

THE WOLF-BOY OF CARUSO COUNTY

and other stories



by Becca Evans

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of Caruso County

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Introduction

Some Bonus Words, 100% Free

This is a collection of short stories I've written over the past 2 years. They are not connected in any particular way except in that same way that everything I write is connected: every one is a direct result of exposure to people that are so consistently interesting, surprising, and inspiring that I have no choice but to continually write things about them just to keep everything straight in my head. If you bought or otherwise acquired this book because I know you and personally pushed it upon you via the power of friendship and/or the Internet, then you're probably in here too, in a gesture, phrase, or thought.

Being completely unrelated as they are, there is no order as such that you should ascribe to while reading these stories. You can read them in whatever order you like, and a couple of them you probably shouldn't read at all, but I've already gone and put them in so it's too late for both of us, I suppose.

There's nothing left to say except thank you, so much, for taking the time to read the things I scribbled down while I was most likely supposed to be paying attention to something someone was telling me instead.

Story One

Fables, Pt. I

To my mom, for personifying every animal she's ever seen.

Once, there was a girl who lived in Florence, Italy who all of a sudden realized that she was allocating entirely too much energy to her studies and to self-pity over how much energy she was allocating to her studies and was not thoroughly appreciating being herself, alive, and in Italy. She decided to fix all that by going to a rose garden on a nearby hillside, settling in the shade of a big tree, realizing that the tree was very close to an annoying flock of slightly racist Italian youths, settling under a different, more tolerant tree near a pair of quiet and unoffending Japanese tourists, and writing some stupid stories.

This is one of those stupid stories.

THE FOX AND THE OWL

One time it came about that the Fox and the Owl began to quarrel over which of them was the Cleverest.

"I am the Cleverest," declared the Fox, "Because I am swift and cunning. And besides, isn't it Wisdom that owls are supposed to have?"

"Yes," replied the Owl, "I am Wise, but you'll find that I am also the Cleverest because I possess the most Knowledge and Experience."

"Your criteria for Cleverness seem suspiciously similar to your criteria for Wisdom," remarked the Fox.

"Well, maybe that's because they're suspiciously similar things and I just have the most of both, and there's no need to be an Asshole about it," said the Owl, in the voice he considered to be his Wisest and Cleverest.

"Maybe we need to pinpoint exactly what it means to be Clever," speculated the Fox, "And then we'll know which of us has the most of it."

"I think the Cleverest animal should be the one who's best at hopping," said the Rabbit, whom no one asked.

"You always say that," said the Owl, "And could you stop hopping around so

much because it's kicking up a lot of dust and some of us have allergies." The Owl sneezed, as if to illustrate his point. The Fox sneezed too, but in a way that sounded a lot like he was saying the word "nerd," which made the Owl suspect that the Fox was making fun of him.

Several minutes and many passive-aggressive comments about how Nasal Wellbeing Is No Joking Matter (as well as one muttered observation by the Fox that the Owl didn't even have a real nose, which the Owl pretended not to hear) later, the two animals remembered what it was that they had been originally talking about before the stupid Rabbit interrupted. The Rabbit was told to go hop someplace somebody cared, and it was decided that the matter of determining the true meaning of Cleverness would be taken to the Lawyers. In this world, the Lawyers were otters, because all the otters were overly litigious and egomaniacal and everyone agreed it just kind of made sense.

"Help us determine which of us is Cleverest," the Owl and the Fox said to the Chief Otter.

"Can it wait?" Replied the Chief Otter, "We're about to go for our lunch break."

"Can't you just do this one thing first?" Pled the Fox and the Owl, "We really want to know and it shouldn't take long at all."

"But we're very hungry," responded the Chief Otter. "Some of us skipped breakfast, and have low blood sugar."

But the Fox and the Owl would not relent until the Chief Otter was forced to give in.

"Fine," said the Chief Otter, in a tone that the Fox and the Owl agreed was overly snippy, "The Cleverest animal will be the one who catches the most fish from the nearby river."

"Okay," the Owl replied and turned to leave, but the Fox stayed where he was.

"What happens to all the fish we catch?" Asked the Fox suspiciously.

"I can't see how that matters at all," responded the Chief Otter hastily.

"It sounds a lot like you're making us bring you some food instead of testing which of us Cleverest," said the Fox. "That sounds like a pretty big conflict of interest."

"Conflict of What-terest?" Asked the Chief Otter.

"Interest," repeated the Fox.

"Aren't you supposed to be a Lawyer?" Added the Owl.

It was then discovered that the Chief Otter had never gone to law school at all,

but had been put in charge only because he was the one with the gavel and he wouldn't let anyone else use it. The Owl and the Fox reported him for fraud and the Chief Otter lost his house and job and was put in prison. The Owl and the Fox decided that it didn't matter which of them was Cleverest, as long as they had made someone else look stupider than them.

Watching all of this was the Warthog who was actually the cleverest, if anyone had ever bothered to ask, who rolled her eyes and sipped her chai latte, entirely unregarded.

Story Two

Pyramus; a Retelling

*To Danny, whose distance from me is always bothersome
but never insurmountable.*

The day that they officially split New Berlin in half was the same day that Tana took the test. That famous test, the one that had been in development, truly, for centuries now. The Ultimate Test, to determine the Ultimate soulmate. The one that was supposed to locate, with absolute certainty, the person that was absolutely, certainly and irrevocably her soulmate. Because it was the future now, she took the test on her phone. She had been looking at a busy signal on her phone for 45 minutes and counting in an internet cafe in Downtown New Berlin West. It was on a hill, affording Tana a view of the cranes a mile or so away that were busy laying the final strips of metal that would separate the Berlin halves for good. Tana was unsure of the politics involved with the establishment of the New Wall. She knew that people on the West were the ones pushing for it, and being from the West she assumed that it was in her favor and had not worried about it. The busy signal on her phone changed from an image of an upside-down hourglass to an image of a right-side-up hourglass, as it had hundreds of times since she had finished plugging in the answer to the last of the test's delving questions.

She wondered what the odds were that she would know the person she matched with in real life. Her roommate and best friend, Sax, had matched with her childhood neighbor of 10 years, which no one had found surprising besides Sax herself. Now the two of them were getting married and Tana, out of a roommate and with sum total of romantic experiences that resembled the emotional equivalent of a post WWII Miami, (or a pre-WWII Chernobyl), figured she had better find her Someone before Someone Else did, or worse, he Got Boring, or even worse, Got Fat and Boring.

She tapped her phone to remind it that it had a job to do beyond reminding her of the ever-constant passing of time.

She wondered if it was even working, or if it had immediately sized her up as Unmatchable and was now giving her 20 dollars worth of false hope. Her last boyfriend, an almost entirely underwhelming and completely too-serious publicist,

had told her that she was not right for him. This was the first time Tana had considered the possibility that she could be Not Right for someone, opening up room for the inevitable extension of that thought, that she might not be right for anyone. In time she grew to agree that she had not been entirely right for the publicist; he always made her talk before her thoughts were done baking, and she always walked two and a half steps faster than him. However, Tana had been willing to try, a talent that she found to be incredibly underrepresented in the people she interacted with. She considered her options should the pixelated hourglass never stop flipping. Recently she had found herself reflecting upon yaks for no explicable reason; she imagined a scenario where she moved to the mountains and spent the remainder of her life yakking. Engaged in the profession of yakkery. She was making a mental note to look into the terminology some point in the future as the phone did a different thing than it had previously been doing.

She experienced a minor heart attack as she watched the screen turn black before dissolving into a display of cascading 3D-ish hearts. Classy. The hearts fell away to reveal a face, the face that Tana realized belonged to her Soulmate™. The face was a kind one, featuring an expression ill-at-ease with cameras that mirrored Tana's own photo. A face topped with cute-messy brown hair and the brownest eyes Tana had ever seen. With another annoying sound effect an arrow appeared to the face's right, with a number: 0.7. That's how far away from her he was.

Tana walked the increasingly neglected sidewalks in the direction of the arrow, paying a hazardously small amount of attention to the path or the obstacles therein. She was too busy swiping through the pages of information about the boy that she had been granted access to. The matching process was so strenuous and the "Terms & C ♥ nditions" so extensive that the instant two people were matched they became privy to a truly stunning amount of information about each other.

She could see his date of birth (a week before hers), his entire music library, and everything he had ever written on any electronic platform. She could see that he owned a 6-year-old rescue dog named Mars Bar, that he had a playlist for every day of the week (The Killers for Fridays, Otis Redding for Mondays, old Weezer for Wednesdays, and new Weezer for Thursdays), and a blog post he had once written ranking every type of Oreo ever released.

