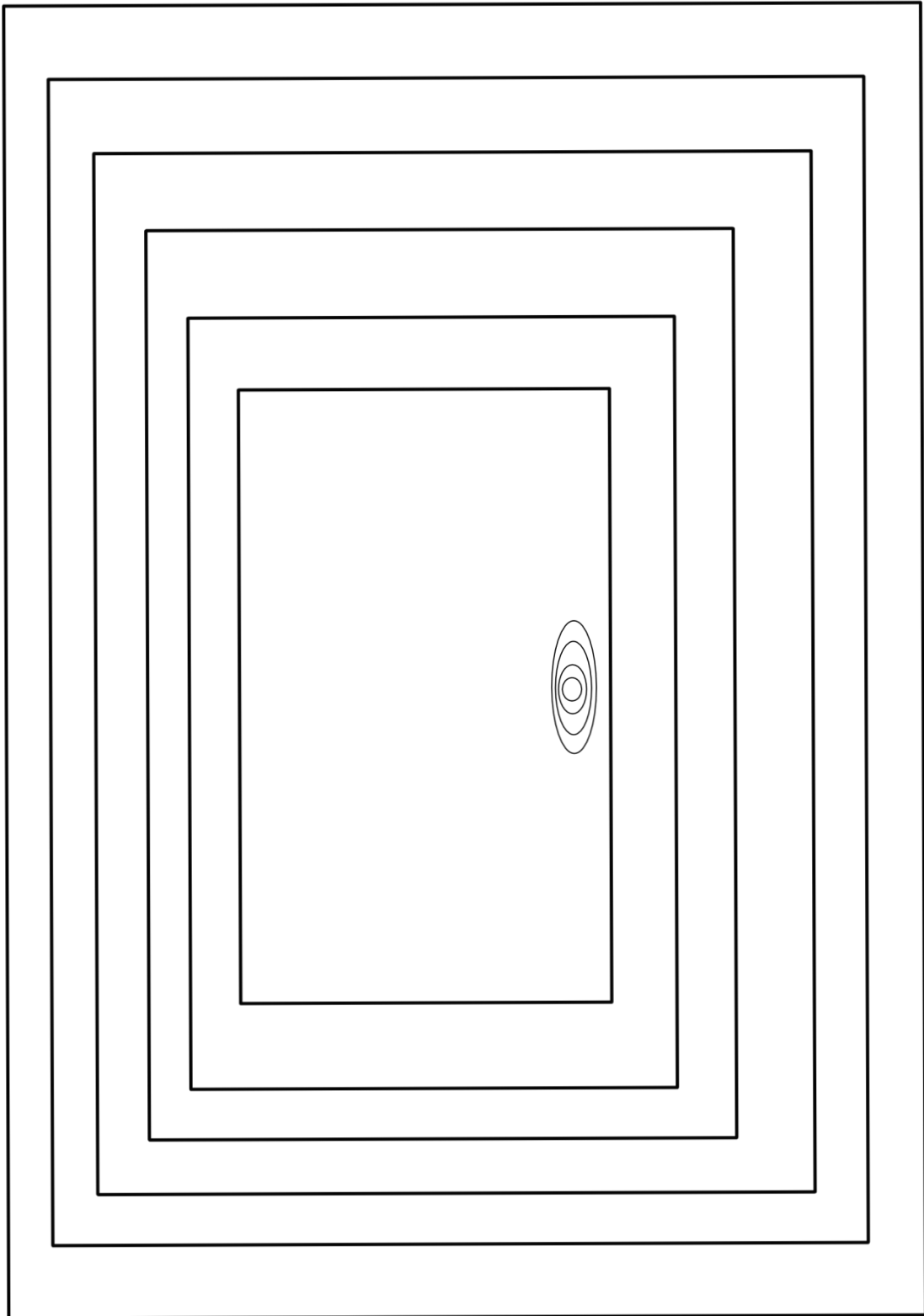


THEY ARE COMING



I awaken to find the bags at the door rustling in discordance. Hurried whispers are heard through the drywall. Today is the day. We have to leave.

The agitated footfall is mirrored by my own, racing to get dressed and pull myself from that rest to begin the process. There's a sudden knock at my door, muffled questions of reassurance, before I can answer they leave.

