

THE GLASS BOOTH OF QUARRY LAKE

WRITTEN BY
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To my Nina.

CHAPTER ONE TEDDY

Sometimes I wonder why I spend / The lonely night dreaming of a song

The melody haunts my reverie / And I am once again with you.

- "Stardust" by Hoagy Carmichael

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ALL OF TEDDY'S PHONE CALLS HAD TO BE MADE ALONG RED HILL ROAD. Not his request by any means; rather, he imagined such luxuries were better fit inside his home, preferably beside his recliner. Such accommodations were an implied courtesy, like being offered cream and sugar with your coffee or if you needed help with your groceries. He even assumed such neighborly mannerisms extended beyond Quarry Lake, in towns far beyond the forest's reach. Upon his return from the city by the river, Teddy Higgins awoke to a distant infrequent stammer coming from outside. He followed the noise to his kitchen window, where he saw his new telephone nailed against one of the wooden utility poles.

Blame it on the war, the technician stated, polishing off dust and woodchips from the phone's surface.

Since the war began, the world took an unexpected turn. London was being evacuated; Hawaii's great battleships were obliterated in broad daylight; families fell away from one another while their sons and daughters fought for their country. Some gone only for a moment; others for a lifetime. All of whom, like Teddy, waited back home along porches and kitchen tables. The war was responsible for so many unexpected changes in his life—this phone, for example. It was hard to imagine that his story was another to add to the pile, a heart yearning for missing piece, the better half, to return home and make him whole again.

Until she returned, he got a telephone so he could talk to her each night. Only the technician's supply of telephone wire extended to one of the utility poles at the edge of his property, the poles that directed the electricity from the town to the dairy farms.

Supplies were at an all-time low, reserved for men with power who needed to communicate over the Atlantic pond, past enemy lines. He may not have an oval office, but he was still Quarry Lake's mayor. If he were a persistent man, he would demand the telephone company to return and complete the job. Men-in-power be damned if he wasn't going to get his needs met. Ironic, however, was calling them from said phone to complete the job when he already knew the response would remain the same. A mayor in a small town like Quarry Lake hardly has his hand in war. As a way to resolve such first-world inconveniences, they promised to extend the line once the war ended. Until then, the phone would remain outdoors. Defiant, yet foolish, like showing up to church in your pajamas instead of the outfit your grandma picked earlier that morning.

Up until today, his town only saw a telephone in old newspaper advertisements. He did not spend a mint for such devices to survive the elements, nor to have to suffer alongside it for that matter. Teddy imagined days when he would have to answer a call in the rain. How the phone might slip out of his hands with him clinging to that utility pole, shielding himself from the downpour. He supposed, on chilly winters' nights, the receiver would keep his ears warm, especially if it were her voice he would hear on the other end.

His father always advised a great mayor is one who can pick his battles. He found no use in making demands nor complaining. Instead he reminded himself why he was doing this in the first place: contact. Her whispers were all he needed. Those distant coos he felt on summer nights along the lake. When she was not an entire ocean, but a reach away. She's bound to call any day now.

A town like Quarry Lake was anything but sheltered. Stay there six months and you might conclude it was merely "set in their ways." That is, of course, assuming they let you stay at all. They had their church, their quarry, and most of all, their beloved mayor, Mister Theodore Higgins himself. Everything in its right place.

Until their mayor got the telephone.

The town treated Teddy's new arrival like much of the town's outsiders, with either curiosity or pure reluctance. Up close, Teddy admired his phone, that Automatic Electric 50. His gaze transfixed on the handset. That oak handle perched on its cradle. Its body offering a part of itself, in awe of the gods who willed it into existence. From kitchen windows, some neighbors said it looked like a stain on that bright oak finish. They resolved Teddy's nightly sprints were mere attempts to remove it. A little elbow grease and a determined grin would do the trick. Oh, and perhaps Merle's famous stain remover.

Early one morning, a distant ring stirred Teddy from his bed. Hours before dawn, what they would consider to be an ungodly hour. When he first heard its chime, his heart jumped as quickly as he did to his feet. Neighbors spied their beloved mayor dashing down his driveway towards that telephone. He hoped to catch it in time, to not disturb the neighbors. He knew who was calling. He had been waiting so patiently for this moment.

The war continued; priorities shifted; promises forgotten, yet Teddy remained content. Every night thereafter, at 2 o'clock, she called. He excused his nightly sprints as exercise. Good for the heart, he would often say in jest. When the town got wind of the phone company's broken promise and the lengths their mayor took into those early-morning phone calls, they gathered their resources and showed up at the telephone pole the next morning. By the end of the day, the mayor on Red Hill

Road had his own glass booth. His patience rewarded with that incessant ring, one the town would soon come to dread. Not for its ringing, but what followed.

The city still stands to this day. What's left of it, that is. If you're ever driving along the forest road, you'll reach a fork on the road. If you're headed to the city by the river; follow your map and pay no attention to the signs. It's why Quarry Lake gets visitors. They really should fix that sign one of these days. Wanderers find themselves driving down a winding road, one that serpentine down the hill until they cross a covered bridge. On the other side, they'll find a small town known to its residents as Quarry Lake. Though none live there anymore, you can still find that glass booth along that dirt road.

Dust stoops along the glass panes, as if even nature itself were trying to hide this technological anomaly from the world. Scrub away its reddened dusted veil and you would still see it. Perched on its desk, awaiting a curious traveler to pick up its receiver. The chair might even still be sturdy enough to hold you, assuming you don't kick it back too far.