A gaudy twinkling noise and flashing icon almost caused her to walk into a poster-smothered telephone pole: she had been alerted that her soulmate was also on the move- towards her. The distance was now dropping twice as rapidly, and

even faster as Tana abandoned all pretense and broke into a slightly unflattering jog. As she rounded a corner, the number now flashed 0.0 and the arrow had changed into another annoying heart.

Looking up, she saw the face from her phone, now attached to a body that was sprinting toward her. As they closed the distance they slowed, both separately realizing the absurdity of the situation and the dearth of ice breaking material they had available for this context. They ended up with a distance of 15 feet and a dull, thudding pressure of expectation between them. Neither spoke for a second until:

“I like Weezer, too.”

Tana spoke, probably far too quietly for the distance between them. Still, an “I know” floated towards her from the boy, whose name was Raffi. This was unfortunately cut off by a cacophony of unnecessary alarm bells. It occurred to Tana where they were only as the final chunk of the New Berlin Wall began to drop. Tana had enough time to see the boy’s expression change to something that, if not despair, was at least a breed of sad befuddlement, before he disappeared from her sight. In seconds, Tana’s newfound soulmate had been replaced by an undynamic barrier of sheet metal. Tana, who rarely gave her emotions the satisfaction of being felt, was somehow feeling all of them at once. She looked at the wall. She reached out and tapped it with her unevenly painted nails, frowning at the obstinate tappity tap she got in response. A few seconds of silence passed, followed by a cheery twinkling emanating from her pocket, signaling that her phone, battery wasted, was succumbing to a state of temporary death. She let her palm rest against the cool metal, her head tilting backwards towards the sky, which was fractured by another 30 or so feet of previously nonexistent wall.

“Um.”

She heard the voice of the most specifically perfect human the world had to offer her ring through a small chink in the wall.

“I don’t know if you heard me, but I said, ‘I know.’ About the Weezer. That you like them too. That’s cool.”

Tana continued to stare at the wall, uncertain of her response. She decided that her course of action would be to ignore every signal of despair her senses were desperately throwing at her, deciding that she had very little use for recognition of the obvious at the current moment. She leaned against the wall, which absolutely refused to give even the smallest amount against her back.

“Yeah, the Blue Album’s pretty choice,” she answered, having no idea how to begin a conversation with a Soulmate™ but knowing that Weezer was as good a place to start as any.

As the voice across the wall responded with an affirmation on the validity of the Blue Album's excellence, as well as weighing in on the Red and Green albums in addition to 2028's controversial Chartreuse Album, Tana's brain started designating less and less space to acknowledging the absurdity of the situation, instead opting to devote the space to remembering the richness of the boy's voice, a sweet monotone that saved lilts into higher and lower tones for special occasions.

The sun sledged slowly across the sky as Tana discussed with the wall every essential subject: childhood phobias (amusement park mascots and tornadoes, respectively), favorite taboo food combinations (mayonnaise and eggs, Reese's in a sandwich), and dream careers (paleontologist-slash-keyboardist for the Strokes, fireworks designer). A shadow slowly traced its way across Tana's body, which had long since lain itself on its stomach facing the wall, jacket bunched up for a pillow beneath her chin. In time the shadow covered her completely, giving her chills that she valiantly fought through until they made themselves apparent in her trembling voice. In response, a slightly tattered but well-loved hoodie drifted down to her from the other side of the wall. In return, Tana chucked a pair of Cadbury eggs from her pack over to him and they continued talking until the shadow grew into nightfall and the nightfall became a diminishing shadow again.

Story Three

Shoe Shine Bear Pt. 1

To my dad, for never failing to encourage my nonsense.

Author's Note, or, Shoe Shine Bear: A Primer

My dad, brother and I were in an antiques shop in downtown Beaufort, NC without my mom, which is more or less a guarantee that something incredibly stupid and/or unnecessary will be coming home with us. On this particular outing we managed to stumble across the thing which I am convinced will eventually be proven the Most Haunted Thing I have ever encountered. Sitting at about 10 inches tall, Shoe Shine Bear is a relic of that age where everyone somehow confused "whimsical" and "adorable" with "bone-chillingly terrifying" and "dead-eyed demi-demon." He's got a special quality to him; if you stare at him long enough you could start to believe that his corn-cob pipe and slight smirk make him a genuinely fun accent and not at all evil, but the second you avert your gaze you'll be somehow filled with conviction that he's somehow moved slightly and the vicious cycle begins again.

We had to have him.

I was the one that made the strongest case for him, mostly as a social experiment to see how deep my power to make my dad make unwise purchases ran, but it was a done deal when I discovered a switch on the side of Shoe Shine Bear's metal perch; when pressed, the bear would click to life, alternately rubbing his two shining brushes together and exhaling a tiny puff of (most likely asbestos-ridden) smoke from his tiny pipe. I could physically see my dad's resolve weakening behind his eyes as the bear emitted puff after puff of nostalgia-ridden definitely-toxic smoke. Finally,

"I'll make you a deal," he told me.

The deal was this: if he purchased the little, possibly demon-ridden creature and brought it home with us, I would have to write a story about the thing. My dad was often engaging in little bets like this, probably sensing that

my writing was the only skill I possessed that even approached marketable and hoping that by strengthening it I would potentially not have to wind up starving to death in my mid 20s.

I took him up on the offer, several times over. Turns out, my dad is one of those guys that is notoriously hard to shop for, but one thing he never has come birthday season, go figure, is a short story starring a miniature bear that is living in his basement and will most likely eventually lead to his grisly demise under mysterious circumstances.

And thus, the saga of Shoe Shine Bear was started.

SHOE SHINE BEAR GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

It was the Bear-1920s (which happened to occur during the human 1980s, as the entire Bear civilization had set itself back several decades during the Great Hibernation Incident of 1880). The place was Bear-Hollywood (which everyone knew was human Canada). And there was one bear who was prepared to do anything to be a star. The way he went about this was mostly by shining a lot of shoes, which, in all fairness, no one had ever told him was the path to stardom. But Shoe Shine Bear still believed, deep within himself, that if he shined enough shoes that he would one day become a star.

“Plus,” he would say to bears whose shoes he was already in the process of shining and who were thus very much trapped and forced to listen to his story, “my name is already Shoe Shine Bear, and it would be a great pain to change it now, nyah, see?” Because this is the way bears talked in the Bear-1920s.

And so Shoe Shine Bear went about shining shoes for years right outside the gates of all the major Bear-studios, which, much to his annoyance, resolutely refused to transform him into a star. There were several times he considered giving up, packing up his comically small box of shoe shining supplies, and going home. But, “My name was still Shoe Shine Bear, ya see? What else could I do? Wash cars? Pfah!” He would tell to the still-trapped customer who by this point would be very seriously considering gnawing off his own feet to escape Shoe Shine Bear’s never-ending narrative.

This is how Shoe Shine Bear’s life went, shining shoes by the Bear-ton (which is also, inexplicably, exactly equal to one human ton, even metaphorically). All in all, this was not a bad mode of employment, as bears took

a lot of pride in their shoes and had an innate desire to keep them fastidiously clean. This, combined with their habit of mauling hunters in grisly ways, ensured that Shoe Shine Bear's business was booming, which made him proud enough. He was happy to be earning his own way and making honest money, having grown up listening to long tirades from his father about the merit of hard honest work.

"Bears these days are all the same," he would grumble at the breakfast table, sticking his greying muzzle into a mug of Bear-coffee (Folger's, in human), "expecting Bear-handouts all the Bear-time instead of doing hard Bear-work." Shoe Shine Bear's father's rants were always somewhat distorted from his preference for using "bear" as a prefix for too many words, an accent he had picked up working long Bear-hours on the Bear-docks, but the point had still been made clearly enough to Shoe Shine Bear that he was proud not to be one of these lazy bears his father Bear-detested.

And so he kept his modest business going, not even knowing that his chance of stardom was rapidly approaching. In fact, he was so unaware that it literally almost hit him in the face; he looked up from organizing his array of shining supplies to see a solid gold boot staring him straight in the face. He knew that this shoe could only belong to one bear.

It was none other than Bear-Hollywood's brightest star, Bearold Lloyd. The pun was a complete coincidence and would go unnoticed by bearkind as they paid very little attention to human affairs and celebrities, but if it had been he would have been executed on the spot. Bears hate puns and had outlawed them in the Bear-1830s (otherwise known as the Squirrel-3000s, because squirrels are terrible at timekeeping and nobody ever knows what they're up to anyway). Shoe Shine Bear found himself speechless, which, at any other time, would have been met with cheers and tears of joy from any of his regular customers. As it was, it went totally unappreciated by Bearold Lloyd.

