

get me another forty rock,
tell, I'm pissed, but the door
. I can hear it through the
s, through Mokie screaming
ass!" and Henry Rollins
hit wild through my speak-
e me alone!" I shout, but the
oes on till I just yank off my
s and shut the world down,
orld off. I open my door,
m going to rip Mama a new
t it's the cops. You can't
cut off a man's head with a
y tell me, and next thing I
esisting arrest. They get me
e station and book me, and
embarrassing enough, a few
I stand before a judge and
ur honor, I did throw
Bill's door."

ne a hundred and twenty
mmunity service to do, and
sed off as all getup. To
Bill and I used to be friends,
pute. Come to think of it,
ends in the world are Mama
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t know, but somebody's got
r the boxwoods. If I don't
ly will.

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Stephen Graham Jones

It's my sister's first
day with the unit,
only nobody knows
she's my sister. The
ohm sled slams us
downtown to the
scene.

"Put your case on," I tell her,
and she shrugs into it.

It's a kidnapping-suicide.
We're just there for the suicide
part.

Daniels and Genny Beau
lead the S8 out of the sled to the
converted outhouse. There's
blood seeping out from under
the door and it's thin with toilet
water.

One of the mounties left
over from negotiations scratches
a siette alight, studies the S8,
and exhales twin lungfuls of sil-
ver flakes our direction. "Didn't
think we'd be needing you," he
says.

"... ghou! squad," his friend
snickers, already looking away, pretend-
ing we don't exist. But we do.

"Just here to clean up after you,
gentlemen," I say, and step inside, Vee
one step behind me like always. If our
hair were just cut the same we could be
twelve years old again, our mother
checking us every night for the scrapes
or cuts she'll need to mimic on the
other one, so she can shuffle us when
Census comes knocking to check our
headcount registry against the creds
she's been issued. Everybody does it,
though — sneaks another kid in. It's
the same with cats or spores or any-
thing.

In the outhouse there's two dead.
The first is the kidnapped six-year-old,
lying with his head alongside the shat-
tered bowl of the toilet, his throat smil-
ing up at us. The second is the man in
the next stall with the knife.

Daniels lets the S8's leash slip his
hand. It was all ornament anyway.
When the S8's near this much death,
you can't stop it. It's *programmed* not to
be stopped. And anyway, there's just
four of us, and it's got eight legs. It
extends one to the stalls, scratches the
paint for a taste of the alloy, and intro-
duces some compound that turns it all
to ash, an instant shadow of itself,

limned in silver — the frame, made of different stuff — then sifting to the floor, the nuts and bolts hanging behind for an impossible second before raining down around the man and the boy.

Both the man's wrists are cut longwise, and then he fell on the blade.

Daniels laughs. "Amateur," he says.

The S8 bathes the man and the boy in its pale yellow light, and when the Natural stripes show up on the boy's chin Genny Beau laughs through his nose, looks away, to wherever the parents are.

"They won't be saying that in two weeks," he says. "Be begging us to bring his ass back."

"He's a Natural," Daniels says back. "Natural's natural, none of our business, got it?"

It's their usual routine.

I step out of the way to let the S8 navigate to the man, the perp, but then my sister bends over him before it can get there and I have to latch onto the neck of her case, haul her back, shaking my head no, not yet. Except I'm pretty sure I'm screaming. The S8 still has to check for tickers, I tell her. They're from the manual she was supposed to have read last night: capsules you swallow which respond to motion, turn your torso to ribbons the instant you're moved. The latest thing in the homicidal suicide's catalogue. Thus the cases we have to strap into before each call.

This one's clean, though. He just needs a liver bag, some blood, a static boost.

It's Daniels' turn to be the cooler, so he submits to the S8, and the S8 opens him in a line between his armpit and his hip — its favorite entry point

— then peels his chest back to the sternum, folds the outer two layers of his liver out.

"It's okay," I tell Vee, holding her back then pushing her away too, because I can't be her brother in public. And it's not like Daniels won't get a better liver at the Tank tonight anyway, or that the one he had was really even his. But still, I'm glad the perp doesn't need anything else.

The S8 cooks a few pints of Daniels' blood to O-neg, cuts it with annies and seds, then feeds it into the perp's arm. Vee's cradling the dead kid's head in her lap by now, stroking his hair over the fingerwide fracture in his skull. I really don't know if she has what it takes for this.

"Why were you screaming like that?" she asks.

Outside, the mounties power up their straddles, tear off into the haze. The ash that was the door is a grey skein on the water gathering around my standard-issue boots.

"I just was," I say. Maybe I don't have what it takes anymore either.

The lids of the perp's eyes roll back into his head and he looks up into the maw of the S8. After forty-two minutes all the way under. He shakes his head no, no, holds his wrists out for us to look, *see* that he killed himself, that he's *dead*, please, but then Genny Beau's standing over him, reading him his rights: that, since he's officially dead, he doesn't have any. That people like him don't get to take the easy way out anymore. Then Genny Beau laughs, steps closer, and trails a clean line of spit onto the perp's chest, saying death's too *good* for him (Genny's daughter, dead in a mallbomb), and I have to hold

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Genny Beau back. The stitches in the
perp's side haven't even cauterized yet.
And the sed, in his spine: he won't
remember any of this. This is the thing
I'm screaming now: that this doesn't
matter, the S8 isn't recording, and the
perp won't remember. Let's just go, go,
before the cameras swoop in.

But then over Genny Beau's shoul-
der I see Vee, standing from the tiles
using just her legs, her back straight
like she's following her head — a
Mesopotamian goddess standing from
her mosaic, intoning what you see
painted on all the walls these days and
splashed across the news: that there's
life and there's death, yes, but then too,
somewhere in the middle, there's us,
the Blue Unit, the Ghoul Squad.

The perp shouldn't have killed that
kid is the thing. He should never have
killed that kid.



The Outhouse Perp takes his life after
death just like the manual says: he kills
himself eight times in the next six days,
with the tools we leave in his cell —
ropes, belts, razors, pills, coldshots. A
mirror we pretend not to know he's
going to shatter, swallow. An oldstyle
projectile pistol Daniels finds in some
closet in the basement, with five rounds
still in it. Each time the S8 massages
him back to life though, or this afterlife
anyway: the harsh lights of the Tank,
me standing there making Vee watch,
learn. Or, me just watching her.

"So you're after the new stuff,
yeah?" Genny Beau says to me, where
Vee can't hear.

I look at him and don't answer.

On the seventh day the Outhouse

Perp settles into the third stage, false
acceptance. His face goes slack and his
pupils contract with pleasure.

"He thinks he's seeing the big pic-
ture," I tell Vee.

"Look at his teeth," she says back.
They're set.

I step closer to his cell to catch
him from another angle and he smiles,
tracking seconds behind me.

"Are you real?" he asks.

I shrug: maybe, maybe not.

False acceptance means he's inter-
preting the Tank as death. I'm just
another steward of hell to him, the S8 a
shiny demon with eight limbs and a
face full of eyes.

Vee stands behind me like an
angel.

At the end of the hall, Daniels is
still holding his side, pounding his
phantom liver with real malt.

"Let's do it already," he says with
not so many words, and I look up to
the lens — Genny Beau — and Genny
Beau nods it twice from obs and the
Outhouse Perp's door clicks open on
cue, an invitation.

"Okay then," I say.

