bounced off his head and the man retreated to his unconscious state. After about 15 minutes, two officers arrived at the apartment. They opened the door and to their surprise, they found the suspect squirming on the couch. Arleen and Lawrence tied the man's hands and feet behind his back. Lawrence walked over to the two officers and noticed that one of the officers was the officer who initially helped with Jaxson's disappearance, Officer Derek.

"How are you doing, buddy?"

"Better now," Lawrence responded.

"Good. Now let's shake this guy down and find out where Jaxson is at," the two officers look over at the struggling man.

"Hey. Devon, we have a few questions for you," officer Derek started. "We heard that you know where Jaxson is."

The other officer chimed in, "Actually, we know you know exactly where he is. Why would you have his I.D.?"

“And why would I tell you, fried bacon?” Devon ended his question with a groan.

“Because if you don’t, you will never see the light of day again,” the officer answered.

“Up yours, ho”

“Alright, if you want to dance, then we will dance,” Officer Derek looked over at Lawrence and gave him a wink.

Before Devon knew it, he had another basketball flying at his head. BAM. Not before long, Devon talked. After he confessed, he was now sitting in the back of a cop car heading to the jail. His make-shift constraints were now steel handcuffs. As the one officer took Devon to be booked, the other, Officer Derek, drove Lawrence and Arleen to Brownsville, where Devon said Jaxson was. *Brownsville was one of the more dangerous neighborhoods, where it was rare to see a police officer.* Because Lawrence and Arleen have been challenged in life, this scenario did not phase them.

“Devon said he would be here,” Officer Derek pointed at a run-down house with half a fence around a concrete slab.

Sweat was rolling from Arleen and Lawrence’s forehead. They were nervous but excited: an emotion they seldom felt.

“What are we waiting for?” Lawrence blurted out.

“He will come out in three...two...one,” Officer Derek called it.

As he said “one,” the door swung open and two people ran out the door: one with a bag over his head and the other, without.

“And... now!” Officer Derek opened his door and hit a sprint.

Within 10 seconds, he tackled the runners. He was grabbing both of them, trying to cuff them. He looked back at Lawrence and waved him over.

“Hey! Grab me some cuffs”. Lawrence sprinted over to the men and handed Officer Derek the cuffs. Officer Derek thought he needed two pairs of cuffs, but it turns out he only needed one. After he cuffed up the exposed man, he pulled the bag off the other man’s head. It was Jaxson. It is almost like they knew Officer Derek was coming, so they tried to relocate Jaxson. Lawrence, Arleen, and the officer came just in time, mid transferring.

Lawrence looked down at Jaxson, “Brother, we came for you. We love you and miss you. I am so glad you’re safe”.

Jaxson looked up, “I’m so sorry, Lawrence. I was trying my best to be better, to be something. I should have been better”.

With tears in his eyes, Lawrence stuck out his hand and offered to help Jaxson up, “It’s over, Jaxson. Come home”.

As Jaxson stood up, he was now in the view of Arleen. She let out a huge cry and ran to Jaxson. At this moment, Lawrence, Arleen, and Jaxson were together again. They were hugging each other like they never had before. Arleen was so overjoyed that she couldn’t talk.

Jaxson knew what she was going to ask him, so without him hearing the question,

he answered, “Yes, I will come home. You saved me. You saved me from me, from this dangerous life, from this cruel world.”

Arleen didn't say a word and just kept hugging her boys. After another minute, Arleen looked at Jaxson, “Jaxson, don't put me through that ever again.” With tears in his eyes, Jaxson looked at both Arleen and Lawrence, “I won't. I promise. Now, let's go home