"Well, don't just sit there gawking, boy. I've got a picture to shoot in half a bear-hour and there's hunter guts all over these." It was hard for Shoe Shine Bear not to gawk; even underneath what had to be several layers of hunter blood, the trademark golden shoes of Bearold Lloyd were unmistakable. He had gotten them made after his first hit and they had become his trademark.

"Step right up," Shoe Shine Bear motioned to his chair and allowed the Bear-celebrity to sit and prop his feet up. "I bet you're wondering what a bear like me is doing shining shoes in a place like this," Shoe Shine Bear added hopefully, wanting a chance to launch himself into his saga which had been the unfortunate fate of so many customers.

“I am not at all interested in that,” was an answer that had never stopped Shoe Shine Bear in the past, and it failed to stop him now.

He decided to give Bearold Lloyd the full nine Bear-yards, starting with his childhood dreams and ending with a shockingly intricate account of every shoe he had ever shined. When he was about halfway through his running description of a pair of particularly nondescript shoes, he found himself interrupted by a sharp, ringing snort. He realized that Bearold Lloyd, out of self defense, had fallen asleep and was now snoring loudly. As Shoe Shine Bear looked at the unconscious celebrity, his father’s voice rang clear in his head: “this is your Bear-chance, Bear-son. These don’t come along every Bear-day.” Before Shoe Shine Bear knew what was happening, he had grabbed both now-immaculate shoes from Bearold Lloyd’s sleeping feet and was running down the street towards the nearest studio.

As he rounded a corner he slipped the shoes, which were almost entirely the wrong size, onto his own feet, and started looking around. Bearold Lloyd had said he was shooting a picture somewhere around here... He came upon a sound studio, full of angry looking Hollywood bears and all sorts of equipment. He took a deep breath and approached them.

“It is I,” he declared, “Bearold Lloyd.” The assembled crowd turned to look at him, and a moment of silence fell upon the area. It was broken by the Bear-director.

“You don’t look very much like him,” he said in a growl, revealing a tone of high suspicion and also a bit of hunger because they hadn’t had Bear-lunch yet. Shoe Shine Bear’s heart skipped a beat and he began to sweat. He wondered if this was the end, until a second voice broke the silence.

“Look at his shoes, though.” Every Bear-eye fell upon the remarkable glittering shoes of Bearold Lloyd. The Bear-director looked for a second, then gave the best approximation of a shrug he could, given the shoulders that were available to him.

“I guess it has to be him then.” Shoe Shine Bear almost started to breathe again when another voice arose, this one full of deep disapproval. It was the producer, a stork who had worked his way up in the ranks of Hollywood. He was known for being sharp and good at his job and thus was allowed to go unmauled, even though everyone agreed he was a bit of a buzzkill.

“That is most certainly not Bearold Lloyd. Bearold Lloyd is a grey bear, and this bear is not that grey at all.” He looked at the Bear-director, who stared back at him with eyes full of rage.

“Are you telling me,” he growled at the stork, “ that you are doubting the shoes right now?”The room grew incredibly tense. Bears trusted shoes above anything. Their motto had been, and always would be, “If you can’t trust a shoe, you can’t trust anything.” This could be applied to startlingly few situations and thus left the bear population largely without guidance in most situations, but anyone who spoke up about changing it would be inevitably mauled. The stork realized his grave mistake in questioning the trustworthiness of a pair of shoes and knew that his only choice was to let the matter pass, or else risk being mauled on principle. He squinted at Shoe Shine Bear.

“Oh, I guess it is him. My mistake.”

At this the assembled crowd growled their assent and went back to their various tasks. The Bear-director lead Shoe Shine Bear in front of the Bear-Camera (which, being made primarily of twigs and honey, was actually rather ineffective at capturing anything in the way of moving images), and thus his career was made. Bearold Lloyd’s career, under Shoe Shine Bear’s new guidance, experienced a new resurgence, as the public opinion had always been that Bearold Lloyd was just a bit too grey, fur-wise. Even at the time of his highest fame, Shoe Shine Bear would always take one day to remove his golden shoes and resume his work at his old shoe shine stand, wanting to never forget his bear-roots.

Without his shoes, Bearold Lloyd was never able to prove his true identity, and had to either hold his peace or be placed in front of a Bear-tribunal for the crime of Doubting The Honesty Of Shoes.

Story Four

Ghost Stories

To The Ghost Girl Of Walter Williams High.

On Friday they went to a house that a kid in English class said was haunted.

They stood before the dark property, armed only with scuffed-up flashlights powered by batteries scavenged from the backs of a couple of Kate's less-essential remote controls. Kate crumpled a long-abandoned Mountain Dew under her heel intentionally, nervous to throw some noise on the too-quiet scene. Ryan stood still, trying to make the moment as significant in his mind as possible. He swung the glowing beam of his flashlight around to the path before them and looked over at Kate. They both knew he wouldn't take a step until she did.

A long-repeated urban legend had the house as the site of a grisly suicide generations before, though, of course, every detail had the blurry vagueness customary to ghost stories. Ryan had heard about it for the first time in his third-period class, offered up too urgently by the pale-ish boy who sat to his left. The boy, an excitable theatre kid with a flair for drama that a role as Ensemble Cowboy in the school production of *Crazy For You* hadn't quite satisfied, had seen an opportunity for attention and had latched onto it.

"She was the ugliest girl in school, in, like, 1950 or whatever," he was shouting to nobody in particular, "She was sad because she never got any dates." At this point he was interrupted by a bored girl with heavy eyelids paging through a volume of *Dracula* as she spoke: "Oh, yeah, and that's totally enough reason for someone to be suicidal."

"Yeah, she was ugly as hell," continued the boy, not one to pick up on tones. "So, anyway, it was prom night, and the quarterback of the football team asked her to prom. It was her dream come true. She got all dressed up--"

"He asked her the night of, and she still had time to get a dress? That's incredible."

“You’re ruining the story,” he snapped at her. She somehow managed to roll her eyes without looking up from her book. “Yeah, so, anyway, it was a prank, and the quarterback stood her up. And she was so distraught--”

“Distraught?”

“She was, shut up, so she was so distraught that she ran up to her attic, still all dressed up in her prom clothes, and she hung herself.”

Ryan had been listening to this all, angry about the empty seat on his other side that he was so accustomed to turning towards when there was anything of interest to discuss.

“Where is this place?” He asked. Ensemble Cowboy seemed genuinely thankful for Ryan’s interest, and turned the full force of his attention onto him.

“It’s over on Maple. I’ve been there myself.”

Ryan tapped his fingers on the desk, rattling off the percussory rhythm of the theme from Ghostbusters, which no one either noticed or appreciated.

“Did you see anything?”

This was obviously the question the Cowboy had hoped for most fervently. His eyes widened and his posture became intentionally bent toward Ryan, like a spring coiling specifically to release this piece of information.

“We saw... her.”

“Who?”

The reverent act came clattering down.

“The ugly dead girl, who do you think,” He turned back to face the front of the room as the teacher entered, forcing Ryan to save his additional questions.

Ryan wondered whether the kid had called her ugly to her face. His sight was again drawn to that empty chair. This was exactly the thing that he knew Kate would love.

Kate was the one who was always spending spare change on secondhand books about Bigfoot and researching local hauntings anytime she went on a trip. It’s not that she believed in the stuff; she just loved a good ghost story. Except for the past few months, when she had become kind of a ghost herself. Kate was determined, it seemed, to apply to every good college in the continental US before Christmas break. Everything that

was not printed on college letterhead, Ryan included, had been put on the back burner. As far as he could remember, more or less every afternoon during the school year had always been full of Kate, making Ben and Jerry's runs or hiding out in the used book store or sitting out on Kate's magnificently easy-to-climb roof. They were never dating.... but they hadn't dated anyone else, either. Kate's self-imposed imprisonment had broken every unspoken agreement they had; namely, that while the two of them were in the same place neither had to worry about being lonely or bored. And in Kate's absence, Ryan had become both.

He didn't know what he was expecting when he showed up on her doorstep with two empty flashlights just as dark was beginning to fall. She'd been locked in her room writing essays for weeks, leaving only for class, and lately, not even that. Ryan knew the odds of prying her away from her bright future in academia were slim at best, but weeks without seeing more of her than a messy ponytail three desks away had driven him to desperation. Though he had spent the walk over to her house debating pitches, by the time he had reached her door all he had composed was "I hear there's a ghost in a house up on Maple."