Here, in this place, with that phone in your hand, any old neighbor would remember the days when Teddy spent his early mornings and nights talking to the one woman to leave town just as quickly as she arrived. Esther. Teddy's wife.

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DESPITE ITS UNFORTUNATE DRAWBACKS, THE GLASS BOOTH GAVE TEDDY A LOOKOUT POST OF HIS TOWN. Days that were devoted to office work were spent here. From his desk, he could peer down Quarry's main street, waving to neighbors as they passed. Behind, Red Hill Road ran past him towards the town's dairy farms. The company of an endless forest and his home comforted him. Beyond town's borders, on a clear day, he could see past the winding road.

Every morning, Teddy spied the usual cavalry of trucks, arriving with the town's supplies and home goods in trade for the town's lumber, minerals, dairy, and handcrafted goods. By night, the light

above Teddy's booth became a beacon, a place to guide those lost coming back from the quarry who took a night-time dip in the lake, through the forest, back home.

The whole town lay at his feet; yet inside that booth, Teddy's gaze travelled beyond. Always to that horizon. He could see past winding roads, even spy the distant plains that opened the forest line into the city. Teddy figured perhaps this latest invention would bridge that gap between horizons. The place where earth met sky, two elements that were always just a reach away, much like his beloved Esther. Time always alluded him; because while it seemed to feel like eons ago, he can close his eyes and find himself back on aisle seven, arranging the cracker boxes.

He met her at Meyer's Grocers. Any outsider would assume a man like Teddy merely as some grocer doing his part for an honest wage, but residents knew he was just helping Walter and Selena Meyer. They have been getting into their years, and the lower shelves were always difficult for Selena's ankles. Along to help with the latest shipment of groceries was Teddy, shelving the hard-to-reach places.

When Teddy wasn't in his office, he would be everywhere else around town, helping out his neighbors, his friends, in whatever they needed. It was never a requirement to help around as it was his means of caring for it in the same manner as any good neighbor. One morning he would be over at Merle's Lumber, hauling cords of logs onto the outgoing trucks. The next, he would be over at the church, helping Gertrude fold sermon notes for the upcoming service. Good habits die hard, much like his disposition for saying ma'am when most women preferred miss. It made them feel young, as if time was not robbing them of their youth. Time was never really a factor in this town. Hell, no one really kept a watch on their wrist, just a smile and a helping hand. What he didn't know was that this virtue would eventually lead to meeting Esther.

Barley brought them together, right there on aisle seven where he found her reading the ingredients to a cracker box. Resigned, she approached him and asked, the ever-diligent Teddy, if there was any barley. He despised the grain, despised the beer. In a town of beer-drinkers, Teddy preferred his gin. He enjoyed the crackers in Esther's hand, enough to know she is safe—from the barley, that is.

Still, he was devoted to helping her find the perfect cracker. Because if there was anything Teddy would admit, he was taken by Esther the moment his gaze met hers.

In her eyes, Teddy peered into a forest, a kaleidoscopic canopy of an autumnal green. The kind you only saw days before its leaves transformed into a vibrant gold. If he stepped into her iris, he would find a sanctimonious clearing, unfound by the outside world. Was he the first man to discover such a place? If so, he marveled at its untouched beauty. Deeper still, there also lingered a warning. If he dared, a man like him can fall forever entranced at the wonder that lay behind them. Foolish men like Teddy who willfully ignored its consequences. Gambling men who knew holding the woman that possessed such a gaze was worth whatever risks that lay beyond.

Not many townspeople were keen on outsiders. They can lend a cup of sugar to their neighbor; for any outsider, they can give the best directions to another town, anywhere but their own. They wanted to preserve the peace there. Esther experienced this firsthand when she settled into her new home out by the church. When Esther wanted to learn more about her new town, the residents sent her to the mayor's home. Teddy loved to hear stories from these supposed outsiders. Stories from the outside world, those tall buildings—they called them skyscrapers—in New York. The next morning, he found her outside his house, asking for the mayor.

In her days in Quarry Lake, Esther relied on his aide for more than just food. She asked for suggestions where she could seek a quiet spot by the lake, or who makes the best flapjacks this end of the Mississippi. In return for his hospitality, she invited him along. "As a scout, a bodyguard." She feigned. Together, they explored Quarry Lake and traded stories along the way.

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VOWS. THOSE LITTLE PLEDGES ESTHER MADE. BACK WHEN LIFE WAS SIMPLE. Those days when your only worry before it all was not getting candle wax on your delicate hands. At the foot of her future, in a dark room lit only with the passing light of candles, she joined her sisters. A ceremony of trust, a rite of passage as each nurse tilted their candles ever so delicately over yours. To light one another's candle; to pass on that light, that pledge they would soon make to the sick and injured. She

earned her place here among her fellow colleagues. Sisters who spent countless long nights together. With tea and sympathy, they devoted their time to both their studies and one another. All with the common goal: to be here, in this moment, light one another's candle.

Was it a calling, Esther would like to think so. The bedside manner started with her dolls, before graduating to her pets, then for her mother's final days. Sometimes it was just being by her side, even if it were to feel a pulse, to hold whatever life that still lingered. Her mother's spirit stayed with her, even now. She felt her mother's gentle grasp around hers. On a night like this one, with the company of other nurses, she felt whole.