The fourth stage is despair — us
leading the inmate down to C-block
and making it feel routine, only we
parade him real slow by the cell of The
Man Who Shot the President then just
wait for his triceps to clench under our
hands as it washes over him all at once,
that he's never going to die.

Genny Beau records this moment
with the fisheye we keep locked on
C14.

The Man Who Shot the President
is four-hundred and twenty-two years
old.

Minutes after we've passed, Vee's

still there, locked onto the marbled eyes, the rangy white hair, the teeth. Over the centuries The Man Who Shot the President's veins have all risen to the surface, become spidery blue ropes just under his parchment skin. Like a map you don't want to follow, even for a moment.

"Can he even remember what he did anymore?" Vee asks me at dinner that night, and I look from her to her husband Deaner with his chrome fingernails then back to her again. Her hair sheens. It's brilliant, silky.

"You learn not to look at him," I say, forking in a tasteless bite.

This is the night they light the moon. We ease outside to watch. Deaner is a wirehead, but that doesn't keep him from appreciating the irony of human achievement — pumping enough oxygen into the moon's new atmosphere that it's as poison as it was back when. Now they're having to burn some off. It's beautiful; the skin of Vee's upturned face tightens from the heat, locking her face into a smile, and I tell her she looks like Mom.

Deaner rotates his left eye my way — a wirehead trick I'll never get used to — then takes her hand in his.

"Thanks," she says, "I guess," but doesn't take my hand.

Our mother died in her third accelerated pregnancy — nine months cut down to three. She wasn't supposed to show even until the last two weeks. But she did. And because she couldn't call a doctor without trading us in to Census, we had to watch her swell in bed, then wither back down. I think it's why I joined the unit.

"I wonder what they started it with," I say — the moon.

Vee turns to me. "Why?" she asks.

"A siette," I say back, then picture some guy in lunar orbit taking one last pull off his siette then flicking it down to the artificial shell of O2, a plume of blue flame rising back up to engulf him.

I haven't smoked in four years now.

"You're still screaming, aren't you?"

Vee says, looking through all my defenses and right to me, in some corner with my fists balled at the side of my head.

"Don't worry about it," I tell her, and, backing away to the house, the door, she and Deaner seem to be holding onto each other not because of me, but something else. Like they'd be holding hands even if I weren't here. Like one of them might blow away if they let go.

Her original name was Eve, but some back alley nurse screwed the letters up on her birth certificate. At least she got one.

Deaner's still watching me with his iguanid eye but I plunder their ice box anyway then slam around town in the ohm for fourteen straight hours, jacked up on malt. The S8 is folded in the trunk. I don't wear my shoulder harness. When Daniels calls on the headset, too, it's not for another suicide like I'm dreading since *I'm* the cooler now, the one who's liver or whatever'll get pulled next time, but to beg me for some creds, for him and his girlfriend. He's drunk again, wanting to be a father, will even settle for a clone pass, he says, just to watch himself grow up all over, do it right this time.

"They're not giving any out this year," I say. "You know that."

A mountie flashes miles overhead,

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it smoked in four years now. "I'm still screaming, aren't you?" "Looking through all my fingers and right to me, in some corner my fists balled at the side of

worry about it," I tell her, "I'm going away to the house, the old Deaner seem to be holding each other not because of me, but because of something else. Like they'd be afraid of me even if I weren't here. I'm afraid they might blow away if

my original name was Eve, but the alley nurse screwed the letter on my birth certificate. At least

she's still watching me with his eyes but I plunder their ice box and slam around town in the streets for thirteen straight hours, jacked up. The S8 is folded in the car and I don't wear my shoulder harness. Daniels calls on the head of the house not for another suicide like me, but because I'm the cooler now, and I'm not on the liver or whatever'll get me out of time, but to beg me for help. I'm not for him and his girlfriend. I'm not for again, wanting to be a clone, but to even settle for a clone pass, but to watch himself grow up and it's right this time. I'm not giving any out this time. "You know that." The mountie flashes miles overhead,

zeroing in on the thermal blip I must be, nestled in the lee of this tall tall building.

"Yeah, well..." Daniels trails off, "...I just thought that —" but then he's gone, replaced by the mountie's voice in the bud.

Thought what?

It turns out this isn't just a tall building either, but a chute, its other end deep in the ionosphere. Which means I'm in international territory. And the mountie doesn't care who I am.

"Leo?" I whisper, stabbing at a name, a trooper I maybe knew in another life, but the mountie just repeats himself, so I slam the ohm away into the darker recesses of the city, aware of each of my major organs in a way the manual says is natural. But it doesn't feel natural.



The next day I take Genny Beau's shift and then do the one thing you're never supposed to do in the Tank: listen to an inmate's story of what he saw on the other side, before the S8 yanked him back. It's the Outhouse Perp. It's a trade, though: I have to tell him about The Man Who Shot the President first, how he's the only one so far to punch through the fourth stage and into the fifth.

"That's Mayan," the Outhouse Perp says. "Fifth world and all, I mean."

"This isn't the Yucatan," I tell him.

He looks at me and grins. "In Hinduism," he goes on, "maya means that all this" — his cell, the Tank, our world — "is illusion. That we just have

to see through."

"That's the third stage," I tell him, "remember?"

He shrugs, tells me that the fifth world is the final world anyway, before it all starts over again. For the Yucatan and the rest of us. I tell him the moon is on fire. He asks me what this fifth stage is *here*, in this particular hell. I look down at the floor between my feet.

"God," I say. "We think he thinks he's God, the way he just sits there."

The Outhouse Perp waits for the punchline I don't have, then lowers his voice and asks me if I'm saying it so quiet because I think The Man Who Shot the President might hear. I don't answer. I don't know what this Outhouse Perp was before he died.

"He really did it, though?" he asks, leaning forward. "The *president*?"

"Didn't you," I say, "that kid?"

He smiles wide and nostalgic: that was lifetimes ago for him. "I just remember reading somewhere that the shooter had, like ..." he says, fumbling, "what do they call it? Too many fingers?"

I stare at him. This was four-hundred and twenty-two years ago. I've never looked at The Man Who Shot the President's hands. All the malts I slammed last night are pounding behind my eyes.

"You weren't the longest," I tell him. "We had one guy dead for eight-hundred hours."

"What did he see?"

"We're not really supposed to ask," I tell him.

This Outhouse Perp runs his tongue along his inner lip and does something yielding and aristocratic

with his hand, as if he's humoring me here.

"It wasn't a tunnel," he says, "but it wasn't just synaptic decay either."

"Okay."

"You sure you want to know?" he asks, and when I neither nod nor don't nod he tells me: it was wet, wherever he went. And warm. And everything sounded thrashed. He tried to open his eyes but couldn't, or did but still couldn't see, and his fingers — that was why he was thinking about fingers already, the handbones in a whale-flipper mitten — they didn't work either, and he started to panic but then he saw in a different way: the moon was burning. The way he was seeing it though, the flames were silver and cold, and he could make out the exhaust plume, even, iridescent, trailing into the earth's magnetic wake.

This is why the manual tells us never to talk to inmates about what they say they saw: because they make it up from whatever you tell them. Because they tell you what you want to hear.

I'm nothing like interested anymore.

"So you were in a womb," I say, pointing my words right at him, "very...*Hindi*, right?"

We're still sitting across from each other.

He shrugs, doesn't look away. "It doesn't do me any good to believe in reincarnation," he says. "I'm not lying, Seth."

So he knows my name.

"What happened when we pulled you back, then?" I ask.