Though he had hoped for it more than he'd admit, what he had never expected was for her to quietly close her extensive Vassar application with a tidy snap, throw on a ragged grey hoodie, and step outside with him.

On the walk over, Ryan was surprised to find that he had no idea what he wanted to talk to her about. He knew he didn't want to talk about colleges. He feared that the subject would cause her to run back to her dungeon of applications and he would never see her again, or worse, that she would direct conversation toward the pile of applications that Ryan had entirely failed to open yet. He couldn't yet muster up the energy to pretend that he cared at all where he ended up, or to believe in the future as a real place that he would soon be. Because he didn't know what to talk about, he talked about the ghost.

"There's a stop sign across the street from the house," he said, "that's supposed to bleed every night, because of the ghost girl. They've replaced the sign three times, but the blood always comes back."

Kate pondered this. "Does it bleed, or is it covered in blood?"

“Is there a difference?”

“I mean, one of them makes more sense... How would a sign be capable of bleeding?”

Ryan decided to let her train of thought continue, knowing that any attempt to derail it would be pointless.

“And you said she hanged herself, didn’t you?”

Ryan nodded, noting her correct use of the past tense of hang, because of course she would.

“Then why all the blood?” She continued. “Hanging is a super bloodless way to go. It’s not like the splatter or whatever from her grisly death is still hanging around.”

“I think it’s more of a generally ghostly thing to do.” He liked that she was being playful. That she had come here at all was nothing short of divine intervention.

“Like, I think ghosts are more abstract than that,” he continued. “I don’t think it’s supposed to be a direct result of the actual grisly death. Call it creative ghostly license.”

“But why the stop sign? How is that remotely related to the rest of the story? Did she have a particular passion for stopping?” She slapped a mosquito that had perched on her arm.

“You know, if you’re too much of a dick about it she probably won’t come out at all.” Kate met this comment with silence, half mocking the situation and half respecting it. Ryan smiled, knowing that there was a part of Kate that really just wanted to see a ghost.

They came to stand at the edge of the house, which stood slightly away from the rest of the road at the end of a grass-coated gravel driveway. It was almost invisible from the road; the house itself looked to be in relatively good condition, but the grass and plants had been given permission to grow where they pleased. The house was hidden beneath generations of ivy and knee-high grass. They stood and looked for a moment.

“How abandoned did you say this place is?” Kate asked.

“Super abandoned. Since the 50s--”

“Since the 50s?” Kate questioned. “How is it still standing?”

“Okay,” Jake responded, worrying that her suspension of disbelief was running low, “The legend says that it’s been abandoned since the grisly-ness, which was in the 50s or something. Don’t think too hard about the

details,” he continued, stopping her short of what he was sure would be a burning retort. “That’s what makes it fun. Look. Kids come here all the time. It’s totally safe.”

They continued to stand, Kate not completely hooked.

But, “ he continued, “if you don’t feel comfortable, we can just go home...”

This was a total gamble, a phrase they used to throw at each other in the face of any risky or stupid decision. This was a reference to Mrs. Gunderson, the middle-aged teacher tasked with teaching Ryan and Kate’s class a catch-all Sex Ed course halfway through the eighth grade, far after the time that it would have been remotely useful. Before every visually graphic yet anatomically correct diagram, the woman would take a too-long pause to reiterate that students who felt uncomfortable could leave at any time, a process that was more painful than the lesson itself. During these pauses Ryan and Kate made it a sport to try and force the other to leave the room. It was a covert war fought with kicks and pinches beneath the desk, safely out of Mrs. Gunderson’s sight.

The words struck home in exactly the way Ryan was most hoping. Maintaining eye contact, Kate took a dramatically big step onto the gravel. Ryan followed.

They fought their way through the bristles to the front porch, pausing briefly to sort out a very unpleasant encounter with a spiderweb.

“How do we get in?” It wasn’t until Kate asked that Ryan realized that he had no idea. The door was boarded up and looked like it hadn’t been disturbed in a decade.

“Um...windows.” He approached the nearest one and attempted to push it inwards as slowly as he dared, having no semblance of a backup plan. He was so focused on the task that he barely heard Kate say his name. He looked over to see her beaming out at him from another window. She disappeared before he had even made it through the window himself.

Inside, Kate was standing, looking around. The window had entered into a living room. Puffy chairs with tacky upholstery encircled a wooden coffee table, all of it looking unused but intact. It looked very much like someone had lived there one day and had just forgotten about it the next.

“Spooky,” Kate said, just to have something to say.

They wandered into the kitchen next. Kate stopped at the refrigerator, where faded photographs were held up by red and yellow magnets shaped

like flowers.

“I missed adventuring.”

Ill-lit as she was, Ryan heard the grin in her voice more than he saw it.

“Yeah,” he answered, sliding open a drawer. “Me too. Where have you been, Bakes?” He had hoped that using her nickname would make the question seem less loaded. He had been terribly mistaken. He had instead sounded even lamer than anticipated.

Kate was suddenly beside him, pushing the drawer shut again.

“Don’t mess anything up, okay, Boss?” She said softly. “This isn’t our place.”

And she was away from him, examining a thankfully empty fishbowl far too closely.

“So what are we supposed to do here? What are the ghost rules?”

“Well, I think she appears if you make fun of her.” This was the part he knew she would take issue with, and busied himself with a snow globe of a ridiculous cat on a sled so he wouldn’t have to see her indignation.

“People make fun of her?”

Ryan looked even closer at the cat. It was wearing a scarf.

“How is that okay? She killed herself because she was bullied, and we’re supposed to bully her more?”

“She’s just a ghost,” he tried. The cat was also somehow wearing mittens, even though there would be nothing to fill the thumbs.

“Ghost or not, that is an asshole move and I will have no part in it.”

“We don’t have to,” he responded.

They continued to explore the house. The first floor appeared to be largely musty and, apart from a sculpture of a toucan made from colored toothpicks which Kate adored, uninteresting. The opportunity to grab her hand as they moved from the den into the hallway was entirely missed by Ryan. They wandered into the bathroom and a small study, neither of which held particular interest. Upstairs, though, they found a room that looked unnervingly like one a teenage girl would have inhabited. The bed dressings were the requisite pink, and there was a white wrought-iron window seat lined with tattered stuffed animals. Kate eyed the books stacked haphazardly on the desk while Ryan peered into the closet, looking for anything that would signify the time period before realizing he might possibly be the least qualified person to do so.

“What are the odds that this is real?” Kate had asked the one question

that was unequivocally forbidden on ghost hunts.

He turned towards her with solemn eyes. "Oh, it's definitely real."

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely."

"Oh." She looked at him for a moment longer than he was entirely sure he was comfortable with.

"Alright, then." She turned back to the desk and examined a bundle of paper held together with twine. They were postcards, decked out with the typical vintage exotic snapshots and colorful block lettering announcing different exciting places: Honolulu, Paris, Sydney. A cheerful beaver looked up sunnily from a card from Montreal, giving the impression of overcompensation next to the sunnier locales.

It was dawning on Ryan how strange it was to be in the upstairs of an abandoned house and rifling through the possessions of a possibly grisly suicided spirit when Kate spoke again. Still looking down at the cards, her voice was different, more faint.

"I'm so afraid that I'm never going to go anywhere. That I'm not going to matter." Ryan had never heard Kate express fear about anything before. He's seen her afraid, sure, but always cloaked under layers of sarcasm and shadowboxing. His nerves were struck by the stark sincerity of her voice as she looked over at him.

"Aren't you?"

"Nope," he knew his answer well enough to give it without hesitation.

"Why?" She asked.

"I just think there are more important things in life than where you end up, is all." He answered, kicking a dust bunny toward the bed and watching disappear behind the crinoline lining.

"Like?" She prompted him. When this was met with silence she set down the postcards and looked over. He was much closer than he had been, and he was looking at her with the full force of the things he couldn't quite say. Kate wasn't sure she liked the things Ryan wasn't saying. There was a distinct possibility that the words that were as yet unspoken were nudging her heart, pulling it open in exactly the way she was trying so hard to prevent.

"We graduate so soon." She attempted to drown out the silence, responding to the question that had not been asked. "We have no idea where we're going to be." The words hated leaving her mouth, true as they

were. “There’s not enough time for this.” She was whispering now.

“But,” he whispered back, “there’s not enough time not to.”

She looked up at him.

“That didn’t make any sense.”