### 3. Monsters

The moon glowed off the faces of politicians, pop stars, and Disney characters. There was something strange in the air. Crowds of intoxicated pirates, fairies, and slutty disciples of Satan ran the streets on this night. We had just left a costume party, so I guess that was expected. Each costume I saw gave off different energy. I didn't know how to feel. I bet the booze didn't help me conclude. Each jack-o-lantern we passed had hard and unchanged faces coated with layers of frost. My ears were barely holding up the beard that went with any costume, but Jesus was the choice for the occasion. I had a poorly conditioned brown wig that went to my shoulders. It needed to be combed every five minutes, so it was out of my face. I swallowed six wig hairs that night. The dark blue, fleece bathroom robe, wig, and sandals made people think I was The Big Lebowski. People thought I was making fun of Jesus because I dressed like him. Oh, Heaven's no. I don't necessarily believe in him, but I respect the man. I had to defend my intentions to atheists and hard-core Christians a few times that night. Let's get back to the story. Tom, who had a giant inflatable tube around his waist, did a fantastic job of directing everyone to the next house party. He was the oldest, most experienced fellow there when it came to sniffing out parties, so he naturally coordinated the night. My exposed feet felt like bricks. With each step, a sharp pain shot through my legs, but Tom reassured everyone that our last destination would be down the street. His brother, Nick, who was a wizard, pointed his staff towards the desired party. "Onward, peasants!" He shouted. He nearly whacked me in the face with his Wizard staff. There was a crowd of people heading to the same house, so we knew we were onto something. We had a feeling that this Halloween was going to be one for the books.

We approached the house and noticed a large set of wooden stairs. As we walked up the stairs, we were greeted with welcoming creaking sounds. Surely, on any other day, we could have fallen through the staircase. Once we got to the front door, I could hear the song *Gimme the Light* by Sean Paul. I knew we were at the right party. I wasn't surprised that the walls did a terrible job of containing the music. The front door had a watchman posted in front of it, almost like a medieval guard defending a castle.

"Who do you know?" uttered the brutish man.

"Kevin," said Tom.

The watchman ushered us in. The secret password worked, and we were granted access to the holy fraternity. I was immediately hit with a smell of mildew and tobacco as I walked through the guarded entrance. After sitting down and playing cards for a while, the dance floor called my name. *Jeeesssssseeee!* I had some liquor in me, so I was ready to bust every move I knew.

While doing high-knees to the living room of the house, I felt two thuds on my shoulder, "Hey, it's Amanda, Amber's friend. she told me that you would be here. She told me to watch you, so I am".

*I was surprised that someone I never met knew what I looked like. She must've worked for the FBI or something.* Oh great, now I had my girlfriend sending spies to watch me. I had to escape her sight and tuck myself away somewhere. I was sure to make a mistake at some point during the night, so I backpedaled from the dancefloor to a random hallway of the house. I start wandering through the house exploring rooms. Luke, my friend, who was a short version of Jason Voorhees, walked out of a distant room. It was at the end of the hallway. Out of curiosity, I cautiously walked into the room he left with my head extended past my shoulders. I looked like an idiot, but a sneaky idiot. I walked in, nearly bumping Luke through the wall.

There were holes in the wall and the room's white paint was covered with a variety of stains: some yellow, some red. I had so many questions that didn't have rational answers. The room was empty at this point. I tiptoed to the wall in front of me. I noticed a hand-shaped hole where someone punched the wall. I put my left eye up to it for some weird reason. *Maybe I thought I could see my future in this hole, who knows?* As I mindlessly placed my eyes against the wall, I began to feel the floor vibrate beneath me. I turned around and saw seven or eight people enter the room. The door slammed behind them and the people situated themselves on the bed. Two people were standing because the bed could only support six people. I was surprised no one noticed a bootleg Jesus in a crouching position randomly in the corner. I got out of my crouching position and slithered to the closed door. As I walked closer to freedom, a man dressed in a cop costume scooted the sliding lock shut.

"Can I leave?" I reluctantly asked.

A thin boy-man dressed as a cop quickly retorted "no, you're going to watch us do cocaine".

I was shocked. I've never seen this stuff in my life. So many things were going through my head: *Why do I have to watch? Will they kill me? Will I escape?*

I couldn't leave, so I made myself comfortable in the corner of the room. I begin to observe the group of characters. It was like nothing I'd seen before. A silver plate was then removed from a black Jansport backpack. A pile of white powder covered the entire plate, and *I knew it couldn't be pixie dust.* I was so freaked out, so I urgently worked my way back to the locked door. I began tampering with the lock to intimate my escape.