He pauses long enough for it to flicker across his face: miscarriage, still-

birth, abortion, suspension. The next dead in line stepping in to replace him. Part of him staying there.

I laugh through my nose, stand.

"Like a child-killer would get to come back as a child anyway," I say, close to his cell.

"You're assuming a just universe," he says, leaning back, churching his fingers under his chin. "And anyway, we've all got to start somewhere, don't we?"

After I've locked the door I lean in again, whisper to him hard that there *aren't* any children this year, okay?

He kills himself two hours later to see (fragments of his skull on the corner of the steel sink we always leave them), and I'm there when the S8 pulls him back, and he rolls his head away from me to stare at the wall. Daniels is there too, probably just to see his liver again. His shift hasn't started yet.

"Your sister's watching that tape with Genny Boy," he says.

I look down the hall to obs and it registers too late for me to make up for it: my sister.

When I turn back to Daniels he's smiling, fingering the yellow ridge of skin down his side. It's like a callous, like he's been cracked open again and again. He had to have found out about Vee by running the S8's positional logs — where the sled was parked last night for dinner: at a married woman's house I'm supposed to only know through the unit. And we still look the same.

"Is she liking it?" I ask him back, all I can muster.

He pulls one side of his mouth up in something like a smile, but not.

"No," he says, and then leans down the hall like I should follow, and,

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instead of touring all the way around A
and D, we cut through the vats — the
kidneys and the hearts and the spleens,
the current in the water their pulse —
and I remember this is where I used to
smoke when I smoked, and without
thinking my hand falls to its old pat-
tern, touching the lid of each vat as I
pass. It's like walking through a ceme-
tery, only nobody's dead. Ever.



We have to tranq Vee back down from
watching Genny Beau's tape. It's still
trembling on-screen, waiting to loop
through itself again. Vee collapses
under the seds, goes limp enough that
the S8 skitters over on the ceiling,
rotating its head, dripping its legs down
off the ceiling around her.

"But —" I say, stepping forward,
only Daniels already has my shirt, is
studying the S8.

"...she's not dead," he completes
for me, talking loud and clear for the
S8.

The S8's smelling something,
though.

But still. I call Vee's name, not sure
what the S8 would do if I tried to
touch her, and then see it when her lids
first crack open: that she thinks the S8
is bringing her back.

"What'd I do?" she asks, pulling
her arms in.

The S8 rises, still tasting the air,
and backs away.

"Nothing," I tell her.

It's a lie, though.

What she did was walk by The
Man Who Shot the President's cell
yesterday with the Outhouse Perp. Like
we've all done dozens of times with

dozens of stage threes. Only it looks
different on the recording Genny Beau
played for her. And everybody knows
she's my sister now. More than just a
new recruit, anyway. It's the way I held
her while she was balled up on the
floor. They had to pull me off Genny
Beau for even having showed it to her.
His lip is still bleeding. He wipes it and
looks at me holding Vee's head in my
lap.

"Right on schedule," he says, look-
ing from the blood on his forearm to
me.

Daniels smiles, nods, getting it:
that these are my last three months
with the unit this cycle. Five years,
eight hearts, and I don't know how
many synthetic pancreases.

I smooth Vee's hair out of her face,
look at all of them in turn.

"I'm not losing it," I say.

And it isn't about me anyway, but
the recording: on it The Man Who
Shot the President is a god. First
Daniels limps past the lens — his steps
long and plunging when he reaches the
edge of the fisheye — then the
Outhouse Perp, flanked by Vee on the
right, me on the left. The Man Who
Shot the President is stone, above all
this. But then Vee looks back at him,
like she's heard something, and he rais-
es his foggy eyes for the first time in
what has to be decades, and there in
the hall we couldn't see what was get-
ting laid down on Genny Beau's
recording: blue tendrils snaking out
from The Man Who Shot the
President, feeling across his cell for
Vee.

I call Deaner to come get her.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, guiding her
down into the seat beside him.

He just stares at me, his monofilament eyelashes pulling a thousand different signals from the air at once, and says to me *Vee?* I nod — *Vee* — and then it registers with him, and he translates her name into whatever binarial string she's been allocated in his head. I stare at him, suddenly can't remember how long they've been married. Above us the moon in the daytime sky is a pale flaming thing, lambent in the sunlight. There are worse things than dying.

Deaner fakes a smile, pulls away.

I stand there on the curb for too long.

After our blue shift — Genny Beau and Daniels both gone — I lounge around, thumb through the Outhouse Perp's files. Because I need to understand *something*. Like what can make you cut a six-year-old's throat in a men's toilet on an otherwise beautiful day. He was just a historian, though. In another lifetime. A historian.

I tell him about Genny Beau's recording, the tendrils.

"Let me talk to him," he says, almost salivating.

I look down the hall to C-block, cell 14.

"Why'd you do it?" I say.

He widens his eyes some, still half-distracted. "He was going to tell," he says, looking directly at me then far away — flinging me there with his eyes then shrugging casually as if, after that, it was all out of his hands. "I mean," he says, "I had the knife right there, y'know?"

I shake my head no, I don't know.

He smiles at this, though; at *me*.

We're never supposed to talk to an inmate about other inmates; about our

sisters; about ourselves. It goes without saying. But they're not supposed to have blue tendrils of light like that, either.

I tell him yes, he can talk to him, to The Man Who Shot the President.

Maybe I am losing it.



The next morning the edge of the city is underwater. I watch the news and smile with wonder because it has to have something to do with the tide — the moon's pull stronger for being on fire, or the ocean just reaching for the flame like a child. It turns out to be more of the banal, though: this new heat on the polar reserves.

I hold a malt in my hand for long minutes before draining it.

Last night I dreamed a zipper up and down my side. It was chrome.

On the different, unflooded way to the Tank there's a small *S8* printed on a brick wall, done so that the *S* really is an incomplete *8*, the *8* just a healed *S*. The name itself is a before and after job, from left to right. A closed circuit. I hammer the ohm on the straight-aways.

Three months. I was trying so hard not to think about it.

A mountie drops into my rearview but not into my earbud. I tap it to be sure but he's not there, and then he's not in the rear viewscreen anymore either. I sag off the throttle, lean forward for the sky above. It's empty; he's gone.

I close my eyes, try to make sense of this morning, this day, this week, the disappearing mountie, and then a voice worms its way into my basal ganglia: *I*

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him yes, he can talk to him,
an Who Shot the President.
æ I am losing it.



morning the edge of the city
ater. I watch the news and
wonder because it has to
something to do with the tide —
s pull stronger for being on
æ ocean just reaching for the
a child. It turns out to be
æ banal, though: this new
æ polar reserves.

l a malt in my hand for long
efore draining it.
night I dreamed a zipper up
my side. It was chrome.
æ different, unflooded way to
there's a small *S8* printed on a
, done so that the *S* really is
lete *8*, the *8* just a healed *S*.
: itself is a before and after
left to right. A closed circuit.
the ohm on the straight-

: months. I was trying so hard
æk about it.

untie drops into my rearview
to my earbud. I tap it to be
e's not there, and then he's
rear viewscreen anymore
g off the throttle, lean for-
he sky above. It's empty; he's

æ my eyes, try to make sense
rning, this day, this week, the
ng mountie, and then a voice
way into my basal ganglia: *I*

told him to build an ark. The nearness
draws my shoulders up like when your
father whispers into your neck, and —
like it matters anymore — the ohm
eases over into the commercial-free
silence of the pay lane, the token
counter on the console rolling hard,
and for a bad instant I see a blue arc of
consciousness snaking out from C-14
to touch me here in the 22K block of
Alameda. I fetal up in the seat to pre-
pare for impact with the median wall
but then the car swerves back into my
lane, the yoke moving without me, and
the voice comes again: *shit shit shit.*

It's not God, it's Deaner.