“I’m okay with that.”

“Okay.”

Story Five

Shoe Shine Bear Goes To Space

To my dad, for his birthday or whatever

Once upon a time, there was a bear named Shoe Shine Bear, though by this point he had been through so much that he could no longer recall exactly why he was called that.

Shoe Shine Bear looked out the portal closest to him, down to the distant clouded blue marble that slowly rotated far below. He'd lost track of how many days he'd been in space.

Three, maybe.

He had become unsure after his Samsung Galaxy S6 with the clock on it had died two hours after lift-off. To his devastation, Shoe Shine Bear had discovered that the craft was only fitted with iPhone 6 chargers. He shook his paw wrathfully at this final poetic injustice to his Android kind.

It had all begun about a pawful of days ago. A bloated Shoe Shine Bear, filled with approximately 6.78 boxes of Starry Blast-Os cereal (roughly 2.76 Shoe Shine Bears worth of stomach capacity) triumphantly pulled his prize from the final box. A little cartoon astronaut told him to report to the nearest Transmissions, Research, and Assessment of Planets (T.R.A.P.) Station for his official Space Victory tour and Astro-Winner Astronaut Training immediately.

This had been the target that Shoe Shine Bear had kept in his sights relentlessly for all of the grueling hours it took to go to Harris Teeter and glumph down as many boxes as his paws could grab off the lowest shelf.

A sudden noise caused Shoe Shine Bear to look up; a Harris Teeter employee had caught wind of what Shoe Shine Bear was getting up to in Aisle 6 and had come to express his discontentment with Shoe Shine Bear's plan. As the employee ran towards him, shouting something that Shoe Shine Bear wasn't really interested in hearing, Shoe Shine Bear leapt into action, promptly vomiting up three Shoe Shine Bears' worth of Blastos and fleeing the scene.

When Shoe Shine Bear arrived at the T.R.A.P. Headquarters, economically tucked between a Supercuts and a Western-themed pet store

called Fistful of Collars, a somewhat sweaty, if friendly, summer intern named Brian was there to greet him. Brian gave Shoe Shine Bear a quick tour of the cereal-making facilities, as well as the space travel facilities and explained that the funds for the space program came from all the money they raked in by tricking fatties into buying Starry Blast-Os. Brian remembered to whom he was talking and quickly amended “fatties” to “brave space enthusiasts,” which almost made Shoe Shine Bear forget about being called a fatty.

After the tour, Brian the intern sweatily and friendlily handed Shoe Shine Bear off to a sharp-looking woman in a power suit named Tamara. Tamara explained that she was the Executive VP of Space Travelling Things and would take over for Shoe Shine Bear’s Astro-Winner Astronaut Training.

She took Shoe Shine Bear to their “space simulator” which eerily resembled a completely actually functioning spacecraft. Which made Shoe Shine Bear all the more excited to jump into the driver’s seat and press a ton of buttons. Tamara told him to make sure and press the gigantic, ominous red button to the left of the Official Blast-Os Astro-Winner Chair.

This is a really very realistic spaceship simulation, thought Shoe Shine Bear to himself as the doors began to swing shut and the seat began to rumble beneath him. Through the door, he asked Tamara how long the training was supposed to last. Tamara responded, indefinitely.

Shoe Shine Bear was beginning to have some reservations about the nature of his prize. He called out to Tamara to verify that this was indeed a simulation. Tamara responded in the negatory, which gave Shoe Shine Bear even more reservations about the nature of his prize. Tamara explained that to make up for sales lost after their competitor, Cosmic Nutty Bites, sent a squirrel into space last month as a promotional gig, the Blast-Os-T.R.A.P. conglomerate really had to up the ante. Thus, Shoe Shine Bear’s training was going to be a bit different than he had expected.

Shoe Shine Bear argued that that didn’t sound as much like training as it did “involuntary space imprisonment” to which Tamara responded that it qualified as training in that “you now know not to trust people who run joint cereal production and space travel programs,” which Shoe Shine Bear still took some issue with as far as definitions go.

Before he could voice these further objections, however, he was rocked back into his seat as four giant jets blasted the rocket into the air, the

hemisphere, and into space.

At least I have Angry Birds, Shoe Shine Bear thought, as he whipped out his Samsung Galaxy S6 and wondered how many levels he could get through on 46% battery.

It was three days later, and Shoe Shine Bear was beginning to doubt the wisdom of having immediately eaten all of the provisions on board. At the time, Shoe Shine Bear had been convinced he could call upon the wisdom of his ancestors and put himself into hibernation until something interesting happened, but it turned out that eating fifty-six boxes of Starry Blast-Os (and one seasonally themed box of Snowflakey Blast-Os) had only led to a hibernation of about eight hours, and that hibernation was really more of a “groany diabetic deathlike coma.”

Shoe Shine Bear had just finished constructing a real-life Angry Birds set out of empty Starry Blast-Os boxes when a sudden bump threw him into them, knocking them all down (like a real-life Angry Bird). Shoe Shine Bear looked out the portal and saw that his ship had hit something: another ship!

He could hardly contain his excitement at the prospect of a companion that wasn't an imaginary Angry Bird. Suddenly he heard a sound a lot like his spacecraft's doors unsealing. He was being boarded!

He smiled. Then he stopped smiling. Wait. He was being boarded. He quickly thought of all of the things that could be boarding him that he would like to not board him. This greatly outweighed his tally of things he would enjoy being boarded by, such as an ice-cream-truck-shaped alien, or an Android charger. He had no more time to contemplate his fate, however, as a mysterious figure entered Shoe Shine Bear's main deck.

It was a squirrel.

More specifically, it was a rather ticky, mangy little squirrel wearing a space suit. The space suit was emblazoned with the symbol of a peanut with kind of a douchey expression, extending an equally douchey thumbs up. This must be the Cosmic Nutty Bites squirrel!

Before Shoe Shine Bear could inquire about his theory, the squirrel declared that he was indeed Ivan the Cosmic Nutty Bites CosmoSquirrel. He declared this in a strong Russian accent, which Shoe Shine Bear was a bit surprised by but pretended to not be surprised by at all in order to not appear racist.

Shoe Shine Bear offered Ivan the CosmoSquirrel a seat on a pile of

abandoned and slightly crumpled Starry Blast-Os boxes, and Ivan the CosmoSquirrel began to tell his mournful tale.

Apparently, the Cosmic Nutty Bites PR team, without an even cursory understanding of how space works, had come up with the plan of moving a bunch of stars into the shape of a giant peanut. When Ivan the CosmoSquirrel, with a double degree in Space Engineering and Astronomy, had tried to explain to the team how many different types of impossible this was, their response was to blast him into space for Being A Wise-Ass. Ivan the CosmoSquirrel's fuel had run out as soon as he had exited the stratosphere. He had been aimlessly drifting in orbit ever since.

Shoe Shine Bear asked what Ivan the CosmoSquirrel's ship ran on for fuel. Ivan responded, incredibly cheap cardboard, actually. Shoe Shine Bear's face lit up. He had a plan.

Shoe Shine Bear awoke blearily, which was really no change from how he normally woke up. The difference was that this time he was covered in sand and debris. It appeared that the Blast-O boxes had worked almost too well in propelling Ivan the CosmoSquirrel's Crazy Nutty Spacecraft™ back to Earth into the middle of a deserted desert.

He looked around for Ivan the CosmoSquirrel and found him fastidiously stacking wreckage. Shoe Shine Bear saw that what Ivan the CosmoSquirrel was stacking specifically were volumes of law books.

Apparently Ivan the CosmoSquirrel had always wanted to be a lawyer rather than a low-ranking, fated-to-be-blasted-into-space-in-a-giant-nut-shaped-spacecraft PR executive, and had used his time in orbit to become a pretty handy lawyer.

This struck Shoe Shine Bear with a second brilliant idea, fulfilling his yearly quota for brilliant ideas.

Shoe Shine Bear awoke blearily once again. This time he was in Medium Claims Court, taking on T.R.A.P. with Ivan the CosmoLegalSquirrel as his representation.

Upon returning to civilization Shoe Shine Bear discovered that he had been rebranded as the Starry Blast-Os SpaceVenture Bear and was world famous for his daring (if commercialized) space exploits. With the help of Ivan, Shoe Shine Bear was able to bring a pretty solid image appropriation case against the corporation.