The jingle from the lock caught the cop's attention, "you better not leave, boy!"

Captain America chimed in, "yeah, you're going to watch us do coke. Big time!".

*What a nightmare... Was this even real?* I looked over at Pocahontas, who was shaking just as much as I was. *I could tell she didn't want to be there.* She was accompanied by an inebriated lumberjack. The plate made its way to Pocahontas. The lumberjack was coaching Pocahontas on how to snort the lines. Before I could see her snort it, I looked away like a scary scene was coming on the screen. After trying for several minutes to escape, I made my way back to the hole in the wall. The cop slid the

empty plate in the backpack ending their session.

The door finally unlocked. I ran out and found my friends. I immediately told them what happened. *They had a hard time believing me.* I was Jesus; they had to believe me. We gathered our things and headed to the front door. I could tell the party ended because the music was off and I heard what people were saying. Before we stepped outside, I saw the crooked coke cop one last time. He grabbed me by my hand.

He pulled me closer to him: stared into my eyes and yelled, “Welcome to College, Boy!”.

He had the craziest look in his eyes. I didn’t know how to respond, so I escaped his grip and started running. My life was never the same as I learned that sometimes we turn into the monsters we dressed up as kids. I also learned that college was *crazy*.

### 3. My Light

Silence filled the stale air; I could only hear the sound of my breathing, which was barely a sound at all. I wasn't surprised I could only hear myself because I was, in fact, *alone*. I have learned to share a space with myself. This was due to circumstance, not a choice. *There I go again, not taking accountability*. Being alone could not possibly constitute living a fulfilled life. During my time alone, I have realized the power of breathing. Sometimes I saved my breath and other times, I used my breath to say hurtful things to people I loved. *Anyone could sense the sadness if they were to walk into my apartment*. It lacked life. It was a typical Saturday as the air in my apartment has barely changed. I closed my eyes and took a breath, an influx of memories came over me: *the time I was lost on a raft with my brother riding the rapids or the first time I experienced loneliness when my ex-girlfriend pierced my heart at the vacant bleachers after a football game*. These memories had to be more than ten years old, but they resurfaced often. The air has all tasted the same to me. With each inhale, memories acted like waves as they came and went. One thing about this air is that it reminded me of the choices I have made in my past.

I lived in a small, beat-down, studio apartment. I often had to find light in my world of darkness. Whenever I left my apartment, the city lights were there to guide me back. I depended on these lights. *Fortunately, my apartment was in the location of several pubs*. I barely had to drive anywhere, which was both good and bad. My apartment was not big at all. The door frames were unforgiving to anyone over six feet. After a night at the bars, I followed the lights back to my apartment. Like any other night, the apartment lacked energy and life. As I ducked under the doorframe, I realized my homemade candle was still producing company and the only source of light. I couldn't afford lightbulbs, but I could afford a six-pack of beer. The sweet smell of the candle temporarily tricked my mind to think that I was somewhere else. *No matter what, there was still a voice in my head telling me to get a job, to make something of my life. I was stuck here in this shitty apartment*. The wallpaper appeared to be floral. The ripped material made the room look like a psychiatric ward. This was home for me. I continued to question if I was alone in this struggle or if others stared at similar wallpapers. Before I felt bad for myself, I passed out on my couch, which also happened to be my bed.

It was now Monday; a grueling day. While others were getting up early and getting to work, I was still incapacitated on the couch. *I have not had a job in four months*. Waking up was a hard enough job for me. The raindrops grew louder and the city was almost completely awake. I wasn't, though.

As I stumbled off the pull-out couch to get some pop-tarts, I noticed two thuds... "Open up, it is Jeff, your landlord".