We're moving out, we have to. I don't know why but I feel that gut instinct telling me to run, "they are coming." There's little to pack in my room, I have only three bags to spare, it's more than enough. We don't need amenities, just our clothes and sentimental items, we have time to worry about that. It's rushed, but in a self-imposed stress, nothing is breathing on my neck this morning, all is free.

If there was ever a feeling of displacement and caution this is it. I don't belong here anymore, this was so recently made home, and yet I can't stay here anymore, I have to make it again. There's nothing left for me.

I rush out to make coffee before dredging my bags, weighted with my love and care, into the boot of that car, to stare at the horizon again for the foreseeable future, hoping there's more to it, and soon. My hands don't shake, though I'm terrified. A sense of ethereal calm washes over me in a breeze from the window. I smell the floral air and remember that old candle on the windowsill. It comforts me to know all is malleable, there is nothing set in stone other than life and death, nothing is promised and we will make home in everything we touch.

The coffee is comforting, the cup is warm in my hands, calm questions now follow the hushed footfalls of the two around me, we are okay and quiet stress will dim to contentment soon. I will not let this ruin me in any way, for we can all adapt, and I am part of that all.

A wave of panic hits me as I drag the final bag across the entryway.

I'm going the right way but everything feels wrong. A pit in my stomach opens up to reveal a gaping maw of fear and unwarranted premonition. The heavy sound of the bags falling puts me at ease, though I'm struggling to see anything in my peripherals. Stumbling back inside with that pit weighing me down more with each step, I cross through the doorway and see unfamiliarity bleed into sight. I'm left in a new place, with the walls a new shade, and everything is changed. This is not my home, though little is, this is a new space which comforts intrinsically.

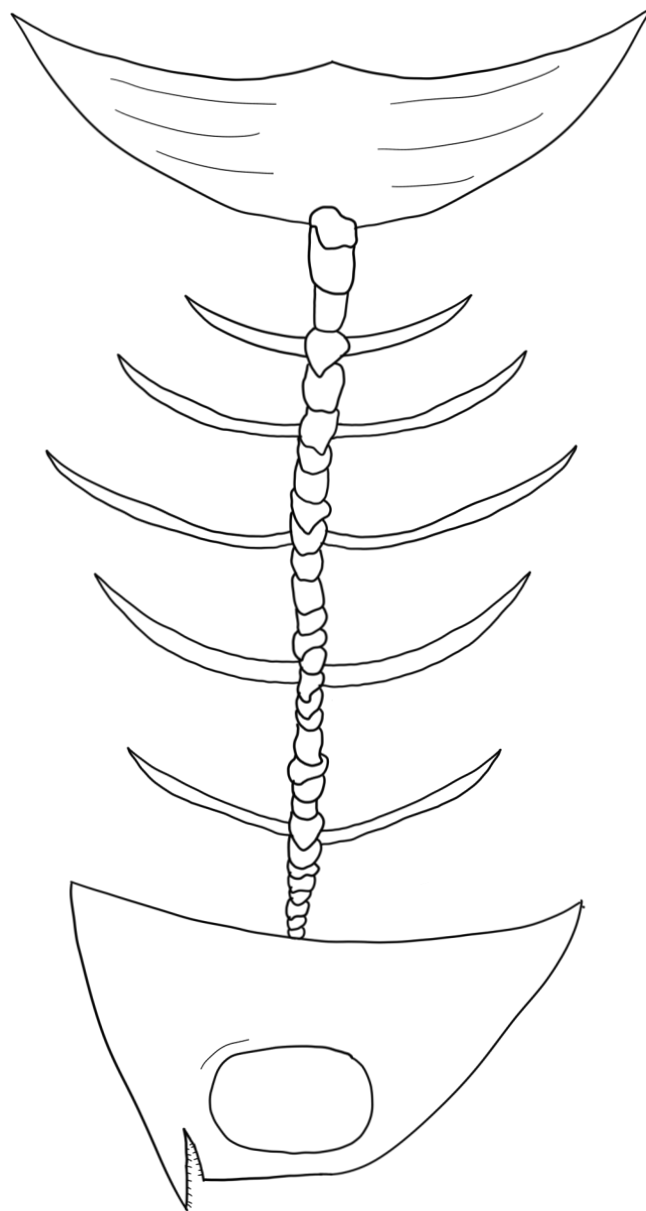
The space is adorned with weathered planks and oriental rugs, great beauty in its simplicity, immediate comfort in its pillars.