T.R.A.P. didn't have a chance against the squirrel's legal adeptness, and quickly folded. Shoe Shine Bear took over the entire Blast-Os-

T.R.A.P. conglomerate, swearing to run it for good instead of evil. He was quickly distracted by a balloon being blown in the wind and promptly forgot about the whole thing, causing the business to be closed forever leaving hundreds of employees out of a job and Brian the Intern out of valuable academic credit.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Now that you've read the story, make sure you're all caught up on the hip space lingo! Impress your friends and humble your enemies using these exciting space terms, just like the real Shoe Shine Bear!

ASTRO-WINNER: Like a regular winner, but astro.

BEING A WISE-ASS: A heinous crime punishable by being blasted into space in a giant nut-shaped spacecraft.

COSMOSQUIRREL: A squirrel, but in space.

COSMOLEGALSQUIRREL: A CosmoSquirrel who has gained a law degree.

GLUMPH: Fitting any amount of food in your mouth that is more than your mouth should reasonably be able to hold. Onomatopoeiac.

HARRIS TEETER: in the upper tier of grocery stores, above Food Lion but below Whole Foods. Establishment where they don't take kindly to people glumphing unpurchased product.

HIBERNATION : Something you can only achieve a weak imitation of by glumphing 57 boxes of Starry Blast-Os.

PAWFUL : A handful, but for bears.

POWER SUIT: Like a suit, but more powerful.

REAL-LIFE ANGRY BIRDS: A game Shoe Shine Bear invents out of a combination of Space Madness and Dead Phone Fever. Involves carefully

forming delicate structures out of Starry Blast-o boxes and then painstakingly destroying all of it as soon as possible.

SAMSUNG GALAXY S6: Dumb, annoying phone for a person (or bear) to have that makes all your messages to them turn green instead of blue, like a SAVAGE.

SPACEVENTURE BEAR: Like a Shoe Shine Bear, but goes onSpaceVentures.

SUMMER INTERN : Sweaty, unpaid, self-conscious migrant worker. Often pale and suffering delusions of future gainful employment. Wide-eyed suckers whose dreams serve as tasty fuel for the soulless corporate machine.

STRATOSPHERE : A space word.

VP: Business term. Stands for Very Posh.

Story Six

The Wolf-Boy Of Caruso County

To my grandfather, for giving me the best flashlight on the market for all my adventuring needs.

“What do you mean?” Felix redirected his path, taking an extra-wide step to stomp an especially crunchy leaf. Ada shrugged, distantly watching as two kids across the street hosed down an unhappy-looking dog.

“I mean,” she looked at him. “You’re definitely better than you used to be...” Felix shook his head as he lunged for another leaf.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. No one can even tell.” Ada looked over as Felix watched the dog make a gallant attempt to escape the tyranny of the hose’s stream.

“Why are you all worked up about this? I thought you liked--” Something in the boy’s body language caused her to drop the subject.

“It’s a bit cold for that, isn’t it?” Ada asked, watching the dog shake off beads of water. Felix shrugged in response.

“Not really.” They kept walking.

By complete coincidence, this conversation and the dog’s unfortunate bath both occurred on the six-year anniversary of the day that they had recovered the boy. It was in all of the papers at the time, or at least, all of the ones that appreciated the value of cashing in on local oddities. Headlines that October were ablaze with words like “Miraculous Discovery” and “Total Aberration of Nature.”

The facts, which were foggy to begin with and had gotten no less so over the course of six years’ retelling, were these: that a boy had been found in or around a wolves’ den, completely naked and with no understanding of English. Whether it was the hunters who discovered the den first or the boy who wandered out to find the hunters, the results were the same:

-One, that the den was abandoned long before anyone got there, the wolves having vacated for reasons unknown to parts unknown, and,

-Two, that the township of Caruso had gained a new resident.

The boy was adopted by one of the hunters, who admitted to close friends that the decision was half motivated by altruism and half by sheer curiosity. He remarked, on the drive home from the hospital, how completely silent the boy was. It wasn't just that he didn't speak; he barely moved, and somehow that stillness was able to convey more loneliness and confusion, despair, than any words the hunter had ever heard strung together.

The boy's childhood was, of course, characterized by a string of little controversies the same way a normal child's would be marked by lost teeth or inches on a door frame. There were calls for psychological testing, fears that the boy would be a danger to the public if he were allowed outside, and, once he'd received a few years of private tutoring and was to be enrolled in the fifth grade, there was an uproar that the "Wolf-Boy of Caruso County" would bite one of his classmates-to-be.

The hunter treated the criticism and scorn the same way he had been handling every challenge in his 40-some years of life; what he couldn't change or fix, he ignored completely. He taught the boy to do the same. Not that the boy was predisposed to care much anyway; in his years since being introduced to the idea of humanity, he had learned the following lessons:

-One, that humans almost never worried about what they were going to eat or how they were going to survive, and because of this they had a lot of time on their hands to get upset about things that weren't related to food at all,

-Two, that you could tell when humans were upset because their voices got higher-pitched, and they reacted poorly if you just stared at them while they did this,

-Three, that humans were far more territorial than wolves, to the point that they seemed to constantly be making things up to claim as their own so that they could get upset and high-pitched when someone else touched it, and

-Four, that humans were afraid of everything.

So, the uproar, shouting, picketing, and prejudice didn't really bother

him that much. Every time he was spoken to about the upcoming school year, often by desperate-looking people with microphones, he made sure to assert that he had been specifically instructed not to rip anyone's throats out. He liked to say this not only because it was the truth but also because he enjoyed how people seemed to tense up a little more each time he repeated it.

Preparations were made at Caruso Elementary to assure that their special new student would get a proper education. A special assembly for students, teachers, and parents advised strongly against any employment of the phrase "Wolf-Boy of Caruso County" and tried to reiterate that the boy had never bitten, scratched, or ripped anyone's throats out, regardless of how often he seemed to talk about doing so.

Contrary to everyone's expectations, the first day of school went fine for all of Caruso's tiniest inhabitants. It wasn't until day two that a couple of the bigger, crueler, less-burdened-with-empathy children had gained enough confidence to truly commit to making the new addition feel unwelcome. According to the only witness to the scene other than the concerned parties, a second grader who had been illegally spending math period on the monkey bars, the events went as follows:

- One, that the boys formed a circle around their target,
- Two, that the boys all picked up fistfuls of gravel from the play yard's floor, and, after a moment's hesitation and a careful and deliberate guarding of their own throats, began hurling rocks at their victim,
- Three, that the boys found themselves quickly and effectively prevented from proceeding by one Ada Carver, a girl one class older and several inches taller than the bullies.

Because the monkey bar boy stands as sole witness to this, it is left for the reader to determine the veracity of the next portion of the boy's statement: that young Ada did nothing but direct a handful of words, spoken in a low, sharp hiss to each of the boys in turn before the boys, as one, turned and ran back to the relative safety of the schoolyard. She then turned to the victim, helped him to his feet and, apparently wordlessly, the two walked off together to go see who could dig the better hole in the school's front lawn.

The monkey bar boy's witness testimony serves as the last documented instance anyone from school could recall seeing Ada and the

boy apart. The two spent the rest of the year forming a somewhat reticent and more than a bit intimidating company; to the casual observer most of the pair's time was spent glaring at things and throwing other things at different things.

The two kept to themselves for the majority of the time, and public sentiment was more or less in favor of them not making themselves a problem for anyone else.

They faced more than a little scrutiny when it appeared that the boy had taught Ada how to speak with him in growls; the issue was raised with the girl's parents but when they responded with nothing but overwhelming joy that Ada's attention had been supplanted from her seemingly unquenchable desire to see each and every one of her possessions lit on fire, there was nothing left to be done other than to request that the two use their inside growls. One day in class, during roll call, Ada halted the teacher midway through the D's- "he'd like to be called Samson now, actually," she declared, and the teacher amended his list with a nod. The rest of Caruso did the same, with seemingly no transition time at all. The boy, now called "Samson," had explained to her that having one name forever didn't make a lot of sense to him. As a wolf, he'd explained, his name had changed often, to reflect his growth or change or even the change of the pack as a whole. This was one of the few details the boy had ever divulged about his life Before and so Ada made sure to pay close attention and ask, every once and a while, if he wasn't ready for a new name yet.

Over the next four years the boy went from Samson to Charles to Turnip (which Ada detested) to Rick (which Ada had chosen herself) and, finally and most recently, to Felix.

Ada's parents quickly got used to Felix's, well, prowling was the verb most aptly used here, around their home. They also got used to serving an extra portion of bacon, extra rare, at Sunday morning breakfast. Upon knocking on Ada's door to say good night, they got used to hearing a distinct conversation immediately cease, and, upon opening the door, they grew accustomed to ignoring the suspiciously Felix-shaped lump that had formed under Ada's blankets. Felix's adoptive father just kept growing accustomed to growing accustomed, having always assumed that Felix's childhood was never going to be average in any way.