I quickly threw on some ripped jeans and forced my eyes open as I stumbled to the

door. The door squeaked open as my landlord looked at me like a disappointed father, *which was weird because I was a few years older than him*. Jeff's eyes said it all, but his mouth confirmed that this would be my last few hours in the apartment. *I was waiting for the day Jeff kicked me out; I haven't paid rent in over three months*. I was just happy I was able to stay as long as I did. Although Jeff and I were decent to each other, I understood that it was strictly business.

"Okay," I said as I slowly closed Jeff off from my world.

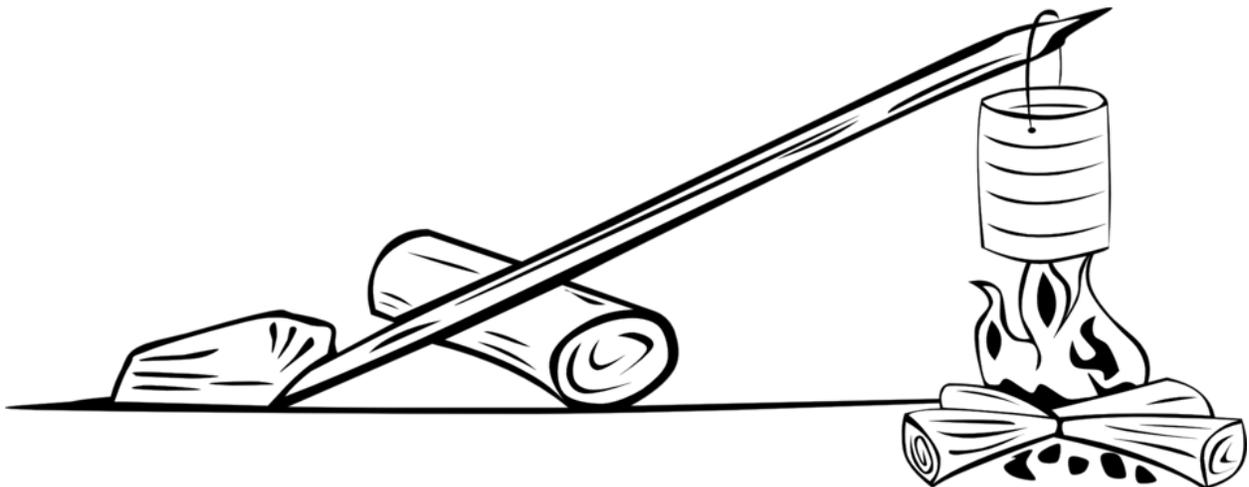
I started packing my things, which fit in a garbage bag. I was ready to leave one bad place to find another. I walked down to his office and left my keys in his mailbox. As I walked out of the building, all I could think about was the candle I left burning in the apartment.

Now that I was on the street, I was at step one again. I had a hard time finding any welcoming lights. I was fortunate to wander a few blocks from my apartment and find a homeless camp. Several make-shift tents and a large fire were burning in the middle of all of them. *I finally found some light*. I survived the night with the help of others just like me. I slept under a bridge down the street from Safeco Field. *When I was a kid going to Mariners games, I would have never thought I would end up like the homeless people I looked down upon. Either way, I was here and I needed to do something about it*. The people I stayed with treated me like family, which was a feeling I missed dearly. I realized that these outwardly dirty people had such beautiful lives before their extended stay at the homeless camp. I learned that some had wives, husbands, kids, and for most of them, jobs. For them to sleep under the same bridge as me, I learned that life can be unpredictable. *One day, we could be at our best, and the other day, we could be sleeping in tents under a bridge*. On this particular night, I felt more alive than ever. I had previously been alone for so long that it was nice to converse with others. *Several lost souls in a night of darkness came together and created one big light*. After I shared a few stories with the fellow bridge dwellers, I couldn't help but stare deep into the fire and think of my time at fifth-grade camp. The campfire provided the necessary warmth and light needed to survive the dark time we were living in. The night-crawling, homeless committee and I continued to share stories deep into the night to the early morning. The cold air I was breathing proved that my skin was tough and my heart was still tender.