Anybody that loud and unfiltered
— that *close* — has to be a wirehead.

"Give it back," I say, and the yoke
relaxes into my hand.

"Just wanted to let you know you're
on the news," he says, then flicks it up
for me on the console, rolling past all
the floods to the segment of us — Blue
Unit — walking into the Outhouse
from days ago, the day of the kidnap-
ping-suicide. It's already marked with
black tape. Four of us walk in then five
walk out, one just risen, dead on his
feet. It's all from the point of view of
that first mountie, too, meaning he was
wearing a cap. Deaner laughs into my
ear.

"So what?" I ask.

He's still mad about Vee.

"You can't see it?" he asks back.

I shake my head, know it's regis-
tering with him: that his eyes aren't so
human anymore. That I'm blind com-
pared to him.

I tell him I'm just a mammal here,
Dean.

He laughs back in his throat some-
where, tells me to thank him for the

mountie, and to swing by, he'll show
me what he's talking about.

"Oh, too —" he starts to say.

"Vee?" I interrupt.

"Yeah. No. I checked her out, I
mean," he says, "or, well, you know."

I do: he tapped into her, acted as a
bridge for a real doctor.

"We did that already," I tell him.

"Just wanted to be sure," he says
back.

Yeah.

This time when he tries to sign
off, I keep him there, ask him what the
word is for being born with too many
fingers.

"Polydactyly," he says — recites —
and then I'm walking through the outer
doors of the Tank with those five sylla-
bles in my head, in my hands, in my
fingers. I watch them all the way down
the hall to obs, until Daniels says, "*Ten*
already, Donor Boy," then shoulders me
back against the wall in his version of
play.

Vee's already there, on her first
round of obs duty.

I tell her today I'm invisible, and
she looks up at me with the station
goggles and every lens down every hall
mimes her, peering up at the ceiling.

"It was just a glitch," she says —
the recording of her and The Man
Who Shot the President. "Deaner tell
you?"

All her organs are still virgin. She
has her hair tied up in a topknot, out of
the way of the headset.

"Do you know what *S8* means?" I
ask her.

She's looking back down now.

"Essate," she recites, "plural cog-
nate of the verb essay, to *try*." She
flashes her eyes up at me then. "I read

the book, Seth," she says. "You don't have to test me."

I can't look away from her hair, though. It didn't used to be that healthy. Like liquid copper.

"You've been drinking," she says.

In the hall I'm invisible like I told her, ghosting past the cells of all these permanent inmates and the sarcastic pairs of lines they've scratched in their chins. Like they can ever die. Daniels says that during his first tour one of the Old Ones got an antique flute somehow, and he still hears it at night when he doesn't want to. It wasn't music was the thing, not quite, and when they took the flute away the inmate still made the sound with his mouth, until they had to put him in solitary, the one without a door, decorated just with a calendar. We've still got the calendar down in obs. It's set to skip days at a time, then linger on one for weeks. It even goes backwards. Daniels thinks that's what happened to the Piper: the calendar went too far back once, to before he died the first time, and the Piper just stayed there.

They brought his body back, but that was all.

Three months, I tell myself. Five years. Vee.

I look up to the lens and wonder if she's looking at me, through me, and then I'm there, rounding the corner of A-block.

"Ready for transf —" I say, turning into the Outhouse Perp's cell, but he's dead.

Genny Beau is sitting on the sink watching him be dead. It's happened before. He's got the Outhouse Perp's sensor patch dampened.

"Transfer?" he says to me, a false

lilt to his voice.

His eyes are still dull from killing.

"That malljob wasn't his," I tell him. "He didn't do it, Gen. Couldn't have."

Genny Beau shrugs. To him, they all did it. No matter how many times he gets wiped, that always remains: his daughter. That the bomb had been a calcium number, the kind that waltzed through security by not being an explosive device until activated, until using the bones of everyone in the area as base for an accelerant. Everyone in, say, the food-court. Her name was Mina.

I peel the Outhouse Perp's patch back and stick it higher, resetting it, and Genny Beau lets me because he wants him to live forever; he *believes*. You have to.

We make a half-assed attempt to stage it as a suicide, but there's no way the Outhouse Perp could have done that kind of damage to himself. It takes the S8 two hours to bring him back, layering engrams into the thin grey folds of his brain, memories not of what Genny Beau did, but what Genny Beau *could* have done: just walked on by.

The Outhouse Perp tries to sit up, but rigor's set in.

I offer to help him walk it off.

Genny Beau looks at me. His hands are shackled behind him, two drones there to lead him out. "No hard feelings," he says to the Outhouse Perp, but the Outhouse Perp is oblivious, staring down the hall to C-block, the idea of cell 14. Then Genny Beau looks to me, at whatever I was doing here before my shift started, but he finally just shakes his head, shoulders away. I let myself breathe at last.

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breathe at last.

"They're going to wipe him,"
Daniels says. "For his own good, I
mean."

I nod. It's only Genny Beau's third
year this tour, so it'll be two years
ahead of schedule for him, but he needs
it: to forget all this, start over. Maybe
the S8'll even erase Mina this time. It'd
be better that way, to forget.

"I need to talk to him," the
Outhouse Perp says when we're alone
in the hall, then whispers the rest:
"God."

All his weight is on my upper arm.
His jaws are still locked. He doesn't
know it, but by morning all his hair
will have fallen out, because each of his
follicles clamped shut with death, are
open too wide now to hold the shafts
in anymore.

"Just walk," I tell him. "Just walk."
We do.



That night I show up at Vee's way after
the lights have gone down. Deaner
opens the door before I even touch it.
The ohm is still smoking behind me.

"What'd you want to know about
polydactyly for?" he asks, holding my
hands in his, counting in an autistic
glance. I take my hands back. The
water's up to some of the residential
conapts already. From his porch we can
hear it lapping, see the ball of flame the
moon is reflected in its surface.

"That dead presidentm" I answer,
and follow Deaner in.

"Which one?" he asks, subversive as
ever.

"Four hundred and twenty-two
years ago," I tell him, and he says back
that they're not indexed together,

Birdley and any form of polydactyly,
but — he shudders against the wall,
sacrificing some motor functions to
burn through the data, stay in the con-
versation instead of above it — yes, yes,
there *is* an account of the shooter hav-
ing an extra finger or two, but they
were grafted on, not congenital.

"So he could reach the trigger bet-
ter, probably," Vee jokes.

She's standing suddenly in the next
doorway, her hair spilling down almost
to her waist.

"Hey," I say.

"They did it," she says. "Genny."

Deaner's lips are pursed. In
mourning, maybe: Genny Beau's gone.

"Part of the job," I tell Vee.

"Part of the *cycle*," she corrects. "It's
not supposed to be punishment, Seth."

"It doesn't hurt," I tell her. "You
don't even —"

"— remember," she completes.

"I remember you," I tell her. "Just
not them...that."

"You can't wait, can you?" she says.

To forget: no. I tell her I don't
need that dead six-year-old lying
around in the men's bathroom in my
head. She asks me what our mother's
name was. I open my mouth to tell her
but then can just get the shape of the
word, not the sound.