One of the least average things about Felix, in fact, was Ada. At age ten they were climbing everything in sight, sharpening sticks in case of a battle scenario, and going on long-winded ghost hunts. At age fourteen they

were still going on ghost hunts, only now they had access to much better flashlights, which was quite useful in searching for spirits. They kept a catalogue, on a little composition pad hidden up in a tree, of all of their experiences with ghosts. It looked like this:

July 2nd, 19__ : Winnow's Stream. Called out for the ghost of Sally (last name unknown), who supposedly sank her car in it years ago. Lots of wind. No visual ghostliness.

August 15th, 19__ : Abandoned Mental Asylum. Said "fresh meat" five times fast, in accordance with legend. Rick Felix said he "felt a presence" but I didn't feel anything. Come back with more flashlights.

Ada remembered the day they watched the dog get hosed down in particular because it was the day before Felix skipped school for the first time ever and, far more importantly, missed a crucial ghost hunt. Walking home from school the next day, the day of Felix's absence, she tried to remember anything she could from the day before that would explain this anomaly. She had a lot of time to do so; being deprived as she was of the source of eighty percent of her social interaction left her with an abundance of time to form theories. He definitely wasn't sick. Never had Felix ever been sick in the entire time she'd known him. He could stay out in cold weather twice as long as Ada could without catching so much as a sniffle. It was one of the numerous things Ada envied of her companion.

She thought back on the previous day; she and Felix had all the same classes this term, and she tried to remember anything out of the ordinary that happened. They had caught someone telling one of the new students about the "Wolf-Boy," but this always put Felix in a good mood, as it gave him the chance to bare his fangs and incite a little shudder, one of the few wolfy pleasures he still allowed himself. She thought back, through interactions with the students and teachers, what they had for lunch, what new projects they had been assigned...

She stopped walking for a second. That was it. Of course that was it. She continued the course she had already been subconsciously walking, to Felix's house, but doubled her pace.

The hunter saw her coming down the street and quietly moved to unlock the door for his anticipated visitor. A few seconds later, Ada burst through the door and trudged up the stairs. The hunter heard the trudging

cease, then resume as it descended back down the stairs.

“Where’s Felix?” The hunter looked up from the dish he was washing.

“Went out to the woods, I think.” He rubbed at a particularly difficult speck. “He used the window, though, so he was trying to be discreet, I think.” He dried the bowl and put it up, glancing back at Ada as he did so. “Oh, and he took his run-away bag.”

Ada crunched quickly down the path behind Felix’s house, driving up a trail of leaves in her wake. The path had theoretically been, at one point in time, meant for bike travel, but it had become so overgrown that neither Ada nor Felix had ever seen another person on it, biked or otherwise. It had been one of the first spots in town the two had appropriated for their own uses. Ada had proposed it, having anticipated that forests and isolation would be two things that would make Felix feel at home, though neither of them acknowledged this as the primary motivation. She had been right, of course. She almost always was when it came to Felix. He was better in the woods, more alive. The first time she had ever seen him smile was after they spent an hour chasing squirrels through the underbrush their first fall together. The second time was when they had spent all night out there, sprawled against a fallen oak tree, making up new constellations out of the stars. That had been Ada’s favorite smile, that one, because it was the one that hadn’t faded when they were subsequently dragged back to their houses by their respective parent figures. That was the smile that Ada, if she tried hard enough, could almost always see, buried somewhere in Felix’s features.

She was worried that she wouldn’t be able to see it now.

She kept trudging, aware that the light was quickly slipping away through the trees. She knew where to look, though. It wasn’t hard. Ada herself, in times of stress or trouble, headed for high ground: tall rocks or high, branchy trees where you could see all around you. Felix, though, he tried to dig into the earth. Bury himself, safe in the ground. Felix made dens.

He was eating an apple in a little encampment surrounded by rocks when Ada found him. Well, he was trying to. He had sealed it in one of those plastic bags, for freshness, but he couldn’t quite manage to unseal it

again. He had just punctured it with one of his teeth, ripping the bag open and victoriously taking a chomp out of the apple, when he saw Ada. Embarrassed, he pretended to reseal the bag like a civilized human being and put it carefully back in his run-away bag. Ada walked over to him and produced a bag of Goldfish from her own backpack.

“Can I sit?”

Felix nodded. Ada opened the bag with her teeth, so emphatically that more than a few of the crackers ended up on the ground, and sat down next to him, chewing loudly.

“It was the project, wasn’t it.” She said this, rather than asking it, and didn’t seem to overly anticipate a response of any kind. She proffered the damaged bag to Felix, and he took a couple of fish for himself.

“I said I was from Norway, for it,” Ada told the goldfish, matter-of-factly. “Half from Norway, half from Azerbaijan.”

“You don’t even know where Azerbaijan is.”

“Do so. It borders Armenia, on the Caspian Sea. And they’ve got a superstition that you should never, ever leave scissors open or it’ll bring misery and death upon your household.” She munched another goldfish vengefully.

“You’re not from Azerbaijan.”

“You don’t know that. Nobody knows that. Even my parents don’t know where I came from.”

Felix turned back to his apple.

Ada continued her conversation with the fish. “I consider it a strength.” Felix rustled beside her.

“I want to go back.”

Ada raised her eyebrows at him.

“I want to try and go back.”

Ada pursed her lips. “Back...” She nodded.

“My dad won’t tell me where it is. No one will.”

Ada nodded. “But... they won’t be there. You know that, right? They said they all left. You were alone, when...”

“I know, but...” As was typical at this point in a conversation, Felix’s command of human language failed him and Ada felt, rather than heard, a little growl escape him.

“Let’s go, then.”

Felix looked up at her as she continued. “How many wolf’s dens

could there possibly be in Caruso?”

Felix always forgot to bring a flashlight. Always. And, either as a direct reaction to this or because of some more general prerogative on the universe’s side that each duo should have one of each type of person, Ada always brought a spare. Always.

Their search was made immediately easier by nature of Caruso’s geographic makeup; the area was sort of cordoned off by a large inlet that flowed from the sea, or possibly to it, which meant that there was really only one direction to go through the woods. Felix led the way. Ada knew for a fact he had never been to this area, or at least had never returned to this area, because she had never been here herself. Still, he seemed to be noticeably familiar with his surroundings, guiding her carefully around bumpy rocks, over fallen trees, and occasionally diverting course to avoid an ornery woodland creature. He grew quieter, too, as they continued. Even quieter than usual. Ada sensed that at the same time he was also becoming more. More present, more there. His eyes were brighter, his gestures larger. Ada even saw the smile she had feared would be missing. She tried, as she hopped onto some toadstools to release the explosion of sporous powder she knew they contained, not to think about what would happen when they finally got there. If they got there. Ada was jarred from her inspection of the toadstool puff (which was extremely satisfactory, in both breadth and color) when Felix froze in his steps just ahead of her. She looked around. They were in a little clearing, a glen just big enough to let the new moonlight through. A little bit ahead of where Felix had stopped there was a slope, dotted with dark, smooth rocks, which led down to a little valley and a stream.

“Is--” Ada fell silent when Felix reached one hand back and touched her wrist, lightly. His whole body had gotten, not stiff exactly, but breathtakingly still. He looked back at her, his eyes reflecting the moonlight in a way that Ada wouldn’t have thought possible. Slowly, and very carefully, Ada shifted to move up next to Felix. The two of them stared, silently, down the slope. Ada looked back at Felix and he nodded. He turned off his flashlight and she did the same, taking them both and stowing them in her backpack. The two of them advanced slowly down the hill. Once at the bottom, Ada realized that, a little down the stream, there

was a quiet outcropping in the hill, dug into the rock right by the river. Ada attempted to fall back to give Felix some space, but a little tug at her wrist told her to stay close, and she complied.

The cave was empty. Well, mostly. The rocky floor was lightly dusted with leaves and pine needles that had been driven in by the wind; that and a few weeds that had somehow managed to grow in little cracks in the stone floor were all that the cave had in the way of contents. The two of them stood in the middle and rotated, slowly, to look it all over. Finally, Felix sat down on the floor and Ada followed. Ada could feel one of those growls again, almost soundlessly emanating from Felix.

“I thought...” more growls, and then silence. Felix curled into himself even more, slowly turning himself into a ball. Ada drew her knees up to her chest and just sat. She felt, very strongly, that this was exactly what she was there to do. Just sit. A drop of water fell to the ground somewhere in the cave.