Two weeks have passed since I stayed with my new friends under the bridge. At this point, food was running out and my attitude was getting worse. Unfortunately, I was used to my dirt-stained skin and my rotten breath. *I can at least blame my breath on the nasty food we have been eating*. A few hours into the morning, I realized all the food was gone. I wanted to do my best to contribute, so I left the camp and started walking; I was now scavenging food.

As I was leaving from the bridge, I heard the following words being shouted from an intercom, "Ken Griffey Jr. up to bat, 2-3 count... bottom of the third" from a distance.

I started to follow that voice. It was Dave Niehaus' voice. *I have been listening to that voice my entire life.* I walked down the long street leading up to the stadium. I was happy to see that a row of street lights illuminate my path as I got closer to the voice. Of course, I passed several bars that I often went to. I started to remember why I got myself in this situation. The smell of booze quickly hit my nose and I was instantly disgusted with myself. *Again, I would have never thought I would be searching the streets for food, but here I was.* I brushed off any negative thoughts as I pushed forward. The stadium lights continued to guide me as I drew close to the heavenly voice. After passing many bars and people like myself, I finally arrived at the lit-up stadium. When I approached the gate, I turned around and realized that every light behind me had darkened. The only light left in Seattle was the light from the stadium. The combination of the stadium's voice and light brought me out of another dark place. I approached the gate and noticed that no one was there to take tickets. With nothing to lose and everything to gain, I walked into the gates. I entered the stadium and looked around. I noticed thousands of dedicated fans around me screaming for the Mariners to win. There was so much energy, hope, and life within the stadium. I couldn't help but feel happy about the positive and hopeful energy around me. I begin to shed a tear as a nostalgic memory of me hitting t-balls entered my brain. *How could all that innocence go away? What happened? Why did she leave me?* At this point, nothing else mattered to me. I forgot about my divorce, my overdose, and my job that paid six figures. I forgot about it all as I was fixated on the stadium's bright lights. The new atmosphere made me forget who I was for a minute. I closed my eyes and I took a deep breath. I begin to take on the wave of memories flooding in. Before I panicked, I exhaled. I had light in my life again. When darkness crept in, the stadium lights washed it all away. I finally found my light: a new life to call my own.



## 5. Gone

Trapped under the door, I did my best to push it off me. The weight pushing down on the door was too powerful, so my attempts were unsuccessful. After several hours and several brief naps, I was able to push the door off of me. Dusty and dirty, I pat my clothes, creating clouds of filth. I walk through the door frame and look back at the defeated door. Curious to what knocked down the door with such force, I continued limping forward. I look to my left and see claw marks etched into the wall. There were toughs of hair and streaks of blood visible to the naked eye outlining the marks. I was not sure if the blood came from me or the creature that tried eating me. I scanned my body and I was unscathed: only a few scratches.

*What the hell was that?* Many thoughts bounced inside my throbbing skull. I made it through the mess and stepped outside, making my way to the front porch. I expand my sight, open my eyes wide, and fixate on two broken trees. It looks like Godzilla came with a big ax and chopped them down. After further inspection, I noticed a string of giant footsteps. I walk toward the trees and stumble into a small hole. I quickly realized I was standing inside just one footprint of this creature. I stick my finger in the muddy print and stare at it as if I knew what I was looking for. I head back inside for the night.

I never mind being alone but to have my life ripped away from me was unexpected, to say the least. It started the day the meteor came falling from the sky. No one saw it coming. Out of nowhere, a small planet-sized meteor came and smashed the entire state of Idaho. Shortly after, people in neighboring states went missing. It was not long after that my life changed for the worse. I was living a relatively normal life; I had a family, a job, and a future planned. It's been a year since I have seen anyone. Every night following the meteoric crash, I would hear hoots and howls. I had many sleepless nights wondering where my family went. Wondering didn't get me answers. Now was the time for action; I remembered the scratch marks, large footprints, and broken trees and knew danger was near and very real. I just wasn't sure what the danger was.

The sun comes up, and I rise to my feet. With my minor limp, I drag my left foot with each step. Looking out the front window, I noticed that a few more trees were knocked down, and there were twice as many footprints. Fortunately, my truck was untouched. I hobbled in and drove to the nearest city: Seattle.

