

*I Should Be Alive*

Josh Sand

Cameraman Riley Hoff turned the van around the same bend of the highway for the second time that morning. The dreamcatcher swayed right. He held his hand out to press the dash cam's suction cup tighter against the glass. Medium Emery Ward-Smith sat in the passenger seat watching the median and grassy roadside. Her presence was barely detectable in the car and Riley often started singing under his breath and driving with one finger hooked on the wheel, jolting back awake when his passenger would come back to life to change or turn down the radio without turning her head.

"Start merging over," she said, staring out her window.

Riley merged and put on his warning lights. He parked the van in the grass and got out and stretched. Cars speeding in the slow lane rocked the van with sharp winds as they rode past. Riley opened the back and started methodically carrying out camera equipment. Emery stood over what they had come for—a small white cross draped in flowers made of sun-bleached fabric. The horizontal bar read in black hand-painted capitals, "MARIA CORTES 1986–2004." Riley pulled apart the legs of a tripod and pushed it down into the grass.

"It's not here," she said.

"What?"

"They put the cross here, but it didn't happen here," she said. "I'm sorry, Riley. I know it's annoying."

"Still want to get something on the cross?"

"No, we can't do it here."

Riley quickly scanned the trees for a sign. A fallen trunk, tire tracks and upturned earth, but it was too long ago. The highway-side had grown over its past. "Okay."



Dr. Wesley stood in the center of the projector's beam, with one hand rubbing his peppery gray beard and the other holding a remote control clicker. The curls of a lion's red mane wrapped around him and shone off his eyes, leaving a silhouette in the middle of the PowerPoint the students were used to. "The name 'Strength.' Notice the incongruity between the act of holding open a lion's jaw, with the serene peace and stillness in the woman's posture and the overall scene." He stared up at the projector lens as if it were a teleprompter. A student's flip phone read 10:03, no alerts, and was shut carefully to not snap loudly. An unrecognized bicycle-rider sat at a table just outside the window alone with a sandwich unaware of the diversion he brought to the students inside. "Everything about it points to a gentleness—the woman's flowing flowery robe, the lion seemingly licking her hand like a dog, the extraneous yellow afternoon sky and rolling landscape in the background. This isn't just a creative interpretation on Smith's hand, this

gentle mood and incongruent posture has been a part of this card since the woodblock days.” The teacher hadn’t explained who Smith was. The attentive honors students who read entire assigned chapters from the textbook (edited and collected by Dr. Wesley) had given up and stared at their pencils and water bottles. “Riley,” Dr. Wesley said without changing tone. “Can you see me after class? Thank you. Now,” click, “moving on we have *l’hermite*.” Riley turned from the biker and his sandwich as soon as his subconscious had processed what had been said, several moments too late to ask for clarification. The teacher looked like his focus never wavered from his class-long speech to the projector. No other students responded to the comment or broke their bored spell with an oooo-you’re-in-troouuble face. Did it happen? Was it really said? The sentence dangled to reality by his lingering confusion in it. He thought about sneaking out of class, going later. But he did hear it. Why would the thought process he was on come in his head otherwise?

The lecture ended just shy of number thirteen, and Riley wandered up towards the desk meekly, expecting Dr. Wesley to ask what he was doing up here. Wesley didn’t look up from a paper he was marking and said instead, “Wait for everyone to clear out, sit down over there.” Riley followed, scared. “You don’t have a class after this, no?”

“No.”

“Ah, good.” The last student left with an armful of slipping binders and textbooks, the door’s slow pneumatic latch leaving the room silent. Wesley leaned back in his chair. “You said on the first day you were interested in going to film school?”

“Uh...” Riley had defended Wesley when others talked about his supposed creeper status. “...yeah.”

“Do you have experience?”

“...shooting stuff?”

“Handling professional-grade film equipment.”

“Yeah, you know, actually my high school had a documentary contest, they had these grants and really decked out and I—wait, why?”

“You have filming experience and you’re unemployed?”

“That’s the cliché, I mean...”

“I have access to equipment, would you be able to use it?” Wesley asked. “It pays, might help you have some work to show for your film career. You’d pass the class naturally. Nothing complicated.”