Though all is unfamiliar, and discomfort still has its place, I feel an acidic sense of home in this state.

Backing up with a calm recollection of my steps, I turn to the outside view again, with all the memories flooding my conscience, there's no more than what is a part of me that matters right now. The families we'll never meet weren't important before, though selfish I feel as a result of my succour.

I meander over to the boot once more, and ask if there's anything needed of me. We're done, it's all over. They have arrived, and we're still here. They have passed, and we're still here. All is okay, all is bright, all is peaceful, and I am not without sight.

HARVEY THE TALKING FISH



Saturday, Christmas is around the corner. Samantha's family has taken her to the beach, they reckon it'll be good for her. She spends the first few hours sitting under the Kowhai tree, reading her book. Once she finishes the third part, she decides it's time to head into the water to cool off. She rubs the sunscreen into her skin, with her book calmly blowing in the wind behind her, pages flapping together with the bookmark firmly placed in between the pages she's set it in. Giving up on rubbing sunscreen on her back, and not bothering to ask her mum, Sam gets up and heads to the water, leaving the safe shade of the Kowhai for the expansive blue of the open ocean, and the shore of Langs Beach.

The first few metres are refreshingly cold, the sun beats down on her, and the salt water feels refreshing on her feet. Once she gets to her waist, she dives in. Letting the water engulf her, cooling her body with every second spent under. She opens her eyes for a split second, letting the stinging sensation in. There's a shadow in the water. It's shaped like something colossal- some looming presence. Her thoughts drift back to Gemstone Beach, and the cliffs at the edge of the sand. That fish. The glare. The voice.

She screws her eyes shut and pokes her head out of the water. Rubbing her eyes, they soon adjust to the light again. A wave. Her head goes back down. Feeling the force push her back to shore, she strengthens her footing as best she can. The sand is loose. Once the wave passes she lifts her head from the water again. Looking around, she notices how far she is from everyone else. They're all in small groups to her left, and further into shore. There's a panging isolation to this distance, especially in such a place.

But the isolation can't set in. There's another force underneath. It pulls the water and loose sand from under her feet. From her left she hears cries and splashing water as people scramble back to the dry sand. Looking at them, then back at the ocean, she realises what's happening. The water's leaving. The beach is drying up. The tide recedes at a rapid pace as Sam's stuck in place by an unknown force. Something wants her here.

The water continues to draw back until Sam's left on the damp sand. The water must be at least a hundred metres away, if not more. It's nothing but a vague blue line in the distance. Sam stays standing, planted in the sand. A rumble begins from the distance, and her breathing quickens.

A wall of water is seen quickly approaching. It's about fifty metres away now. Twenty. Sam manages to tear herself from the spot, turn, and run. Once she gets to dry sand the rush of water is right behind her. A voice comes from there, though the water's loud the voice is clear. It sounds old and wise, as if it's that of the Turtle, from IT. "Samantha"

The name slithers from its lips. The voice is calming, enticing, there's a small chorus in its tone. Both deeply grave and angelic.

Sam freezes, eyes locked on the grassy knoll at the edge of the sand, wishing she'd run further, wishing she was there.

"I know you hear me, turn around"

With that she wills her body to flee, to find that grass in her hands and be at peace. She doesn't.

"I mean you no harm, turn around"

Hesitantly, she turns. Her whole body shaking.

"Wh-w-what d-do you w-want?"

"You"

The voice simultaneously spits this and calmly lets it ebb from its tongue. The chorus is breaking apart.

"N-no"

Sam is firm in this response, even through her stutter (born of fear) is still strong, so is her resolution.

"Why do you fight, I have chosen you. Do you not recall the beach?"

With eyes wide, she remembers Gemstone Beach. The fish. This is the same. Why does it want her?

She's shaking more vehemently now. Every fibre in her body is telling her to flee. Though she's planted to the spot.

"Ever since that day, I knew you were the one I wanted. I have waited. I have seen you passing by the shoreline for years. I have yearned for you Samantha, will you not aid me?"

"No. I will not succumb to your unruly expectations of me. I cannot survive with you, you have chosen me though I have not chosen you. Why have you yearned for years? It is because I have not fulfilled your wishes, I have wished your presence to leave. It looms over me like those cliffs. It follows me everywhere. Your spirit follows me everywhere and I have wished for it to leave, so that I may sleep"

Stunned, the water now ebbing up and down, the fish wavers. It's angry, Sam can tell. Its fins scrape the edge of the water.