The glow around her candle, her neighbors', then looking up to see the room. Each one illuminated with a sanctimonious warmth, as if it were radiating from within. Solemn, humbled, devoted to their destiny. Before her family and her sisters, she recited her Nightingale Pledge.

It was easy to say the pledge because she was unaware of what lay ahead. A life in the Nurse Corp was different, but an exciting one. Each season in a new city, new state, Esther imagined herself as a woman on the run. Gone rogue from status quo, to travelling most times on her own, to serve, to protect, and to replace those missing nurses who now heal the injured soldiers on the front lines.

Eventually, the wanderlusting thrill waned. The constant uprooting happened at the most inconvenient times. Right when she found her groove in the town, her orders arrived, sending her off, once again, into another city, another state. She fell in and out of love so many times, it was difficult to even understand such a concept existed. Love was weary when it was always getting broken. Deep down, Esther believed happy endings were only found in fairy tales. The kind of "happily ever afters" her father would read to her each night before bed, while her mother coughed up blood in the next room.

Her next orders sent her to the city by the river. This time, instead of taking the bus, she insisted on driving herself through the winding forest roads. Daylight shrouded from the canopy of the pines above her, only revealing itself when she crossed the railroad. Just before she came to that fork.

Accidental miracles were what her mother called them. An unexplained moment where you just happened upon those right-place/right-time scenarios. In hindsight, it was the fault of that misleading sign that sent her to the wrong city. She wound through the serpentine road to find herself in Quarry Lake. This little town tucked into the never-ending folds of the forest line. She supposed a curious woman like herself was bound to find places like this, a place to hide, where only few knew of its whereabouts. And those Outsiders who found it were merely passing through.

With no river in sight, she stopped in Meyer's Grocers to ask for directions. As always, Quarrians always provide the best directions, away from their city. Getting directions was no problem, it was her hunger that needed deliverance. On the way out, she stopped by aisle seven, where she studied the cracker box, where she met Quarry Lake's civil servant, Teddy Higgins.

She had every intent to leave Quarry Lake, to just drive back up that winding road like other accidental visitors, into someone else's town, into someone else's story. If she was lucky, she could make it to the city by the river before nightfall. It was what happened on her way out, these accidental miracles, that kept her there.

It started with a nice walk to stretch her legs. Down Grand Avenue, where she passed the small shops, Gerty's Perdy Salon, Adelaide's Homemade's, then Merle's Lumber, before she found the trailhead to the Quarry. Juniper trees guided her way uphill. The invigorating aroma of junipers kept her on the path, should curiosity coerce away from what lied ahead and into the forest thicket. Life itself seemed to stop in reverence of such an unfound wonder. Juniper surrounded the quarry before surrendering itself to the ground at her feet. Smooth, dark, warm granite guided her steps close to the edge, before plunging into the cerulean waters. An overwhelming serenity draped this hallowed clearing, enough to compel this curious tourist to her knees.

The stillness reminded her of places back home. Those summers spent beside the local watering hole. The summers that guided a girl's destiny into becoming a woman. The afternoons spent holding her first's love's hand along its lapping waters. The getaways she made, after final exams, with her friends, atop the floating docks and dancing to the Andrews Sisters on a fourth of July, made

her homesick. While she was grateful of the adventures she has had, this woman on the run longed to root herself in a place like this. A place called home.

How Esther found herself here again, standing along the Quarry banks. Only now, months since her first visit to this hidden escape, she felt home. Teddy cradled her ever-dreaming head in his lap. Her hands intertwined with his own, along familiar shores of memory. Esther was a woman on the run because she didn't want to get orders to anywhere else but in Teddy's heart.

Inevitably, the news of war reached Quarry Lake. Americans touched down and fought on German soil. Soon, men in military uniforms arrived in town, looking for Esther. She was served with orders that evening. As a member of the Nurse Corp, her orders were to leave Quarry Lake at once. The suited men reminded her of her commitment to her country.

She had to refrain from asking. "What about Quarry Lake?" because she also thought about the soldiers on the battlefield. The men who also left their homesteads, to serve and protect. Men who also didn't have a choice. She remembered her vows. Those hallowed words uttered under candlelight. And how her hands, her bedside manner, could help aid their survival. So they can see home, if not one more day, once more. She would ask, "What about Teddy?" A question that she really wanted to ask. But she knew their answer. They would confuse her emotions

teddy and the quarry

they're one in the same

as silly thoughts from a woman in love. Men, especially those in suits, hardly take sympathy to those things. No need for tugging heartstrings when they need nurses. She refrained from emotion so that she could persuade them. She needed more time, she said, because this woman in love was getting married.

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GOOD OL' SANDERS WAS NEVER KNOWN TO BE A SLOW EATER. In a family of sixteen, if he weren't the first to have a seat at the dinner table, chances were you might just get the scraps. Each time dinner was called, he fought his way through the helpings, snatching up rolls, digging through the corn, and scarfed his way through dinner. He ate quickly, enough to get a head start to hiding in the corn fields, away from his angry siblings who sought to make him pay for his gluttony.

When he kicked back that large helping of Alma's blue-ribbon chili, he couldn't help but feel like this bad habit got the best of him. Those dinners when he took three pieces of cornbread when he should have only taken one. Who can blame him, everyone in town knew Mama Sanders made the best baked goods. Just like they knew Alma's chili always earned the blue-ribbon. Other contestants, men and women alike, watched with an envy to rival their crock-pots. One of the judges, Sanders, sang her praises as she served him a good helping of chili. His ravenous inhalation of the prizewinner resulted in trying to gasp for air. Instead, he clutched the blue gingham tablecloth, dying for the prize-winner's chili. Men stood behind him, patting his back in hopes to dislodge it.