### *REMEMBERING THE 00’s*

General format: two-man crew “investigating” (in other words, rolling cameras in and around) various WA areas where men, women and children had met sudden grisly deaths. It was pretty freeform from there. I was the straight man and sole cameraman and technician to Dr. [John] Wesley and Emery [Ward-Smith], who would channel and record whatever energies the dead gave. People really liked that setup.

The premise, giving a voice to those who died who “shouldn’t” have. Hokey hokey hokey hokey. I don’t know how much Wesley believed in that, but he had a dedication to things that made questions like that irrelevant. Emery, oh, no question there. I feel nothing but reverence for her. I could never really open up with her. She has that quieting kind of belief that makes you cower back, realize it’s not your place. Made *me* cower back, anyway. One of those people whose personalities aren’t meant to exist in the same rooms and buildings as yours. She probably just remembers me as quiet.

Our network had two other paranormal investigation shows at various slots, and there were more on the others. Each one had its own twist, and ours was that it was incompetent in all the right ways, I guess. All the blame for the qualities people like about *I Should Be Alive* can’t really be laid on anyone, they’re all just things that went wrong and ways we collectively failed in trying to make something like the other shows were doing. Who was responsible? No one alive...it was the ghosts. Yeah. Total incompetence is something that’s rare on TV. There’s cynical trash, sure, but even that succeeds in its cynical cash-in purposes. Forgettable but competently-made mediocrity is the wide landscape of TV, with true quality being the occasional miracle that rises up and makes the network proud, but utter failure—that’s unseen.



The children were all too young to remember their great-grandfather, but they strained so hard to sit still and silently they looked like they were on the verge of tears. They had been lined up on the couch even though Riley’s cameras were not rolling. The house was historic with all the creaks and bizarre architectural minutiae that came with. The parents casually discussed their shared memories of the wife’s grandfather and his work for the church and for the poor. Emery was jittery, looking over a glass cabinet full of ornamental plates and Precious Moments figurines, leaving Riley to get the information out of them. The parents excused themselves to talk in the kitchen for a moment. The kids stared at Riley and Emery nervously. Emery leaned over to Riley and whispered, “I really don’t like it here.”

“Why?” Riley whispered back.

“The show’s called *I Should Be Alive*...”

“Yeah, so?”

“This person shouldn’t be alive, is what I’m saying. Everything is telling me this person is best dead.”

“*What?*”

“There’s something underlying it. I think he was a Gacy type. He disappeared, no one found out what happened. I don’t *want* to find out what happened.”

“It’d make a great episode, then.”

“This family doesn’t need to know what really happened.”

“Emery... what do I tell them then?”

They walked back in the living room with a leather photo album. Emery stood up and quickly asked, “So when would you like us to get back to you? What would be the most convenient way to contact you?”



“Excuse me for a moment,” Dr. Wesley said, getting up. He left Riley alone in the office with its owner, a bald wrinkled man with BERNARD WESLEY inscribed on a plaque on his desk. Riley could not find their resemblance.

“You’re one of his *students*, right?” Bernard asked, smiling meanly.

“Yes. You’re related to him?” Riley asked, nodding his head towards the plaque.

“I’m his father. We’re close enough.”

“I figured there was some reason he was able to do this that he hadn’t told me.”

“Keen eye. There’s no way he’d be getting out of that community college if it weren’t for me. He knows this.” He reached out to adjust a paperweight, and brought his hand back. “You seem like you’ll learn things fast. You’ll be alright. You shouldn’t let him drag you down. This is his project, and this is his chance. Don’t beat yourself up over however it goes.”

“Thanks, sir,” Riley said. Bernard smiled to himself.

Dr. Wesley popped his head in the doorway, his hand covering the mouthpiece of his phone. “They don’t have night vision cameras.”

“Night vision cameras? Why do you need those?”

“... You need night vision cameras.”

“What, for *ghosts*?”

“For lots of things!”

Bernard put a fist on his table and used it to prop himself out of his chair. “That’s a load of balls! Ask them if they have a green filter.”