"You don't understand. I've never wanted anything more than to love you. To help you. To watch you flourish into what you deserve to be"

"Though you never did see that for us to be together was surely for me to drown. You wish to help me? Leave me be, obey my wishes. This is not love you speak of, it is infatuation and asinine obsession. You have an entire world to be what you deserve to be, so do I. Those worlds are separate though. And so we must be for us to flourish in our own ways"

The water is wavering intensely now. The fish is shaking now, as if left on land to die. Its lifeforce drained from it.

"You don't understand. I've waited all this time. I need you. Please"

"No you don't understand! This isn't healthy and I am not going to go with you!"

Samantha spits this with vengeance, after the fish tormenting her dreams for years she will finally be free. This will not continue.

"Besides. I don't even know your name"

The fish stutters, it's shaking as strongly as Sam once was. Though she's now resolute in her stance and poise. A strong presence overpowers her. She feels in control. She's standing up for herself, after this time.

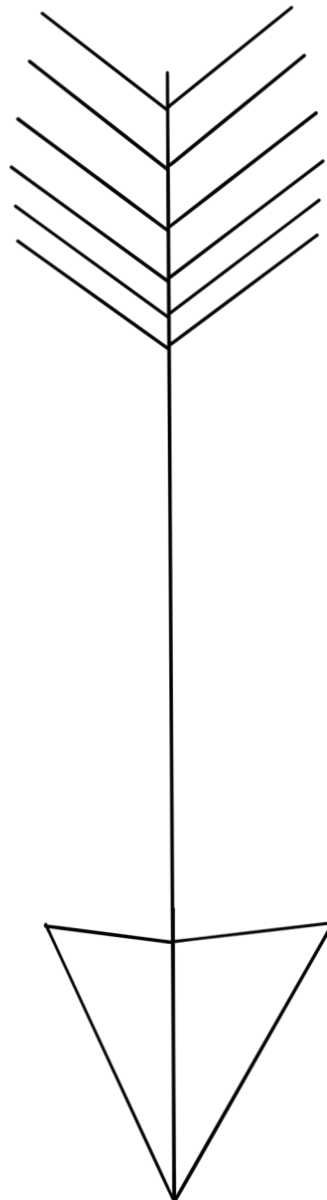
“H-ha-harvey”

The fish sputters its lips, and spits out this last word. The chorus is gone, there’s only one voice left. The true voice of the fish. The voice of Harvey.

With that the water drops to the ground, with Harveys body inside its expanse. The tide slowly returns, it isn’t angry, it isn’t vengeful. It’s calm, a relaxed embrace of the salt water seeping into the dips of sand on the beach. Encompassing the damp plains of sand. Waves slowly push the water forward. The people to her left are staring, mouths agape, stunned with a mixture of fear and awe. Harvey’s body is already withering, wrinkling, folding into the sand and oncoming water.

Sam’s mum comes over slowly, puts a hand on her shoulder, and gently leads her back to their towels so they can pack up. It’s time to go home.

THE BEAR
AND THE ARROW



I don't remember much, my memories are foggy, caked with sand and broken glass, this is all I remember.

-

We began in the car, wind howling past us. It's blowing sand around like tentacles reaching for us. Breaking the silence inside the car, Kaitlyn asks if we should reconsider, half-yelling over the din. Maria pipes in from the back seat reassuring her in a calm tone. I don't say anything, neither does Phoenix, though I'm sure we'll be fine.

(there's still that hesitation)

Getting out of the car, we're met with whipping wind and the shrapnel of sand, which immediately flies into the car, and creates a small ecosystem inside it.

We decide we'll try, we came all this way and it'd be a waste to give up just because of a little storm. Huddling around the more protected side of the car we shuffle into our wetsuits, it's an uncomfortable experience, but if we want to stay somewhat warm in the water we have to do it.

(why didn't we do that before we left?)

Once in the water everything becomes a hazy blur, it's all a mess of white water and rocks. The waves are surprisingly rideable, it's crossshore, but somehow it isn't horrible. The wind blows in the same direction as the waves curl, which makes for some challenging but fun surfing.

After a couple of hours Kaitlyn and Maria get out to warm up, they're cold now. Me and Phoenix stay out for a little while longer.