Esther was not too far away, about three tables in fact, tasting Gertrude's chili when she heard their cries. They called out for the doctor, only to realize he was out of town, picking up medical supplies and treating himself to a new stethoscope. Esther stepped away from the table to watch Sanders fall to the floor. He writhed on the ground like a snake that had lost its head, seconds away from death. People stood back, bearing witness to Sanders' fate.

Meanwhile, Esther was having a crisis of her own. Every part of her wanted to summon her training, to save this man. She wondered if aiding a dying man would even help the people in town to actually hold a conversation with her. One long enough that was neither condescending nor patronizing, where they didn't humor her doe-eyed love with distance and disdain. This man will die, if she only stayed in her place, where they wanted her. It was a family affair, no room for outsiders. No one knew Esther's occupation; no one really even bothered to ask. Each hoped Esther's visit was a temporary one. Before she would return back to the place where women traveled alone, took up a job, all independent of men.

On the other hand, she remembered she wasn't called as a nurse to perform like some show-pony. Her sick mother, her dolls, her sisters, all never asked for theatrics in exchange for companionship; they only asked for her to care, nurture, and save those who need it. A woman such as herself wasn't meant to remain still, nor hang idle behind a crowd. She concluded this is why fate brought her to this town. She stepped through the crowd, towards Alma's booth, armed with Teddy's pocketknife and handkerchief.

Only to the residents, it did not look like a rescue. Her stride possessed the same determination of someone who just wants to put an injured animal out of its misery, or cut the blue-ribbon from Alma's table. No one could tell, except Alma, who fainted when she saw blood pouring from Sanders' neck.

The crowd swept in to catch Alma's fall before they also noticed blood jutting out of Sanders' neck. Silence consumed the cook-off, even the band stopped playing, almost in anticipation for the coming sounds. That wet, moaning sigh coming from the hole in Sanders' throat. Droplets fell, staining the grass with sickly patches of red. Teddy moved through the crowd to see Esther's blood-smearred hands. Bystanders watched, afraid if they reached for Esther they would also get their throats cut. With the handkerchief, Esther kept her hands over his throat. A bloody straw jutted from his neck. She ordered the men surrounding her to lift him up and help her carry him to the doctor's office. They had to keep him stable, in order to keep the straw and him from choking on his own blood.

The men managed to break into the doctor's office, where Esther dislodged a chunk of meat from Sander's throat with forceps. She stitched it up and remained by his side. During his recovery, people of the town stopped in to ask about his health. With the doctor still out of town, she welcomed this moment. Their talks began with both welcome and terror and ended with a simple joining of hands from the women, and a humble head nod from the men. He will recover, bearing the scar on his neck as a good reminder to slow down his otherwise poor eating habits.

The town grew to love Esther and Teddy, enough to also experience a commiserating sense of loss. One by one, Esther's neighbors closed their doors, turned their curtains, and isolated these two new visitors from their gaze.

The suited men remained on Grand Avenue. Around them, men and women evacuated their homes bearing chairs, makeshift gifts, including odds and ends to decorate. Swept into the moment, the suited men watched an entire town close its doors. By dusk, Quarry Lake fell dormant. Curiosity got the best of the suited men as they found themselves following the crowd to the lake, Teddy's favorite spot, to witness their wedding.

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TEDDY HOPED HER DAYS ON THE ROAD WOULD END IN QUARRY LAKE. Just one more day was all he wanted, to more quiet afternoons along the lake or warm evenings with sparklers in their hands and stars in their eyes. Of course, it would only make sense for him to ask for one more day after that, how he would keep pushing away the inevitable. Just before the seasons changed once again.

The decision was made for him. Her orders would proceed come first light. He sat on the patio, and watched the sun set. Its light waned before he found himself empathizing with the setting sun. How it made its escape, behind treelines, beyond mountains, past horizons, taking its light with it. How he envied this divine power and wished he could do the same. To take his bride and disappear, away from men who only sought to take her away. If he was to have one last night with her, it will be as a means to celebrate.

The two men stood by the car along Red Hill Road. Far enough to allow some privacy, but close enough to make sure she remembered her prior commitments.

She kissed him goodbye, both at the altar, then early the next morning. Esther stood before her husband wearing the same outfit when he first met her. Back on aisle seven, what feels like a whole lifetime ago instead of a few months. She stood before him, feigning confidence with the same weight as her smile. Still, he admired his bride, grooming her outfit, his Esther, capturing her scent, her touch, every beautiful part of her through his eyes. Both would deny the inevitable goodbye for

another embrace, another kiss, another day. How that day would come. Like this morning's dawn, just beyond the horizon.

He brought her close, enough for even ghosts to feel. Her sobs masked into his shoulder, into his warm jacket. Her lips grazed his scruffy cheek. Both nuzzled close to feel one another's trembling heartbeat, one that dared not let go first. Vows exchanged, husband and wife agreed to find a way. To talk. To await her call.

He watched the two men drive off into the early morning with his bride in the backseat. Their taillights burned through the early morning's fog with a smoldering glow. One that blazed all the way up the serpentine road, into the treeline. Later that morning, Teddy took his pickup into the city where he paid, in cash, to have a phone line installed on his property. Of course, he was never specific enough to tell him in his house. He was not savvy when it came to technology, so he had no idea that needed to be addressed. What he little he did know was how a phone should be in a house, not along a utility pole at the edge of his property.