“That’s not the—“

“Ask them!”

Dr. Wesley frowned and held up the phone. “Do you have any green filters available? ... Okay? Yeah, thanks, one moment.” He glared at his father.

“Told you. Now strap a flashlight to the camera, turn off all the other lights in the place, and presto. Night vision...Jesus...”



Riley was starting to overheat from holding still under his blankets. His bed was under a wide window but their street had no lights and the moon was new and dim. Sleep had no interest in him and every sound was something implausible. No wind rustled the old trees in the yard to mask the sounds of the house.

Stairs, steps on the stairs. One of his sisters going to the bathroom, probably. He gave her a few minutes to settle back in her room and restore the house to stillness. He rolled over. The door to his room was open. He stared through it against his better judgement until he saw figures and faces.

“Riley?”

A spring in his bed squeaked as he bounced straight up. He slapped around the nightstand for the lamp switch.

“Can I sleep in here?” She blinked in the lamplight, holding a matted pink blanket.

“Yeah, I guess.”

She walked in and scooted some books and laundry off a futon. “I like your couch.”

“Why are you up so late? What time is it...”

“I stayed up to watch your show.”

Riley sighed. “Aaayye.”

“It was scary...”

“...It’s not real, you know.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not sure how good of consolation that is.”

“What’s consolation?”

“Like, helping you out.”

“Oh. Con-so-la-tion.”

“Want me to turn off the lamp now?”

“No.”

He rolled back to the window.



*“Life and Death in the 1800’s”, a.k.a. “The Corpse Episode”*

—How did that happen?

Oh, God. [laughs] That’s the classic kind of antics Wesley would take us on. I wonder how Emery feels about that one. I can’t watch that episode. Everything wrong. I don’t know how that was allowed. We didn’t even...It’s funny because it was probably okayed because no one cared, no one would see it, but it ended up becoming the episode that made people care and watch the show. All because that blogger—

—Johntime.

Yeah, Johntime. Channel surfing at the right hour. Or the wrong hour. He had the right reaction. The only sensible reaction.

—Was there any...ill-intent with that episode? People called it, exploitation—

No, no. I mean, the whole show was exploitation. It had great potential to be a platform to give respectful elegies to the dearly departed, but instead we had to run around with EMPs. Even at the show's most inexplicable hours we still wanted to entertain...the thought of having a viewership. The corpse episode in particular had its roots when Dr. Wesley found this old cemetery with graves going back to before Washington got its statehood. It was a reserve location in case we ever had a period when we didn't have anything really juicy, or there were some legal matters with relatives still being cleared out. This was one of those weeks, so we went down there. Somehow we ended up only getting nine minutes of raw footage. Not nine minutes of usable footage, just raw footage. I won't go into the technical frustrations that led to that but basically we were absolutely required to get something in and we didn't have enough. Wesley and I barreled back over to the graveyard and we were talking to the owner about what we needed, and he took us to this mausoleum that had what I called the mascot of the place.

—That was our guy?

That was our guy.

—What was his name?

John Duck. A great name. He was probably cool, like, an interesting fellow, if a little dead-eyed. He's become a bit of a joke to me, it's impossible remembering he was a real person. John Duck lived and breathed and had aspirations. He wanted to be a TV legend. I'm sorry, that's wrong. I shouldn't say that.

—He wanted to terrify thousands.

I hope so. It makes me sleep better. He wanted to terrify Johntime. Well, the guy that owned the graveyard was an interesting person. We ran by him a usual feature on our show, where we set up cameras and audio on the remains of the subject of our episode and run it at high-speed, analyze audio static, that kind of thing. Usually urns, you know. This episode we didn't have a subject, and we needed someone who had no visitors and preferably, no known relationships.

—And that was John Duck.

Correct. The owner took us to his mausoleum. And he toddles on over and opens up ol' Johnny. Wesley did not bat an eye. I don't know what surprised me more, what was happening, or Wesley's unwavering reaction. I was expecting to put a camera on the coffin or something like we had done a couple times before. Oddly it didn't smell that bad, kinda stale musky smell. Wesley pulls out this tarp we use for talking

head segments, kind of like this one back here actually, and starts taping it up on the wall. The owner sort of [slow hand gestures] leans Johnny against the tarp while I was rigging the lighting. [laughs]

—[laughs] What?