I look to Deaner but he's at the
console.

When I look back to Vee, she's
gone.

"Lidia," Deaner says, reading from
some census roll or birth certificate
scrolling down the backside of his eyes.

Lidia. I say it in my head and sit
down by Deaner for whatever he's got
ready.

"He tried to shoot himself,

y'know," Deaner says, doing something complicated with the console.

I look over to him.

"The Man Who Shot the President," he says, cocking his index finger to his temple, a casual gesture.

"Oh," I say. That. Yes. But the crowd collapsed on him before he could. Common knowledge. Our charter case; the S8 is just the crowd, now. All those legs.

"He never sleeps, either," I say.

Deaner raises his eyebrows. "In addition to not ever dying, you mean?"

"In addition to not ever dying," I say back. God.

What Deaner has for me is the news segment from yesterday morning: four people in, five out.

"Still not seeing it?" he asks, looking from the screen to me.

I shake my head no, say it again, to myself — *Lidia* — then Deaner, moving slow so I can keep up, unrolls a tiny square of miniboard down on the table. It's maybe as big as his fingernail, and dense with nanocircuitry: a blackmarket amp, never dropped. Probably five years old by now. I stand to leave, because you're not even supposed to be in the room with these. Deaner smiles.

"It's safe," he says. "I've kept it on ice."

"Just *tell* me," I tell him, but he's shaking his head no — the pusher — saying I have to *see*.

"I'm not a junkie," I tell him.

"Neither am I," he says, and touches the tiny square. It rolls up into a capsule. Now it has to be either dropped or tossed. Either way it burns. I set my teeth.

"I'll just make it a two-minute job," Deaner says. "No residuals."

He taps the amp open, programming. I tell him I can't swallow it, *that*, a chip, but delivery isn't a problem: he reconfigures it to a patch.

I tell him we have blood tests at the Tank every other week, and he tells me this is neural.

I tell him I don't have my genetech profile with me, and he says we can use Vee's.

I tell him I don't want to do this, and he tells me I do.

"You won't remember anyway, right?" he says. "For all you know, last cycle you dropped every night."

I shake my head no to this, that I know myself better than that.

Deaner shrugs.

"*What?*" I say.

"Nothing, man," he tells me.

When he doesn't look away from me I pull my lips back, extend the fishbelly part of my forearm, daring him.

"Don't," Vee says, suddenly in the doorway again, but it's too late: the patch is digging into my skin, rerouting capillaries to it, and in the peripheral part of the room Deaner's holding one hand up, counting down from three, drawing his silvertipped fingers down into his fist, and when he gets down to *one* the room changes tint, rushes past like I'm diving into it. It's cold blue, now. And sharp. How Deaner always sees it.

I try to say something but the words slur together either in my mouth or in my ear, and Deaner just directs my head back to the console, the screen.

It's looped back to the five of us walking out of the outhouse, only it's different now: there's blue tendrils there.

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"It's nothing," Deaner's saying
from his end of whatever tunnel he's in,
"just your medical unit, that S8, exactly
the kind of decay you'd expect from ion
batteries juiced like that, just in a dif-
ferent spectrum," but I'm not listening
anymore, just looking. Outside.

One thing the Outhouse Perp
pointed out to me while we were walk-
ing off his rigor was the further irony
of human achievement: that all our
technology might be tapping into
something spiritual.

It's the moon through Deaner's
eyes.

I only see it for an instant before
the amp drains from my system, but it's
just like the room: cold, blue, sharp;
beautiful.

"You're crying," Deaner tells me at
the door.

It doesn't stop me from slamming
the ohm out to the edge of the water.
All the dealers are bunched up there,
driven back by the flood. I buy an imi-
tation amp off one of them then shoot
it blind just to be sure, no kicker, and
when the ohm is printed to me and
they can't steal it, the dealers strip off
what they can then just leave me there
staring across the water until Daniels
whispers into my ear that there's anoth-
er hostage situation on the make.

Another outhouse.

I ask him what the Piper sounded
like.

"You lit?" he asks, even quieter.

I look at my index finger and it
extends across my field of vision. Just
past it, someone is standing from the
shallows, walking across the water, her
back impossibly straight, hair dripping.

"Lidia," I say instead of *Mom*, and
then Vee's at the door, leaning in. I feel

myself smile. I tell her I could never
forget her. She tells me Genny Beau
told her about the Outhouse Perp, the
transfer I was planning. I tell her back
that I'm still invisible. She covers her
eyes with her hands. I don't ask her if it
was like this last time, too.



Daniels is shaving when we walk into
obs, running the pad along his jawline.
Genny Beau is in the corner, just blank,
a piece of furniture. Vee looks away
from him, then back. I settle down into
the chair for suicide watch. The only
nice thing about the ride over was that,
instead of the usual ad-chatter you get
in the commercial lane, each one dialed
direct into your profile so that it's hard
not to dial out, buy in, the mounties
were over-riding it with the hostage
signal, feeding us updates about the
decaying negotiations. For a moment,
passing one of the downtown chutes,
we could see them, their straddles
massed in the sky over another out-
house, and I said it — *flies* — and Vee
saw them like that too, then asked what
that made us?

I never should have recruited her.

She stands in front of Genny Beau
and ties her hair back.

Daniels pinches his shaving pad
then arcs it into the trash. It trails a
thin line of chemical smoke up out of
the can, his two-day beard smoldering
away, filling the room with the scent of
burnt hair.

"Thanks," I tell him, trying not to
breathe.

"It's called hygiene," he says, look-
ing at Vee too, then at me. "You should
try it sometime."

He's shaving up here because he never made it home last night either. His skin is sallow, jaundiced. He reeks of malt.

"How's the new liver?" I say.

Vee flares her eyes at me, steps between me and Daniels.

I hold my hands up in apology, in surrender, and spin the chair around like that, use my raised hands to pull the goggles down. Daniels is saying something to me but my head's already in the halls, listening to the inmates' augmented breath, watching them wrap the thermal images of their fingers around the thermal images of the bars and stare into eternity, their pupils white hot. It's like I'm there with them. Some of them even know the lenses well enough that they act like I'm there too, nodding when I come on shift.

I float from cell to cell, block to block, hour to hour, skipping the even side of C altogether — standard operating procedure — and then easing into the Tombs, all the inmates on ice, awaiting harvest. The Piper's there somewhere, has to be. All I see are feet, though, rows and rows and rows of them. They all have five toes.

In low D Daniels is waiting for me.

I key him open, tighten the lens down on his yellow face.

"You didn't check C, did you?" he says.

I shake the lens no, get a slight feedback from the actuator.

He shrugs.

"What already?" I say.

"You haven't done it yet?" he asks.

"What?" I say again.

It's what he was saying when he was here, what I missed: "Three-threec-

two."

I nod the lens, look down at my pad for the numbers I know by touch, and hit them — 3-3-2. The program Daniels had docked opens, and it's what I asked for last night: the Piper. A bad, mono recording of a dead man playing the flute. It scratches the inner walls of my sinuses with something tin, grating and seductive at the same time — not human, or too human maybe — and then my arm jumps, like I'm a marionette.

I hold it down with my other hand, tighten the rest of me into a ball, and then hear it behind me: Genny Beau, rising.

"No," I say, *no*, but he's up out of his chair, dancing slow, his arms and head limp, and I look deep into the goggles instead, see the drain of the Outhouse Perp's sink. It's thick with hair. I reach out to touch it and push a key instead. The music wilts to the floor.