Again, it did not matter the phone's location nor its inconvenience. Teddy never minded sprinting to catch the phone those first days. What did matter, however, was just to hear her voice on the other line. When she called, to talk about the war, the endless hours, the soldiers she lost. He cherished every sentence, every sigh, every laugh. The call could end at any moment, so he made sure to take advantage. He ached to hear her voice, to catch the essence of fresh juniper, to embrace the memories of her—right here—in his drink, in his arms, in his heart.

While talking to Esther those early mornings, he would sit in that glass booth. His gaze fell beyond the town, past the forest line, into the winding road, to that great somewhere-else. Teddy knew she was just past the corner of this horizon, watching a sunset to his sunrise. He prayed to the stars to watch over her. To guide her back home, to her Teddy. And if he left right now, he just might make it. To see her one more time.

Besides setting up a phone line, he never crossed the town's borders. Everything Teddy could want was just down the street. The town was a firm believer in a work-for-trade deal. So while he remained

to be one of the last surviving Americans to live off the land, he also relied on his trade for certain indulgences, like his gin.

When it came for his love for Esther, he was invested. As the town settled in for the evening, Teddy indulged himself in their memories together. Juniper, from her wedding garland, or in his drink. Pleasant, inviting vices to occupy his time and his senses; that is, until he got her call.

One day, Alec the milkman found Teddy asleep in the glass booth on his way to Himmelstein's farm. He thought nothing of it, at the time. Everyone knew about Teddy's phone calls. It wasn't until later that morning when Alec found Teddy still in the glass booth. Troubled, he woke Teddy and got a somber, concerned mumble. "She hasn't called."

Alec almost didn't catch it. He was too busy trying to just make sure Teddy was okay. He would stay, just long enough to be left on his own, until his return trip later that day, when he can check up. Leave it to the milkman to beat the paperboy to some news. He informed the entire town in trade for their empty milk bottles. Women in the town wrote letters to the Nurse Corps for information; men scavenged the newspaper. Both came back with nothing but dead ends. Each night, they would come check on their mayor in the glass booth, who stood on guard, waiting for her call.

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DUST CLOUDED TEDDY'S HORIZON WHEN HE WOKE THAT MORNING. With each turn along that distant, winding road before him, drawing ever closer. Because there were no winds, it hung in the sky, like a long shimmering red curtain clouding his otherwise clear horizon.

Red in the morning, a sailor's warning.

All of Teddy's thoughts resorted to his father's foreboding old rhyme. It weaved through the road like a silk ribbon caught in the wind. Perhaps it too was trying to cover whatever was causing it, as if fate itself is trying to will it out of existence and preserve the town's peace.

With the exception of the mailman and grocery deliveries, people didn't travel in; the only things to leave Quarry Lake were its lumber and letters. News, contact, from the outside, weaving in and out of the forest line. Teddy's eyes surveyed the dust's culprit to find a single black Cadillac making each turn. To Quarry Lake. One by one, the town drew their eyes to the forest line. Soon, they would hear its roaring engine, then its tires crush up the pebbles of rock underneath the tires.

The town watched as the car passed by the general store, the church, the lumber yard. The whole town stopped, especially when it passed the town, where First Street runs into Red Hill Road, closer to Teddy's booth.

Teddy's eyes didn't blink. He feared missing a fleeting moment; yet hoped he was dreaming it all. Either way, it all felt surreal. At first glance, it looked like a hearse. Teddy watched the Cadillac pass through the town. The curtain, now a tsunami of dust, draped the town. Teddy stood up, unable to handle the anticipation. He knew it was coming right for him, so what's the point in delaying the inevitable?

He imagined the moment she would step out of the car. Her uniform would be decorated with Nurse Corps medals. Each shining medallion a testament to her heroic efforts of healing, enough to send her home on good behavior. While the men may not salute a nurse, respect is given where its due. Her eyes lowered, equally anticipating laying eyes on him once again. Their wait, all those hours, days, months spent apart have finally come to an end. He would embrace her, as if their very soul was reunited with its better half. He would love her. He would never let her go. So he stood up from his chair, ready to face it. He stepped out of his glass booth as two men stepped out to approach Teddy.

The town saw two men exit the car. One of them held white sheets in their hands. Folded in white squares. With the dust still hanging in the air, the sheets looked like they were delivering laundry. It wasn't until they saw what rested on top of the linens that made it clear. Esther's nurse cap. It was her uniform. To this day, surviving townspeople will talk about that cap. Merle, the owner of the lumber yard, swore for the longest time that he saw along the cap's brim: drops of blood.

They will also talk about seeing their beloved mayor on his knees. The town's men and women raced to his side, hoping to catch a man from falling too far into grief, let alone onto the ground below him.

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THAT SUNDAY, THE TOWN'S MINISTER HELD A SERVICE IN TEDDY'S HOME. He spoke of community. He spoke 'if one member of its family suffers, the remaining members must also follow suit. Now is a time, when we're broken, that we encourage, uplift one another, together.' The entire town, including the town's former priest, Merchamp, attended; they surrounded their good neighbor, who became ever so distant. Miles away, still focused on that horizon, on that hearse.