It's funny. Sorry. Just that it happened. We roll the camera. I stepped outside for something, come back in, John's slumped over, Wesley has his index knuckle to his lips, staring stony-faced. That's pretty much it, on my end. John was returned, and I got the equipment back in our van. Nothing was really scary. I felt bad for Mr. Duck. If his name was anything else I probably would've been scared. Wolfgang. I remember starting to laugh on the middle of the drive back. Wesley told me to watch the road. It wasn't a response-to-fear laugh, just an accumulated buildup of deadline stress, and how it manifested in us mangling a corpse for a no-budget midnight paranormal documentary. I'm probably exaggerating, I probably chuckled like twice.

—Who was responsible for the infamous narration?

The studio has Whitfield, this British guy on-hand for narration on a few of their different shows. He records for our show as one of the first stages of production on an episode, which is kind of weird, but it would always end up working as an outline and guide for the episode. When he recorded that particular narration we weren't planning on having a subject for the episode—it was just going to be a general history episode about deadly living conditions in lumber mills and some of the worse accidents. So that's what he talked about, nineteenth century life in Seattle and other towns. I think at some point there was an episode planned about the history of the wharf and dockworkers, it was going to be a theme, but after this episode's heroic failure that was out.

Our editors were responsible for most of that episode's special splendor. It might've been possible to make that episode into something tasteful and forgettable, but instead, they...I'm just inferring here. They were probably hotboxing in the editing room. Which isn't too unlikely since one of them was arrested for possession later. Or maybe before. I forget. We didn't prepare ahead enough of time to make those montages of various blurry ways to zoom in and up and down an old church, and didn't have the time to buy any stock of blue-tinted narrow depth-of-field videos of people walking on cobblestone streets in top hats—but we did have the high-speed corpse footage, and we did have Whitfield's narration, so they made lemonade. Horrible, horrible lemonade. So when some random person is channel surfing, they see this show called *I Should Be Alive*, and there's a well-preserved corpse on the screen, and it doesn't cut in 1.2 seconds like most TV shows, no music, no gong scraping sound effects, just this corpse staring forward, like it's the one saying "I should be alive." You wait just a little longer waiting for the point but there is none. Once you realize it's not going to leave, this British voice comes out of nowhere and starts monologuing about Seattle history, completely out of context. Then the voice abruptly ends, but the

corpse is still there. As some people noticed, if you fast forward through the episode if you had TiVo back then or taped it—did people still tape things back then?

—Probably the same people that still do now.

If you fast forward, you can notice that the whole time the corpse is slipping to the side, very subtly. It's not anything you notice watching it in real time, unless you had a fly on the screen for reference or something. For the sake of viewer's heart conditions, the editors were smart enough to cut out the end where John slumps forward. It's a result of the sliding he was doing up to that point, but in the high-speed, it looks like he gives a final lurch to the camera before giving up and hanging there in death and defeat. That's the evidence I point to to prove that, to whatever extent, the editors were actually trying to remove a mistake and not create the most depraved and macabre half-hour of television possible. It could've been much worse. Maybe there'll be a director's cut, a box set, one day, one day...

—Do you miss it?

Oh, sure. There were lots of fun memories. Rigging microphones around the aisles of an estate sale with Dr. Wesley. Emery telling me to set up cameras around this spot on the ground in the middle of the night while she was staring intently into these nearby woods in a different direction. A lot of little things like that will pop up now and then. They're fond memories.



Three of the studio crew came up to Riley's suburban address from the other part of town. They rolled to a stop over the road's thick bumps and cracks made by the vengeful roots of old trees. The brick walkway leading to the house was covered in spots of shade and leaves dense enough to hide the path's edges from the tall grass and the unhindered dandelions. One of the crew stepped up to the "WIPE YOUR PAWS" mat to knock. An older woman answered. A row of young sisters stopped their morning activities and froze staring like deer at the strangers at the doorstep. A dog yapped from a room out of view. The woman began yelling backwards into the house after speeding through introductions, address confirmations, and apologies on the morning hour.