(he has his leg this time)

As the wind shifts to a more onshore mess, we decide to check out a small embankment of rocks with a tiny cave off to the side. Paddling over, we see shards of a shell, like ceramic painted to look like brown fur. There are only a few pieces drifting in the water, which has a dark and murky complexion, and so the seeds of unease are planted.

Reaching the rocks we hoist ourselves up to rest for a minute. We're shivering, though knowing us part of me thinks it's out of fear, at least somewhat. The sky is still grey, with textured clouds all around us, completely covering the sun.

Crashing waves go on, and we sit still, breathing, this peace is enough for now. I see a big set forming, it's about to come crashing through the rocks on the other side of the cove, after nudging Phoenix and mentioning the coming set, we decide to stay here until the set has passed, and continue to breathe.

A harsh scrape on the rocks behind us gets our attention, we see massive claws peeking out from under coarse brown fur, gripping the edge of the rock. Another set joins in by its side. There's a draining of water and a low rumbling growl that reeks out from that space. A grizzly bear, with some sort of bill instead of a snout, hauls its body out from the water, struggling and ending half-way on the rock we're resting on. Pushing its breath onto us, we stiffen and try not to alarm it. Trepidation turns into all-out fear when its voice comes into the breath, which quickly turns into a roar, sending our bones to shake in our skin.

Phoenix is the first to jump off, while I stay staring at the beast, petrified in fear. My ears are still waterlogged, and I'm focusing all my energy on the beast, though I still hear Phoenix yelling my name, urging me to "just fucking leave."

Quickly though calmly we paddle back, attempting to let the beast throw its fit without fixing its jaws on us. There're more shards of 'shell' here, that's what they have to be, shells of other animals, somehow appearing ceramic and painted. There's an intrinsic knowledge that these are part of a skeleton.

The assumption is this; that the bear was protecting its space, and through hunting whatever lived in this cove, it collected tchotchkes of the dead that can be used as a warning for people like us, if we were smart enough to notice.

We continue to paddle back, and the shards slowly minimise until it's just the breaking waves on the shore, we stay close to the rocks on our right, just in case.

Reaching the white-water, we each catch one quick wave into the shore, trying to cut our time in the water as much as possible now. Kaitlyn and Maria are already waiting in the car, talking with each other. Once we arrive we're asked if everything's okay, without answering the question there's the mutual idea that we have to leave as soon as we can. Towels are thrown over car seats and we jump in, and get out.

(what was that?)

Once back at the house, everything's a calm blur. Shaking off the events from earlier, the conversation turns to the beautiful (though unnerving) cove and the waves of the day. Dinner is followed by a movie, before Maria and Phoenix turn in for the night. I finally get around to doing the dishes while Kaitlyn reads at the dining table, it's peaceful. A slice from "Boring Domesticated Life" seeps into my memory, and that phantom synth tone floods my ears, all is well. Once I'm done with the dishes it's dark out, Faun texts me telling me he'll be here with Abby in about half-an-hour, now we wait. I've been waiting to see Faun for so long, and this is the perfect time. Seeing all my friends at once is the best dream I could've had. Kaitlyn and I pass the time by talking.

About what I don't know, though it's nice, as always. Soon I hear the car pull up, Faun and Abby step out to greet us at the door, bringing a bag each they walk in, find their rooms, and quickly return to the dining room for some tea.

Over an hour, maybe two, has passed since their arrival. We've been talking and catching up the whole time, all the while trying to keep quiet so that Phoenix and Maria can still sleep.

(why can't everything feel like this?)

Soon the jovial conversation is broken by the ping of shingles on the neighbours roof, it hits the fence and topples into the small alley between our house and the fence. I see a flash of yellow and a boot skitting out of sight. Keeping my eye on the window behind Kaitlyn and Faun, I turn my focus back to the conversation. A shifting sound is heard from the window again, and I see another flash of yellow, a black glove shines through, gripping a yellow bow. A darkened figure moves, still clutching the bow, raising a matte black arrow with yellow on the tip. As with before I'm stuck in fear for a single moment, though snapping out of it, I jump under the table in an instant, pulling the others down with me in a frenzied mess. Thinking me crazy, they hesitate, though they soon follow suit. We wait for what feels like half-an-hour, though it's probably more like five minutes. There's no sound, Abby peaks her head up and soon sits back on her chair, Faun and Kaitlyn do the same, finally I join them, though I'm shaking at this point.