Behind me now, Genny Beau is standing awkwardly, and crying to himself.

I take him in my arms, guide him back down to his chair. His breath is hot on my neck. I say the one thing I can — "Mina" — then cue the goggles into his stats, for his physical response. There isn't one. No skin galvanics, no heart-rate increase, no pupil dilation: this time, Mina's dead.

I see myself walking away from an old food court, my leather satchel ticking behind me, a dead man standing on one leg in the gazebo background, playing the flute. Another thing the Outhouse Perp asked when we were walking off his rigor was how old I was?

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"Thirty-one," I told him, rote.

"What year were you born?" he asked then, like he didn't want to be doing this, and I had to do the math to figure it out, and after that we didn't talk any.

Thirty-one, though.

I pull up some old recordings of my first cycle but then do what I always do: lock it down to one frame, pull close to my face then take my hand off the pad, touch my own cheek. Like that can make us the same person. I look up to the lens in obs and make it wink red back at me, recording. With the goggles on, it'll just be my lower face, my lips pressed together to keep them from trembling.

I pull up the lens on the Outhouse Perp.

He's slick-bald now, waiting.

"Okay," I tell him. Okay.

He's died nine times now. If Daniels walks up on us in the hall, I'll have to kill him again, make it an even ten. But what the hell. I take the goggles with me, so none of this will get recorded, then come back to shake a siette from Genny Beau's pack, for cover, an excuse — like I'm just strolling down to the vats for a smoke after all these years. It feels good in my hand. Better than what I'm doing, anyway. Or about to.

The Outhouse Perp smiles when I sulk around his corner, the teeth on the left side of his mouth dying, grey, and all I can think is rictus grin, rictus grin. I look away from him and the lens above us does too. The Outhouse Perp tracks from me to it and shakes his head with wonder, or disgust, then says I'm hiding my eyes, that he can smell them on me.

"Them?" I say, as quiet as possible, making sure my sleeve's down over the starburst of capillaries the patch welled up.

"Sim pills?" he asks, no lips.

I shake my head no. "Amps," I tell him.

"Got any hemlock?" he asks, the running joke.

We don't laugh.

His real transfer orders are already in the pipe for him to be shifted up to Red, because he knows Genny Beau now, and Genny Beau doesn't know him, and that's unacceptable in the Tank, that an inmate have that kind of power over a guard. It can lead to all kinds of things. Like this.

"Well?" the Outhouse Perp says, running his palm over his smooth head. In the goggles, each of the blood vessels in his iris is a clear ridge. This is the man who killed a child first, then himself, to escape. But we didn't let him.

I lead him down to The Man Who Shot the President.

He's humming the same tune the Piper carried.

"Where'd you hear that?" I ask him.

He thinks, thinks, then says it's a lullaby maybe. Which isn't what I asked. But I don't want to know anymore either.



In the high end of B-block Daniels cuts through the hostage negotiations in my ear to ask if I'm through with my little transfer. I stop at a corner to hear him better, to stall. The Outhouse Perp feels my hand clench around his upper

arm and looks to me, then pulls away, slouching down to C.

I tell Daniels I don't know what he's talking about.

He laughs.

Downtown there's four hostages dead, four in waiting.

"There's something wrong with Genny Boy," he says.

I cue into obs and Daniels rises into the goggles. Genny Beau is sprawled across the suicide watch chair, in the aftershocks of some grand mal episode.

"The S8?" I say.

"He's not *dead*," Daniels says.

The S8 doesn't do maintenance, just salvage.

I look once to the receding form of the Outhouse Perp, the sheet he had wrapped around him dragging the floor. He's a pilgrim. Today President Birdley would have been five-hundred years old. I looked it up. Even his arresting officer: Leonard Rawley. Leonard, Leo. I tell Daniels I'll be right there, and take off at a walk that turns mechanical once the sound of my feet falling gets me an audience. I nod to the inmates as I pass and they reach for me with their white arms, and I walk through lens after lens and finally duck through the vats to obs.

Genny Beau is dying.

Daniels already has him wired into the console, a doctor bridged in. He stares at me like it's taken me years to get here. Like I never should have left my post. And he's right.

"He did this last time, too," Daniels says, looking down at Genny Beau.

"How do you...?" I start to say — *remember* — but then there's only one way he could: the inmates.

"The Piper, right?" I say.

He nods, shrugs. "Like your Outhouse Twerp, yeah?"

"God," I say, weak.

Daniels shakes his head no, says that name's already taken. I chock the goggles up on my forehead in question.

He reaches over with one hand, keys C-14 into the pad, and it comes up — *them*: The Man Who Shot the President, stood up from his chair; the Outhouse Perp, reaching for him; Vee, a step back from the cell but tranced out, her hair moving around her shoulders like she's outside.

I turn for the door but Daniels says I could never make it in time.

I plug the goggles into the console to enhance it, and the blue tendrils resolve, massing out from The Man Who Shot the President to Vee, *for Vee*.

The only sound that comes through is a hiss.

Another hostage dies downtown. Daniels looks to me about it.

"We don't have much time," he says, still holding me there, then steps closer to Genny Beau, looks up at the lens to see if it's red. It's not. "This going to be okay with you?" he says, palming his antique projectile pistol.

I nod in pain: the only way to save Genny Beau is to kill him.

Daniels counts to three, getting the rhythm into the gun, then flips it, comes down hard with the wooden butt, right into Genny Beau's trachea. It opens white and shiny and Genny Beau drowns, his jaw working up and down like an infant's, like a young bird waiting for its mother's vomit to pour down out of the sky. Daniels backs up for the S8, crawling down off the wall.

He says it's the best way.

iper, right?" I say.
ls, shrugs. "Like your
'werp, yeah?"
I say, weak.
shakes his head no, says
already taken. I chock the
on my forehead in question.
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he goggles into the console
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; down off the wall.
; it's the best way.

I finally turn away when the S8 starts draining Genny Beau's lungs, and there on the console is The Man Who Shot the President. It's like he's watching this, us. I back away, reach behind me for Daniels but he's gone, a voice in my ear again.

"You can't make it," I whisper to him; repeat.

"You can't," he says, and then it's all breathing as he snaps from lens to lens, and he's right: I'm too numb to move.

The console flickers for a moment with Genny Beau's static shock, and then he's rolled over, vomiting up the enzymes which had already started digesting him, and the S8's dormant again.

I feel across the floor to Genny Beau, take his head in my lap, his hair in my hand.

"It's alright," I say to him and then on-screen Vee is floating, a nimbus of blue, like she's in an egg, and I scream *No* to her until Genny Beau flinches.

I hum to him. It's the lullaby.

The last thing from C-14 before it all flashes blue, burning out the lens, is The Man Who Shot the President raising a hand — a *five-fingered* hand — to the Outhouse Perp, pointing, then turning the hand over, then Daniels crashing into the scene, filling the Tank with the ancient sound of his pistol.

The Outhouse Perp, the *historian*, was asking The Man Who Shot the President if he knew what day it had been then. He didn't.

The sound of Daniels' pistol washes up B and through the open doors of the vats and then into obs, but Genny Beau never hears it, because I'm doing the one good thing I can: talking into his ear everything I know about Mina,

and making up what I don't, making her beautiful, perfect. Maybe it's like this every time — us trading her off, keeping her alive.