"RILEY! Get DOWN here, my god, you shoulda seen he's been getting all primmed up and ready since five this morning he was banging around, RILEY, yes I let them IN get OVER here I really am sorry, hate to keep you waiting, no, no, you shouldn't have to deal with this kind of thing, all your nice equipment and cameras and your van back there, RILEY! GodDAMN."

"Mom!" Riley yelled from atop the staircase railing.

"You took off your jacket? All that and you're not going to wear the jacket?"

"Mom, I'm not, oh hey, sorry, excuse my m—"



“You said earlier that you were going to—”

“*Got it, Mom.*”



Riley sat in the back of *Remembering the 00's* production van, in awe of the simple equipment left in the back because no one had felt like carrying it out for the extra room.

“Was that your mom’s house? You live in your mom’s house?” the driver asked.

Riley moaned and leaned his head back. “I don’t *live* there. I have an apartment down south...”

“What were you doing there?”

“I came up for the fourth of July.”

“It’s the twelfth.”

“He’s just messing with you,” a man said. Riley noticed the man’s hair was slicked back and his jaw was stubble-free. The face seemed familiar.

“Yeah, I’m just messing with you,” the driver said.

“I’m the host,” the man said, holding out his hand, before pulling it back quickly. “...of what show?” The driver sang the *Jeopardy!* theme.

“Oh...I know this...” Riley said. “*Fear Factor.*”

“Ooooh damn,” the driver said. “This guy.”

“Not the main one though!” Riley said. “But you hosted some of the episodes. Quite a few. Some of the later ones, I think. The TV was always on in my family.”

“I’m impressed,” he said. He held his hand out to shake, and Riley accepted. “Aaron Carmosino.”

“Thanks for this, I mean...it’s crazy that anyone remembers this show. And that it’s going on *your* show.”

“You can only remember the 00’s so late into the third season,” the driver said.

“I remember seeing that episode with all the cats, before I knew about the show. I saw it back in its original broadcast,” Aaron said.

“Hipster,” the driver said. Aaron kicked the back of the driver’s seat. “Ow!”

“You know Ford Skehan? That found footage horror guy?”

“Uh...I’m not sure. Sorry...”

“He directed one of the parts of that anthology movie...I forget the name. He’s a big fan of your show. He said he referenced a lot of episodes from it in his stuff.”

“That’s...what? He referenced *I Should Be Alive?*”

“Yeah, I was reading some forum threads about the show and someone mentioned that he was a fan.”

“...Forum threads?”

“I’m sure you’ve read a few of them. I read some about *Fear Factor*. We use forums to get stuff for this show, sometimes. See what people are nostalgic for.”



“We had to pick up Hoff from his *mom’s* house.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, his mom’s.”

“Wow.”

“He doesn’t live there. He said.”

“Oh, oh ho.”



EMERY            Now he...he died suddenly.

CLARICE        No.

EMERY            It was...prolonged? He was...he was comatose.

CLARICE        No.

EMERY            [paces, looks over belongings]  
Richard, he...it was a car wreck.

RILEY            [off-camera] You okay Emery?

EMERY            I’m fine.

CLARICE        Yes, it was an accident.

EMERY            At this time he had been working to get his non-profit off the ground.

CLARICE        No, that was much earlier. By then he had retired.

EMERY            He was very focused, working towards building something, your husband—

CLARICE        Richard wasn’t my husband!

EMERY            What?

CLARICE        We never married! We lived together for years, but we broke up...I moved out...my husband is alive! We’re still married! We have grandkids! You can’t tell these things?

EMERY            Richard Osborne wasn’t your husband?

CLARICE        Richard Osborne? I don’t know any Richard Osborne’s! Osborne is my husband’s name! You don’t know who you’re talking about. I don’t want to do this.

RILEY            [off-camera] Mrs. Osborne...

CLARICE        I don’t want to do this anymore. Get your things out of my living room.