The freeways were empty. It looks like the cars on the freeway took the role of being claw machine prizes. 150 miles later and still no cars or humans. As I pulled off the freeway and into Seattle, the first thing I noticed was that the Space Needle looked like a titanium candle. Large flames were kissing the sky.

I get out of my car and hobble closer to the center of town. The closer I got to the Space Needle, the sicker I felt. I look around and see empty streets and vacant stores. I take one step into the flaming needle and step in toxic sludge. I try to lift my foot, but can't. My shoe is glued to the floor. I look up and see pieces of rubble fall. A large beam

almost hits me, as I unstick my foot and roll away. I was out just as fast as I was in. I get up, look behind me and see the Space Needle collapse. Green sludge oozes out the sides of the structure. A piece of radio-active slime lands on my lip. Against my better judgment, I lick my lips. My tongue slowly retreats in my mouth. My lips close, and my pupils expand to the size of a dime. *I have to get to my truck.*

Back in my truck, I grip the steering wheel with all my might. The veins in my arms become visible. A few more veins make an appearance on my forehead. Blazing down the freeway, I shift my focus to 400 meters in front of me. A colossal figure takes one step and clears the width of the freeway. I look up and see that it has human-like features. It's almost as if a human adopted the size of King Kong, except this creature, was covered in green slime. The truck hit maximum speed. A minute passes and I slam the gas pedal to the floor to get a closer look. I parallel park beside the creature's left foot. It matches the size of the footprint found at my house. *Surely, this was the creature that attacked me the other day.* With the truck in park, I foolishly stepped outside to get a better look. I look up and see the large gargantuan hovering over me, with its face leaning into mine. Shaking in my boots, I do my best to stay still, in fear of causing discomfort. It feels as if an eternity passes. The timid creature lowers down, scoops me up, and raises me to its face. I am the size of its nose, so I was afraid of getting inhaled. The monster let out an audible grunt. I look deep into its eyes and see a large, slimy tear fall from its enormous eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

The monster's head shakes side to side and points to the collapsed Space Needle. Its eyes told me that something was wrong.

I extend my hand and stroke its large nose, "It will be okay. If you help me, then I will help you!"

The monster shook its head up and down in agreement. It lowers me down, and I enter my truck. I notice that my skin is starting to glow. I look in the rearview mirror and see that I was changing. Buttons started popping off my shirt as my body started growing rapidly. Within a few seconds, the truck I'm in explodes off of me. Not before long, I was standing eye to eye with the creature that was just holding me. I lost my ability to speak. I tilt my head at the creature and reveal my palms in frustration. The creature shrugs its shoulders. I became the creature I feared and hated. *How did this happen?* It taps its wrist indicating something about time. After tapping a few times, the creature points up to the sky. I look up and see a flaming ball coming right at us. The closer it got, the blurrier my vision became. In a flash, life left me; I saw nothing but white.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP

"Sir, are you okay?" A faint voice said.

I open my eyes and see an elderly nurse feeling my right wrist. I am in a hospital bed of some sort; I can't recall what led me here.

"Sir, you had another episode. You locked yourself in your room and said there was a big creature coming after you. We had to break the door down and sedate you

because you were uncontrollable. You did suffer some minor injuries” the voice rings through my ears.

With a question written on my face, I ask, “What do you mean I had an episode? Where am I?”

The nurse grabs my hand and looks directly into my eyes, “Sir, you are home. You are at Meadowhill Psycheward. You have been here for over 10 years. Well, since your family dropped you off.”

“M- My family? Do you know where they are? I need to save them from the creature!” were the words rolling off my lips.

The nurse shook her head in slight disappointment. Without answering or skipping a beat, she grabs a pill bottle from the cupboard, takes a few pills out, and puts them in my hand, “Here. Take these. They will make you feel better.”

I swallow the pills without conflict, close my eyes and drift away. Just like that, I was under a door again, the same place I started.