I set him up in the chair before I leave, twin Natural stripes scratched into his skin (*my* fingernails), and make the call alone, slamming the ohm downtown. At the scene I walk through the black tape and over the eight dead hostages to the suicide. He's hanging from the ceiling by a belt. I cut him down into my arms.

"Just one ghoul?" the closest mountie asks, leaning over the bars of his straddle, and I hope he's wearing a cap so he can get us walking back to the ohm, trailing black tape, both of us dead.



In the ohm with the suicide lolling beside me I broadcast for Deaner, and he taps in. I have maybe four minutes before the Tank looms into view. I ask him what it might mean if our Man Who Shot the President has the standard ten fingers.

He hesitates, hesitates, killing other processes, then asks me back why?

Four mounties are trailing me, in case I'm going solo, stealing the body for display or the blackmarket or something. I push the ohm harder.

"*What does it mean?*" I ask Deaner again, clipping a light pole.

He comes back quiet, contained, obvious: "That he isn't the shooter" he says. "Is Vee alright, Seth? Where is she?"

His signal fades and I know he's trying to tap into the Tank. We're a closed system, though: he can't.

"How old am I?" I ask him, unable not to.

"What?" he answers, then replaces it with *thirty-one*, his voice flat the way it gets with data.

"Then how long have you been married to my sister?" I ask him, and he comes back with *five years*, but it's all intoned wrong. Like he's lying, hiding something. I close my eyes, letting the ohm take the easiest path.

"Vee," I say.

Deaner's signal becomes clearer, a vacuum almost, taking in my least breath. I give it to him because I want to see if it'll hurt: The Man Who Shot the President has her. And he isn't really a man anymore, maybe. Deaner doesn't miss a beat. "I need the codes," he says, not even bothering to scramble it away from the mounties, who have to be tapped in by now.

On cue, one of them peels off for Deaner's place.

"*Seth!*" Deaner says, snapping me back to the road, pulling the yoke across three lanes of traffic, and I slide him the seventeen digits, let him use my voice-mod, and he bounces off the ohm's uplink miles ahead of us, to the Tank, and I can tell he's burning so fast his heart's getting arrhythmic, the blood pooling in his lower lids, spilling down from his ear canal. For Vee, I tell myself. Because they are married. At least that's real. All I can make out of him anymore is his muttering, but it's enough: if The Man Who Shot the President isn't The Man Who Shot the President, The Man Who Shot the President must be either dead or misplaced. And Blue Unit doesn't lose people. Not in the Tank.

The death tag flashes through the

console, censored black but then enhanced, and then Deaner's digging deeper, back four hundred years to un-abbed scans of the physical files, through all the deleted matter and bureaucratic clutter to an accident, a mag fire in the Tank in an election year, four inmates charred beyond recognition.

I ramp off a chute and back at the mounties, scattering them, the thin wall of the chute singing behind me, then pull the ohm around so hard the suicide beside me slumps across the yoke. I push him back once, twice, strap him in finally, then Deaner's talking in my ear again: it looks like The Man Who Shot the President might have died in a fire twenty-two years after permanent incarceration. But the public still needed him to serve his sentence, and his sentence was supposed to have been forever.

"They replaced him," I say, waiting for Deaner to confirm, but something's going on at his end. His mainline cuts out and he has to go to back-ups, and it's like he talking to me from another room now. Asking me if Vee's okay, only his voice filters aren't up, and he's calling her a string of numbers — *34988FC943*. Some wirehead pet name.

"I don't know," I say about her, picturing the mountie crashing through his door, finding him unconscious at his console, his eyes rolled back to silver, his higher functions all locked away in the wires. Maybe for good.

I pull the ohm into cargo down by D-block, and while the docking arm is hardwiring us under its wing I count to three, for this thing I'm about to have to do. For Vee. I never should have gotten her into this.

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is.

The last thing that flashes on the
console as I'm stepping out is a name:
Celand Boise, courtesy of Deaner. It has
numbers all mixed in with it, but I lift
the letters, keep them in my mouth as I
push the suicide up D and down to C,
cell 14.

Daniels is there, shot with his own
gun. His blood is everywhere, but that's
how it is with projectile weapons.

"You okay?" I say to Vee, and she
shakes her head no. The whites of her
eyes are pale blue. The snaps at the side
of her regulation shirt are undone, and
through them I see a faint vertical
ridge, a scar I almost remember, just not
quite. I touch her hair just to be touch-
ing it and she shies away like she's
ashamed.

She's kneeling over the Outhouse
Perp — dead, too, maybe for good this
time — but she rises, takes the suicide
from me.

We're not twelve anymore. Not
ever again.

The Man Who Shot the President
is watching all this, fascinated. In his
hand, too thick to pull back through the
bars of his cell, is Daniels' pistol. He
holds it casual, lolling to the side, his
other hand fingering the hole Daniels
shot in his leg. It isn't bleeding.

It was quiet walking up the hall
because none of the lenses were follow-
ing me, because no one's on suicide
watch anymore. Just the husk of Genny
Beau sitting blank in the chair, the gog-
gles useless on his face, his chin drip-
ping two red lines.

The Man Who Shot the President
smiles at me, his face cracking open,
spilling blue light.

Celand Boise.

"You're dead," I tell him, but he

shakes his head no; not quite.

Suddenly Deaner's in my ear, far
away, marooned in the Tank's system.
He's thrashing around, getting burnt by
everything he touches, saying Vee's
string of numbers over and over. Lights
up and down C flicker, alternate; all the
odd-side doors click open, then retract
again. Vee lowers her ear to her shoul-
der, pushing her bud in deeper.

"Dean?" she says.

"Tell him we need the S8," I say.
"Now!"

Her eyes are welling though, her
head shaking no about Deaner, unfil-
tered like this, naked, all his flesh flayed
off by our system. Calling her numbers
instead of letters. She looks around,
shakes her head no then keeps shaking
it, like she's trying to convince herself.

"What?" I say.

She swallows. "He..." she starts,
"349 is his prefix for rentals, Seth. For
me..."

"...who from?" I say, stepping clos-
er, and in answer she looks around
again, at the Tank: here. From here.
Deaner got my sister on loan from
where I work.

"Vee —" I say, ready to shake my
head no, *insist*, but she interrupts me,
holding her ear to her shoulder to hear.
She looks right at me.

The Man Who Shot the President
cocks his head to listen too, but then
the Outhouse Perp's patch sparks — a
programmed response this long after a
flatline — and a glistening red bubble
rises partway from his mouth, collapses
back in.

"What?" I say to Vee.

"Lidia," she says, repeats, talking in
code — *our mother?* — but then Deaner
pushes a familiar sound into my ear

(whisperhush of sand falling) and I remember brushing her hair when she was in bed that last time, sick with baby growing too fast in her. How her hair spilled down onto the floor like strands of fine copper. Like Vee's. It was the vitamins she'd been taking. All the vitamins. I close my eyes, do a painful thing with my eyebrows.

Vee's pregnant. Gestator tabs.

"Oh God," I say, weak.

She looks down to the suicide cradled in her arms — *all* life matters to her now that she's carrying it — and then to the Outhouse Perp, and I understand another thing: that the moon he saw burning like ice was Deaner's — *through* Deaner, or the amps, or something. That he wasn't lying. That he contracted her out of this place to carry his child for him. That she *belongs* here.

Like I do.

The S8 spiders into the room on the ceiling, settles over Daniels and the Outhouse Perp, making one person out of the parts of two. A guard or an inmate, I can't tell yet.