Inside, Teddy replayed her final moments in his mind. The soldiers told him she passed when enemy soldiers stormed their medic tent. What they told him was Esther fought and died with honor. What Teddy didn't know was there were surviving witnesses. On her watch, Esther defended her fellow nurses and patients to the very end. She fought to be a survivor, to be a hero. The injured marines awoke to screams, just before the gunshots ripped into the air. They witnessed nurses falling to the ground. Others, like his Esther, whipped out a soldier's gun and started shooting, before sudden, deep blotches of red blossomed over their white scrubs.

He couldn't shake the feeling of her final moments. An imaginary specter, he watched her breathing fall more shallow with each breath. A stream of blood spilled across the floor. Her gaze, just as distant as his own. Both husband and wife looking out to that same distant horizon. The man in Quarry Lake, the man to save her from barley.

Weeks went by. He ate little, slept even less. There, he sat at his recliner, rocking back and forth. He never left the house, let alone cast his gaze out any window. His bed faced away from the windows, away from life itself, away from the glass booth. Outside, it awaited his return. At night, the glass booth watched over him under that solitary light. Its luster faded. A fine layer of dust coated its exterior. Inside, only ghosts and echoes occupied the silence. The phone stands on that desk, a relic of what feels like a whole life ago.

Meanwhile, across town, Teddy's neighbors talked. Some awoke to the sound of Teddy's screams coming from Red Hill Road last night. Which led them to question if they should tear down the glass booth. The whole town saw what it has done to Teddy. This discussion left people at an impasse. The booth brought them together. Now, it has become an eyesore. A bitter reminder that no good deed goes unpunished. One townspeople in particular, got to see it firsthand.

One silent night, Beau took a nightly stroll down the quiet town. He always walked after dinner. Raising a family of four, he found the only peace he found was not in front of an empty plate, but looking up at the star-spangled sky. There, just along Red Hill Road, under the light, he saw Teddy, axe in hand. Under his gin-stenched breath, Teddy told his neighbor "the ringing has stopped" before he left to go back to his home. Not only was it a horrifying sight, seeing their mayor, unhinged, but it was the first time he stepped out of his house.

Only this wasn't his first outing. Teddy's first days outdoors were spent back in the booth at two o'clock in the morning. In a silent room, on another silent night, he stared at the phone. It was dusty, a noticeable film coated the once smooth mahogany. He liked how it cradled there. The weight of it pressed into his hand. He placed the phone in his ear. Quiet. The muffled echoes of the nocturnal creatures grew further away. The line was still dead.

Just like her. He thought. It shocked him a little. The blunt candid nature of his words. Still, the memory of her lingered there. Her warm hands surrendered into his own under the moonlight.

To this day, Teddy still can't understand why he did this. He put his finger along the rotary and started turning, recalling the adage of old habits. The rotary recoiled, back into its initial point. One. Four. Three. He imagined the operator would intervene the call. "Who are you trying to reach, Mister Higgins?" before connecting him to into international lines. *I'd like to speak to Esther Higgins.* He'd ask, before the voice became a ringing tone.

A connection awaits. It's been a month since he had a phone line. His heart raced, anticipating to hear her voice. The traffic of people, fallen soldiers, a world at war, all happening behind her. Yet

her voice, he can still hear it. So calm through it all. That sigh she made when she knew he was listening to her. Her laugh, when he recalled their time at the lake. The refusal to be the first one to drop the call.

If he could only tell her he still wouldn't drop the call. Why not say it now? He thought. Entertain yourself for once. What would you say if she picked up. Anything? He imagined he would be dumbstruck. He would admit he wasn't anticipating her to pick up. She would laugh, almost admitting she couldn't wait to place the phone up to her ear.

It was his reflection that broke that veil between what could be and what is happening. A man talking to ghosts. Isn't he a little too old to be having an imagination? Leave that for the other dreamers. Those outside of this town. Because, in reality, dawn was breaking. The gin's power was waning.

He indulged himself, once again, and said her name on the phone, before returning it to its cradle. Just before the tears fell. He casted his gaze beyond. The light that swept her away into the shadows, far from this earthly plane. Yet through his reflection, he could have sworn he just saw her there. Not drawing a single breath, let alone a hello, just the phone in her hands, looking back.

Night after night, he returned to the booth and talked to his silent recipient. He updated her on life, day after day. Before closing each call. Again, he reminded her of how much he still missed her and longed just for a simple "Hello." To which he received just silence.

Psychologists would normally discourage the idea of a man talking to his deceased lover. Ever since he caught a glimpse of her within his reflection, Teddy dutifully took these imaginary calls. He imagined her sighs, along with her staple sayings. After a while, Teddy found his nightly therapy helped him face the outside. Perhaps this was a good way to find closure. The town watched him slowly return to society, to his civil service, to watching the ball game at the Elk, to judging the chili cookoff at the farmer's market. Good times were back in Quarry Lake.

The talks around town, of destroying that glass booth, stopped.

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THE PHONE ON RED HILL ROAD RANG AT ELEVEN-THIRTY. Alec was restocking his bottle for his second run. He heard something in the air, but was too far away to make sure. Alec disregarded that ringing for his tinnitus. It always came in waves when the summer nears its end, when he doesn't drink as much water as he should.

Merchamp was delivering wood when he heard it. He was deep in thought, concerned about the quality of the bark from the morning's chop. It's been on his mind during his time in the forest. Either he is getting stronger, or the trees are dry. He was able to topple a tree with about ten swings of his axe. It worried him a little. That is, until he heard the ringing within the glass booth.