Emery pulled at her knit vest on the front patio. The edges of the porch were dark from the rain. Riley finished loading the van back up, and came to collect her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“She’s lying. I knew, I knew.”

“His name wasn’t Richard Osborne. You knew that before we came here.”

“I got a Richard Osborne, it was so definite. I made up the coma, that was pure cold reading. Richard Osborne died quickly in a car wreck.”

“There’s no Richard Osborne here.”

Emery held her forehead in her hands for a moment before running her fingers up through her hair, exposing her red wet eyes. “Where the hell is he then.”



Riley wished he drove to the interview. They kept him longer than he wanted them to. Their two-camera interview setup had more money and intricacy than he had ever been on the level to work with. The cameras they used to take mug shots of him with had better lenses and lights than he had saved up to buy for his small Tacoma photography studio where he had taken dozens of portraits of toddlers in strollers and babies lying on rugs. They were interviewing Emery at her house the next day; they would be getting most of the footage for the episode there. He was invited to show up, there would be lunch catered. She lived at the same address Riley would pick her up from in the production van sometimes. The cab they called to take him back home hadn’t showed up yet.



Riley wasn’t sure his dad was listening to his story. He cut his steak methodically and scooped it to his mouth rhythmically. “I don’t know if I like you getting into that tarot stuff,” he said finally. The sisters had a complicated exchange of bowls and trays of food going across the table.

“Yeah, but *after* class,” Riley said, “he said he remembered that I wanted to go to film school and asked if I could shoot something with him, for pay and class credit.”

“How old is this teacher?” Riley’s mom asked.

“I don’t know, older.”

The two youngest sisters fought over a biscuit before agreeing to tear it.

“Are you going to do it?” she asked.

“I’ll make sure I’m packing in case things get weird.”

The younger sister said the other would tear her side bigger.

“Riley, that’s not funny...”

“Make him sign a contract,” his dad said. “First thing right up, before you touch a camera. Make sure he’s going to pay you.”

The older sister searched for a knife to split the biscuit.

“I can’t believe I’m actually making connections,” Riley said. “Work connections!”

“It’s community college. You don’t make connections. Not in any Paranormal Studies class either. Whatever you think are ‘connections’ are something else entirely. Why you’re taking classes like Paranormal Studies, I don’t know.”

“You need so many elective courses,” his mom offered.

“If you’re taking a degree that allows you to take courses like Paranormal Studies, you picked the wrong degree.”



The empty fields with signs in them had been filled with houses and the intersection to Emery’s neighborhood now had a stop sign. Emery’s driveway had a Prius and a humble pickup with a company name and phone number on its back window, while the sidewalk around it was lined with vans. Riley picked a neighbor to upset by parking in front of. Emery’s patio’s overhang was adorned with wooden wind chimes and metallic flower-shaped spinners with a holographic hummingbird that flapped its wings as the wind blew. The front door was open and the roar of floor fans could be heard coming from inside. Aaron Carmosino stepped outside with a plateful of cubed watermelon and honeydew, in the same neat hosts’ outfit he wore the day before. He squinted at the bright sky before he saw Riley. “Oh, hello, Riley! You came!”

“Yeah. This place looks different.” He looked off to the side and chuckled.

“What is it?” Aaron asked.

“You had said there were forum threads about the show yesterday. I couldn’t fall asleep last night and looked some up on my phone.”

“Oh, yes. Good stuff.”

“I think this *Remembering the 00’s* episode on it sparked some new discussion. Half-conscious, I saw one person post a message that just said, ‘John Duck was an evil man.’ It was posted literally a few minutes before I had read it, one in the morning. So stupid now, but last night it made me way more panicky that it should have.”

“Being scared is nostalgic,” Aaron said. “Staring down unclosed closets. Running back and forth between light switches.”

“I did that too.”

“You could say I know a lot about fear,” he said, eating a piece of watermelon. “When I was looking at one of those forums, someone found something on a Frenchman named Jean Canard that immigrated to Canada mid-nineteenth century. No records about him coming to Washington though. Did you hear about that?”

“No...really?”

“Someone had a scan of a handwritten log.”

“Wow...”