Later, when the moon had fallen a little, Ada and Felix wordlessly left the cave as they had found it. They turned and began to walk back up the slope.

It was Ada that saw them first. First one pair of eyes at the edge of the clearing, then a few pairs, then many. She touched Felix’s wrist, exactly as he had done to her earlier. Almost immediately he moved, making sure that he was between Ada and the pack. Ada would think back on this moment often as the first time she had felt real fear. Well, technically she would identify that moment as the next one, when one of the creatures, large, scarred, and greying around the muzzle, took three tentative steps into the clearing toward them. Ada’s touch on Felix’s wrist became more of a grip. The wind swirled a few leaves around. No one moved. And then...

Felix nodded, just slightly, and the wolf seemed to do the same. Felix, keeping Ada behind him still, turned away and the two continued up the hill. Ada looked back only once, and could see the eyes still, just on the edge of the clearing. Watching.

For a while there was silence, punctuated only by that ever-present shuffling of leaves, and, later, the telltale crunch of gravel that signified they were approaching civilization again. Ada thought about touching Felix’s wrist again, but thought better of it.

“W-what did they want,” she spoke to the ground, again leaving room for the eventuality that Felix would never answer.

“What makes you think they wanted anything?”

Ada shrugged. The gravel crunched on.

“I think my flashlight’s about to die. Do you have any extra batteries?”

“No, but we can just share mine.”

Eventually, they neared the fork in the paved road where they traditionally split ways, when Felix would head left for his home and Ada would turn right for hers. As they approached, Ada tried to think of something definitive to say, to ceremoniously close this strange encounter. But the words wouldn’t come, because, Ada realized, it wasn’t time for that yet. Felix headed left and Ada did too. They climbed the large magnolia tree that grew next to Felix’s house and made the short, simple jump to the roof. Ada didn’t think of doing these things; her body had done them so many times that she was conscious of them only very rarely, the way you seldom think of drawing breath. They sat on the eave of the roof, Felix on the left, Ada on the right. This, again, was tradition, though it was entirely possible that neither party was aware that it was. They looked at the moon, low in the sky, and Ada became aware that it had to be no earlier than three or four in the morning, but was also aware that this knowledge made no difference. They sat.

Somewhere, a dog barked, and Ada imagined that it was the one they had seen getting bathed on the street the day before.

“They wanted me to come with them, I think.” Felix spoke to his knees. Ada listened. “And I...” He scratched his head just behind his ear. “I don’t know.”

“Did you want to go?”

“I don’t belong there.” His head had, at this point, drawn so far toward his knees that his voice rose from somewhere near the middle of him. “I don’t belong anywhere.”

They watched the moon set, and, some amount of time later, they watched the sky turn pink. Birds started chirping and the street started moving again, pinpricks of light as cars passed becoming more and more frequent.

“Are you going to go to school today?”

Ada shook her head. “Nah, I don’t think I will be.”

“Me neither.”

“You know that creepy abandoned Shell station we saw last week?”

“Yeah.”

“Turns out there’s some sort of monster that’s supposed to live there and scare people off. A little green one.”

“Really?”

And, bathed in the soft light of a new adventure, the two began planning their day.

And somewhere else, in a slightly different universe, a boy who had made the other decision ran and barked and played with his four-legged family, happy to have left behind a world he didn’t particularly like or understand. But in this one, that boy had at least one thing that made him suspect he did belong somewhere.

Story Seven

Here There Be Dragons

To my mom again, and also always.

There's always the Princess. There has to be a Princess because there is a Tower and Princes don't just get put in charge for saving nobody, you know. The Princess matters, insofar as she is the physical embodiment of Beauty and Grace, as well as a physical body to be saved from the Dragon. There has to be a Dragon, too. No one cares very much about what he's like, either, as long as it includes being Big, Scary, and Killed By The Prince With Some, But Not Too Terribly Much, Difficulty.

These were the thoughts that the Dragon found himself thinking, as he stared down the road and listened to the sound of approaching hoof beats. The Dragon actually had a fairly acute grasp on the universe around him and felt he understood it far better than any of the human inhabitants with whom in general everyone was much more concerned. Despite this, no one ever really seemed to care much what he thought. The Dragon, whose name was Carl, though no one had ever asked, had had a decent amount of time to reflect upon his world such as it was. Up until now his primary occupation had been Jealously Guarding the Princess, which for the most part boiled down to making a good deal of noise stamping around the base of the tower and roaring occasionally. His heart hadn't been in his work for years. In fact, he'd become far more interested in the Princess than his roaring in the past decade or so. The most interesting thing about her was the fact that she was not, as it was, an "original." There had been another, the current Princess' late sister, who had been placed in the Tower on her 5th birthday according to tradition. In Carl's opinion, that Princess had been far better at her job than this new model. *That* one had faithfully sat at her window every day, combing her hair and sighing in anticipation of the arrival of her one day hero, alternately singing and sewing and generally devoting her energy to being incredibly delicate, feminine, and fair-skinned. In every way her traits could be considered ideal. Right up until the moment they all combined tragically and the fair lady underwent a fainting spell resulting from thinking about true love too deeply while

leaning out of her window to sing to a passing sparrow and ultimately fell to her death, albeit in the most delicate and feminine way possible.

Luckily, there had been another girl in the family, who up to that point had been largely regarded as useless and thus had been left to her own devices. Carl remembered the day that the New Princess had been brought to the Tower. Luckily for everyone involved, she was nearly identical to her sister; same ivory skin, rosy cheeks, and hair like spun gold. Her only fault (other than the entirety of her personality and the fact that her fingernails were always, somehow, dirty) was in her eyes; the first Princess had had eyes like limpid pools of purest spring water; this Princess' eyes were a thoroughly disinteresting brown. The Dragon, observant and overly inundated with free time as he was, had noted some other differences over the course of his duty. This new Princess read far more. Carl had not been aware that there had been so much as a single book in the Tower, for all the attention that the original Princess had given them. This Princess also sang far less, which Carl found rather annoying; he had always been able to tell with ease what the first Princess had been thinking because more often than not she would immediately sing any thought that entered her mind, devoting a few verses to each of her troubles, hopes and dreams. Carl never quite knew what this Princess was thinking.

Carl put these reflections out of his mind as the figure on horseback finally came into view. Carl knew that his whole life, all of the stamping and roaring and guarding the two Princesses, had all been building to this moment. It was time to face off against the Prince, put up a convincing struggle, and then eventually have his head violently separated from his body by the Prince's razor sharp Sword. When he was sure the Prince was looking he let out a roar, quite fearsome and one he had been working on for years. He let two fountains of brimstone smoke pour from his nostrils, something which actually quite itched and was therefore only attempted for effect in cases where making an impression was extremely important. As he looked down his snout at the approaching Prince, a final thought occurred to Carl. He had no idea why it was that the Princess had to be locked in that Tower, nor why it was so vital that Carl devote his life to guarding her, nor, and this was the thought which was burning most vivid in his mind now, why it was that Carl must now be slain in order for the Princess to be rescued. Carl tried to content himself with the certainty that

this was simply the way these things had to happen, and end his reasoning at that. However, as the Prince's sword sliced through a few of Carl's more vital neck bits, he still found himself somewhat unsettled by the notion that all of this had very little meaning at all, and died more than a little dissatisfied.

The Princess watched from her window as all this happened. In general she avoided it at all costs, feeling that gazing out the window, like singing and combing her tresses, was something expected of her and therefore something she did as little as possible. Besides, every time she went to the window some wildlife would attempt to befriend her and that was entirely too much social pressure for her. However, she obliged herself in a quick peek when it sounded like something exciting was finally happening.

Seeing the dragon's grisly demise left her feeling more than a little upset. She'd quite liked that dragon, and always got the impression that it only acted fearsome when it thought she was looking. She watched the shining metallic figure wipe of his sword and continue towards her tower feeling less than enthused. She knew the next step was for him to rescue and subsequently wed her. She knew that these were the rules, but for some reason she couldn't recall precisely which book those rules had come from. The prince was almost at the gate. She knew it was her duty to let him in, but a thought nagged at the edges of her mind. She'd been having more of them recently, thoughts, and they were starting to pile up in a rather upsetting way. She had a lot of questions about why things had to be the way that they were, but she had no idea to whom these issues should be addressed. She was fairly sure the answer did not lie with the shiny figure who had started clanging against the tower's doors. But, she thought, maybe he could help.