Red Hill Road was never a lush area. So it still fails to make sense how a telephone can echo across a flat space of land. It was another dirt road in another forgotten road through another town. But Merchamp heard it, all right. He first felt doubt. Did Teddy really cut those phone lines? He had a hard time believing Beau. The man was never of a right mind, but the axe and the drunk mayor stumbling down the street

the ringing has stopped.

"Hand on my mother's grave." Beau insisted. Yet Merchamp wasn't so sure. Was that just hearsay? He couldn't seem to recall even seeing another car since that day, let alone a repairman. Regardless, the phone's chiming squeal sent shivers down his spine.

The only time he ever spent in the booth was when it was being built. He spent those weeks with Merle, chopping and gathering enough wood for the floor and ceiling of that space. The glass was a special order, courtesy of Meyer's Grocers.

Merchamp stood over the ringing phone. He was unsure if this was still real. Back when he saw his friend race to answer it on some distant early morning. Some echo of time long ago. When an outsider forever changed their small town. Bad for the neighborhood, which is why they give them

directions to anywhere but here. Only she did come and go as one, only stealing the heart of the owner of this phone to an early grave. Its dead bell, ringing. He lifted the receiver off the cradle. Off its hook, the air froze, if only to stop the incessant scream of bells.

Years from now, the town wondered what would have happen if he only left it alone. Teddy would endure, let its ringing linger in his ear. Perhaps his town would still be preserved today, instead of what it is now. His only solace would be waiting for those grace periods. Just between the rings, when its suspended bell dangled that ghostly echo into the quiet, early afternoon. If they only tore down this ringing relic before Teddy stepped outdoors. Before he would find himself back in the booth. Only Merchamp didn't. He surrendered reason to embellish in the possibilities. He placed it against his ear.

"Hello?" He answered.

What first hit him was doubt. That place of uncertainty, where a single moment felt like an eternity until someone answered.

"I have a telephone call for a Theodore Higgins."

Merchamp recalled the day when he visited Teddy's home. The town made it a point to always leave a Bible around Teddy's room. As if some divine influence could stop this man's heart from breaking. He might guess the town felt hope was found in these pages. For this former priest, he learned both could be found not within a book, but within himself. Why rely on such an imaginary being over the confidence of a friend? He lived just over the hill. Not a far trek by any means. Maybe it was that telephone, such technological advances, that both created as much as it bridged distances. Why walk when you can just ask an operator to connect you?

When Teddy admitted to cutting off the phone line weeks ago, Merchant could remember Teddy ask. "It seems I'm returning back to the nineteenth century. You still think I can run a town?"

"You've done it before." Merchamp replied, sharing a worn smile to a good friend.

On the other hand, Merchamp also knew Bibles stopped people, like Teddy, from biting into a gun. Up until a couple weeks ago, that also seemed likely. Then again, Merchamp knew Teddy was the furthest from owning a gun of any sort. *Too many stupid people in this world.* Teddy chuckled, recalling better days. Although, it seems those days are on the rise, once again. Merchamp only wished he knew Teddy's secret to the quick bounce-back.

"Hello, Caller?" the voice on the other end repeated. Merchamp jumped off the train of thought. He forgot about the dead phone in his hand, asking for Teddy.

"Yes."

"Is Theodore Higgins available? He's got a call."

Merchamp can't remember what he said in response. All he remembered was the operator's reply, right before he found himself running-no, sprinting-towards Teddy's house.

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TEDDY WASN'T HOME. His feet were cradled along the lake's shoreline, trying to purge her memory, if not one last time. Each night, the man wakes up and chases the ghostly remnants of their conversation. What he can remember, at least.

Take me where you find the most peace.

He felt her fingers just under his elbow. It was a cradling, almost asking for his hand in return. She matched that squeeze with her hazel eyes, both gentle, kind enough to keep a lonely man company. So he took her along this embankment, to his little sanctuary along the lake, where no one bothered him, where they later felt the most whole. She rested herself against his lap. His hands stroked her

hair, her ears, as they remained quiet, serenaded by the babbling brook, the whispering trees, her faint heartbeat.

A travelling nurse happened on this town, wanting no more than to feel like a native, and shook its very core. His heart. This town. It was here that he took her, where his heart felt the most at peace. Only now, the peace, much like his private sanctuary, was poisoned. Tainted by her memory. Even the junipers and lilies failed to salvage its beauty. But he's not here to reminisce any longer; no, he is fed up with the pain. He has to rip it off, like a dead limb. For such appendages are likely to spread its decay to other parts of the body.

The town has never had a successful suicide. It wasn't going to have one now. Have there been its share of heartbreaks? Absolutely, just walk anywhere along the lake. Hiding in the shadows you will see hidden markings. A graveyard of broken hearts, etched in bark. This afternoon will be no different, because just as Teddy teetered along the edge, Merchamp found his little hideaway, with a message.

The two men stood over the severed phone line. He told Merchamp the reason no one saw a repairman because Teddy its severed the connection himself one drunk night. Of course, the town did not need to hear this confession. His screams stretched well across the street, into forests, down alleys. They needn't look outside, for they knew where it was coming from. The gin had taken ahold of his grief; when her memory, mixed with juniper, tortured his mind. He assured his friend all was on the mend. He set aside his gin, his bad habit, until he can be in a better place.

He asked how long has Merchamp heard the phone ring. "Just this once." He replied before asking "How 'bout you?"

Teddy responded just with a humored chuckle, as if recalling some joke he overheard at some cookout. He couldn't answer because he was afraid to admit this wasn't the first time. There were nights when all he could hear were its chimes. Rough nights when gin was his only way to summon sleep. If other people heard it, it gave him hope that perhaps he wasn't crazy. Perhaps all of this wasn't some weird waking nightmare.