The conversation turns back to normal, I don't forget the figure, and the yellow, though I haven't fixed my gaze on the window completely, I still see something moving occasionally.

(what was that?)

After some time the conversation dies down somewhat, and Abby clocks out for the day, I think she did most of the driving, so she'd be fucking exhausted. The three of us that're left continue to talk, finally turning to the cove, though I don't tell them about the bear yet, I want to tell them with Phoenix, he deserves to tell them just as much as I do.

Throughout the night I keep seeing flashes of black and grey through the window, though I don't see the yellow again until about an hour after Abby leaves. This time it's quick, the window shines with the light from the lamps, though I can make out that sickening neon yellow through the panes. Suddenly the yellow shoots through the window, shattering it and taking out the overhead light with it. With the light significantly dimmed and the broken glass shattered on the floor and the table, we jump to the floor and huddle under the windowsill, where the figure can't see us. Shuffling sounds are heard again. The figure's moving. Every second is terror, and our breathing is loud. The dim light of the lamps barely reaches the high ceilings, and the old architecture is on display now in this lighting.

(why do i notice that now?)

Peeking my head up from the windowsill I find the figure still there, it's a girl, eerily resemblant of Taylor Swift. Why is she doing this? I duck my head back under quickly so as to avoid being seen (hopefully). A whistling tone is heard from her position, it's bone-chilling.

The others have surely woken up, right? Did she get them already? Or are they hiding in their rooms, clutching their metaphorical pearls to keep their bodies from shaking uncontrollably in this freezing terror.

(Fucking Taylor Swift)

Soon there's a knock at the door, and after checking the windowsill, I (for some reason) go to answer it. Thankfully it's not her, but a hunched man, though I recognize him. It's Todd, I used to live with him though we never spoke a word. He looks up from his feet, and reaches behind him pulling out a knife. A grin is smeared across his face, the first time I've ever seen him smile, with yellowed teeth clawing their way through his gums and chapped lips. He lunges. In instinct I bend back, and reach to shut the door, though he's already in the frame by the time my hand touches the handle. I have to turn and run, there's no way out, except the back. As I run through the dining room I notice Kaitlyn and Faun are gone, passing by the rooms I find them comforting Maria, Phoenix, and Abby, all the while packing their bags. I tell them to run, though they're confused for a second. I bolt through the hallway with Todd behind me, he ignores them (thank god) and keeps his eyes screwed into my back. I can smell his stench emanating from his body.

I find the back door and jump from the stairs, turning around to slam the door shut in his face, his fingers are caught in and he lets out a short yawn. The first time I've ever heard his voice. I turn and run around the house, looking for the front door, I see the others clambering out with their bags. They see me running past, and soon they see Todd too. There are a couple of short yelps from the group, though they largely continue rummaging through everything to get out. Sprinting past just adjacent the front door, I turn to face Todd. he's lumbering behind, boots making as much noise as possible on the soft grass. His chest heaves with his tired breath, the grin's still carved into his face.

He lunges again, except this time I don't dip back, I put out my arms to stop him, the stench is overpowering and his strength is unsuspected. The grin turns to gritted teeth, spit drips from his face onto my shirt, staining it with the night's pungent memories. The knife is shaking in his hand now, a little more and he'll drop it, then I can yell for help from someone and we can restrain him safely before calling the police, we can't just leave now. A dulled clatter is heard off to my left, the knife is dropped, I force myself up onto him before rolling over and pinning him down.

I yell for someone to get the knife and find some rope, Phoenix and Kaitlyn rush, Phoenix gets the knife and Kaitlyn finds the rope in the shed. The knife is used to tie off the excess rope, once he's tied up.

He sits on the grass, hands and feet tied together, with his hands behind his back, gnashing his teeth like a fucking rabid dog.

The figure appears once more on our roof, the bow is still in her hand though it's at her side, it's fucking Taylor Swift, what the fuck. She gives a slight nod and leaves across the roofs again, jumping to the neighbours and back into the town.

Maria's called the police, they're on their way. We go back into the house, bags still packed in the car, and make some tea to wait them out. Todd's still gnashing his teeth and the broken glass is still scattered on the floor, we brush it off from the dining table.

Now we wait.