The Man Who Probably *Didn't* Shoot the President laughs, his voice unused for centuries.

My eyes burn with water.

"Celand Boise," I say, calling him out, leaning my head back like I'm having to birth the words from my throat, like they're that big, and Deaner lowers the lights in response, opens them wide again.

The Man Who Didn't Shoot the President angles the pistol over at me, a lazy gesture. His eyes are flat blue, like the layer of water that collects at the top of the vats.

"...Genny?" Vee says, unsure if

she's reading this right, and all the lights in the hall fade except for the pale yellow cone on her: yes, Genny, Genny Beau.

He doesn't know his own name, though.

He doesn't know anything.

Just what I told him, the mall.

I take him there word by word, creating the food court, the department stores, the tracks, then point out Mina to him again, so perfect, going to live forever and have a wonderful life, and we follow her but it's across the keypad in obs, from letter to letter, until enough of CELAND BOISE has been entered that Deaner can pull the rest from his side, start the data pull.

"Mina?" Genny Beau says into all our ears.

Vee answers, just her eyes crying, not her voice: "Daddy?"

Genny Beau breathes in sharp — his Mina, alive again — then feeds her the search results when she asks, because it's her asking: Celand Boise, arrested for pedophilic tendencies as manifested through passive alpha-surveillance. Back when those surveys were still considered valid. I look to the Man Who Didn't Shoot the President, understand his fascination with Vee at last — she has the first child he can have been in contact with for centuries, maybe ever. And he's been conditioned to want it. It was like I brought her to him, an offering.

"No," I say, just as the S8's twin antennae steady above it, listening. In Vee's direction. And then I realize what's been so wrong here, why I've felt so naked with the pistol close: we don't have our cases on.

"Don't move," I tell her, Vee, stand-

g this right, and all the
hall fade except for the pale
on her: yes, Genny, Genny
asn't know his own name,
asn't know anything.
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th the pistol close: we don't
ses on.
move," I tell her, Vee, stand-

ing again, holding my hand out to her,
but then the delay on the ticker runs
out, and the suicide in her arms blooms
long after he was supposed to, half an
hour after he swallowed the seed, and
it's a calcium number: the suicide's fea-
tures all cave in just long enough for me
to say *Vee*, for her to hear me, then they
expand again at the speed of sound, out
to the shape of an egg — the original
shape of the capsule — and then the
inner walls of the egg burst red, form a
membrane *Vee* slumps against, punc-
tures, falls through. She never has a
chance. This was her second call. She's
not even showing yet. Deaner rains
sparks all up and down the hall in grief,
or anger, or helplessness, rage, and all
that's left of him now is her name, her
numbers, and under them another,
smaller number: the child.

I raise my arms for the S8 to open
the zipper down my side, insert *Vee's*
baby into *me*, use me like a seahorse,
but instead it just tests the air then
hunches back over the Outhouse Perp
and Daniels. I beat on it with the side
of my fist and the side of my forearm
but it doesn't even notice.

Behind it, the Outhouse Perp is
gurgling, laughing, and it washes over
me all at once: that the child in *Vee* will
die if he lives, if he gets pulled back
again, *out*.

I reach for him, saying no, no, and
then Celand Boise shoots him in the
face for me.

"Hello hello," he says.

The pistol is on me again. He
hooks the barrel towards himself, as if
I'm supposed to come closer. I shake my
head no. He lowers the pistol on me as
if that's too bad, and shoots just past my
neck. The slug whines down the hall.

My sister is dead. Her child is drowning
inside her, its bones not yet hard
enough to have been a base for the cal-
cium bomb.

In two steps I'm there, to him like
he wanted, but I still don't have the pis-
tol. It's resting on the bridge of my
nose, searing a crescent there. Like the
moon.

I tell him that when the water rises
as high as the Tank, he's going to
drown.

In return he caresses the side of my
face with his dead hand, his palm as
smooth as porcelain, and takes the
sirette I've already forgotten from
behind my ear, studies it, running the
length of it under his nose then putting
it into my front pocket, looking past
me.

"What — ?" I say, then see: he did-
n't shoot the Outhouse Perp for me at
all. He shot *Vee*. Now the S8 has its
eight eyes close to her, the second joint
of its legs a series of peaks high above
its abdomen.

"Sister sister," he says, his voice
sing-song.

I look to him. He smiles, runs two
of his fingers up a bar, says *pop cops, pop*
cops.

That's what we used to call Census,
me and *Vee*. I think. It's what I remem-
ber anyway.

Something inside me falls down,
leaving an empty space.

"How..." I start, "...how do you —
?" but instead of answering, he raises
the index fingers of both hands up the
bar up until they touch, then *V's* them
apart, a delicate film of blue spreading
between them like a web. Another
membrane. And there's images on it, of
two children, ducking through secret

doors from room to room, life to life, century to century.

I shake my head no, no, *it really happened*, it's not just an engram, stencilled in, not a — but then behind me a baby screams and I know it's being birthed from the side of a woman.

Four inmates burned up in that fire.

I'm on my knees.

One thing about trading organs for decades and centuries is that your genetech profiles merge and you start to express the same, start to resemble whoever's heart you have, whoever's spleen.

The S8 leaves the baby — the fetus, almost — on the concrete, bored with it for being not all the way dead. It's in the second trimester, maybe, blue from lack of oxygen.

I lift it from the floor, hold it closer than I should, closer than I would have thought I could. Its eyes are round little mirrors — Deaner's wires not yet grown over with flesh. A breath away from me the tearducts of the Man Who Didn't Shoot the President's eyes are trailing blue vapor.

He nods to me and extends his arms through the bars, elbows locked, pleading — that he *deserves* this — but I shield her from him with my shoulders. He shakes his head no to me, though, *no*, and then his light fades a shade of reluctant blue and feels around the ragged edges of my consciousness, infecting me, and when I look down at the baby all I see are my hands. And through my hands.

I close my eyes, see through the lids too, can't look away.

"Sorry sorry," the Man Who Didn't Shoot the President mumbles, reaching through the bars.

I look up to him and see Him for what he is too, and I give him the child.

"Name her Eve," I say.

The pistol clatters to the ground at my feet. I bend for it mechanically, and when I stand The Man Who Didn't Shoot the President's pulled Eve through the bars somehow, her bones still soft for birth. He's looking at the gun, though. It's pointing at him. He angles his head twelve degrees to the right, for what will be, for him, the ancient sensation of a bullet tearing through his head.

"*How old am I?*" I ask him, thumbing the safety off, the hammer back.

He looks away, behind me, then to me again, then strains his head back suddenly, his neck corded in ecstasy, his teeth grinding against one another. It's Eve, nursing at one of his ancient dugs, her chrome eyes staring. I look away, to the dead lens, telling Genny Beau to stand up, to run, to get out of here. That we're all prisoners.

What I saw through my hands were my bones, the vestigial spur of a sixth finger fused to the metacarpal, to hide it. And the gun I've got palmed, the pistol: I know it, remember its heft, how to point it through a crowd.

That was why it only had five bullets. I'd already shot the sixth into somebody. I laugh a little bit, then not anymore, try to fumble the sigarette up from my pocket but drop it end over end down into the void.

According to the manual, the first stage of the Lazarus Complex is thinking you're immortal. The last is knowing it. I place the pistol against my temple and pull the trigger nearly five hundred years after I meant to.