“Emery’s inside, you want to say hi?”

Riley saw Emery as soon as he walked through her front door. She made split-second eye contact but was in the middle of a discussion. The production crew buzzed around the house. Emery's husband lurked awkwardly in the corner, with his hand permanently held at an angle for a handshake. Riley had seen him around Emery with higher frequency towards the end of the show, still recognizable without the long hair and patchouli aura. Now he was clean-cut, and, Riley noticed, was wearing a green cast on his elbow.

Riley ducked for her kitchen, open to the living room. Trays of watermelon, honeydew, cantaloupe, pineapple, carrots, broccoli, ranch, Triscuits, artichoke spinach dip, paper plates, napkins. The driver of the van from yesterday was leaving with a plate full of Triscuits. Flowers a few days too old in a vase by the window, a short bundle of bamboo stalks. Colorful ankh magnet on the fridge. He wished he hadn't come.

"You shaved your beard!"

Riley turned around, it was Emery, offering a hug. He put his plate down and leaned down to her.

"I saw you come in."

"Long time, Emery. We're really...remembering the 00's. Reelin' in the years."

"What are you up to now?"

"I don't know. Nothing permanent." Nothing permanent? What, a like a relationship? God, stupid.

"That's good, nothing you're stuck in. Still have options. How's your mother?"

The van driver snorted on the other side of the room. "Good." He clamped his eyes down in a half-wince. "Do you have any water?" He needed to be outside. It was hurting him. He should've stayed home.

"There's a cup in here...here. Don't use the ice button on the fridge, it doesn't work. There's a bag inside...yeah, you got it."

Riley felt sick. He had grown but she had only gotten older. The ceiling fan's light shone through the distortions in the cup. It was a set of cups that, if personally owned, would seem standard and unremarkable, but if seen in someone else's home, was kitschy and plasticky and unfamiliar. He broke away and made for her backyard. There was a covered bright yellow slide and wooden playground he didn't remember. Suddenly a little boy with a blond pageboy haircut popped out the slide with a twin close behind him. They ran after each other and chased an old brown labrador through the open sliding screen door inside. Riley tried picking up a rubber swing to the small of his back and putting his weight on it but stopped when the entire playground began to squeak and stretch.



—Now Emery, why did the show end?

Oh, you know. Changing tastes. It always had misfortunes, like Dr. Wesley...the reason I had to be brought on in the first place. It had a good run.

—Do you still work as a medium?

Not like I used to. I'm a full-time mother now, two boys. Spiritualism is still a big part of my life, maybe more now than before.

—Hold on, someone's in the frame. Who's that walking around in the backyard? Can someone get him inside?



The vans were starting to leave and the sky was growing orange. Riley pushed some fallen leaves around with his foot.

"I always felt bad for ending the show," Emery said.

"You didn't end it," Riley said.

"No, it was my fault. I was a big part of it. All those people I had to lie to in the end."

"What made it change?"

"I still picked up everything just like I used to. They just stopped lining up with things. I tapped into something else, something higher, something grander, but it made everything useless. I know how it sounds. It's all so vague but you have to put it into words. The best mediums are all good speakers and good writers for that reason. I was never either of those..."

Riley was silent. Their shadows stretched across her back lawn and creeped up the brick wall at its edge.

"It's like there's this realm full of spirits and souls and ideas that are all clamoring for realization, wanting to exist. The whole essence of that place is the drive to exist here with us. They see a purpose and meaning here that's hopelessly invisible for us...I know that's the underlying premise to every possession movie, all the spirits wanting a vessel to take over, everyone thinks it has to be scary. I think it's beautiful. I had to give up the show to figure it out, but it was the next step. We have something here, you know. All around us, where we can't see, there's a passion. Did you ever believe anything?"

"What?"

"Anything on the show."

Riley sighed. "Kind of. Logically, no, but I think in my heart, I just kinda said 'hell, why not' a little bit. It's not like it ever conflicted with anything. No one's ever really asked that before."

She smiled. "I always assumed you quietly hated everything."

"Everyone always thinks that. I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong."

"No, you're not doing anything wrong."