Expect a call at your usual time.

He stood in the booth in the early hours of morning, back in the glass booth. This early morn, the mayor took in the view of his sleepy town. It stood under the protective shadow of the forest. A canopy of pine, guarding, preserving the town from that city glow, the ever-present brightness that deprived its dwellers from the twilight sky. Helpless but to bow to life's curiosities and wonders.

He took solace in the night's clear sky. He searched the stars, hoping one would catch his attention. Convinced she might be there, yet doubting in its possibility. He hoped because he needed something to believe. To believe that she is truly in a better place, even if it is apart from him. Above, they glistened, breaking through the darkness, to give their spectators enough hope and wonder. That calls can be made from the other side. That he may have yet another chance to hear her voice. Teddy looked for that star and found himself lost. Each one sparkled across the heavens, a unanimous approval. He found it underneath the telephone pole, where the phone began to chime.

Teddy first noticed the phone's ring held a different cadence. Any sleep under his eyes quickly fled, retreating behind the combination of adrenalin and denial. Was it really ringing?

Who in town would even do this? To prank a broken man? A dead phone, ringing, in the middle of the night? Before his mind raced, almost beyond comprehension. Conflicted, he was uncertain if he should answer it. What could anyone say in moments like these? If he did, what would he even say? He took the receiver off the cradle and he held it to his ear. The wooden receiver was warm, as if someone has been holding it up to their ear all night.

With his ear surrendered to the receiver, he closed his eyes to focus on what he heard. First, it was the train's wheels. The brakes screeched and the whined, rebelling, if not protesting, its deceleration. Once stopped, he heard the conductor inviting new passengers aboard. Then, through all the hustle, he heard a timid "Hello?"

His heart leapt, in disbelief, before he heard the voice again.

“Teddy?”

He nodded. The tears that have welled up on his eye lids began to fall. He would like to meet a happier man. A man given another chance. To talk to his beloved. All he could muster out of his wet sobs were “Esther.” His senses washed over him, waves of juniper and lilies, of how delicate her hands touched the surface of water, those hazel eyes, burning into his own. He was overwhelmed but excited all over again.

“Yes, love. I’m here.”

His conversations usually began working through the formalities. First through the “how are you’s,” then ‘how’s the weather’s,’ before finally getting to the meat of the conversation. They are usually done quickly, as if on an agenda. Of course, this time was different, Teddy savored every minute. So he caught her up with the goings-on in the town, especially the day when he was told of her passing. How it hit the town, but also brought them all together. She listened, laughing when he mentioned their days by the lake.

It wasn’t until he ran out of things to say that he felt terror. Afraid that she might hang up; this time, for good. So he asked how she was doing. If she was at peace.

“It’s very cold here. Train’s backed up with refugees and dead soldiers. It’s gonna be a while before I can even come home. The war has ended, you know that?”

Yes, the war has most certainly ended. Teddy found the newspaper on his porch one foggy morning. That infamous front-page photo, of the man kissing some beautiful maiden upon his return. Both were surrendered, lost in the kiss and one another. He returned home; he survived. History made in a single shot. Every time he saw it, Teddy held such a poisonous envy for the man.

His mind wandered to his own history, of the soft lips that were speaking to him along some limboed train station. Their first kiss along Red Hill Road on some faraway summer, their first kiss as husband

and wife; then to their last kiss when on some early cold morning she was whisked away to save lives. It was quick, hurried, salty, for tears had wandered onto her lips. His own. Seduced by the past, by its nearness along with its closeness, it took him a while to also recall one important detail.

The war ended two years ago. Yet, here she is, on the phone line, talking about coming home. How can that be?

He feared questioning it, worried his surreal fantasy would evade him. There was a good reason. Maybe she wasn't dead at all. Perhaps he hallucinated severing the phone lines. What if she were some prisoner of war, only to be released years later, along with the others who also await a train back home? Until he remembered Merchamp stood next to him, just hours before, also seeing the damage made with that axe. No way two people could be sharing the same dream.

He wondered what the price might be for this out-of-corporeal-plane telephone call. His international calls to Germany were twenty-five cents a minute. No chump change by any means.

“Did you hear that, Teddy? I'm coming home!”

He didn't know how to reply. A small part of him was overjoyed to hear of her return, to replicate his own War's-End-Kiss; on the other hand, he was terrified. Nothing is free, not even a call from the other side. Teddy learned he sacrifice done a moment of insanity for another chance.

Then again, what if she was alive? What if those two men were mistaken?

“How can that be?” He admitted.

Pressed, immaculate folds of white. A droplet. That's all Teddy can remember. He fails to recall the men. Just their hearse, breaking his horizon. A damning line that divided Teddy from his Esther, where life itself failed to make sense.

Teddy held onto the fables of man. Uplifting promises where tortoises outrace rabbits, or servants become royalty. Whether in this life or the next, religion helped people like Teddy hold onto hope. Hope was all he believed in, because he got to hold it in his arms each night. To hear her voice, her return, Teddy felt it coming back.

Doubt splintered through his skewed logic. It anchored him to the earth. He kept remind himself to remember his last night of drinking. It led him behind the glass booth, where he split wires apart, much like that horizon. He questioned if two hearts can still communicate, even from beyond? In this moment, Teddy embraced in the possibility that he could hold her again. That she was as heroic as she was a survivor. Enough to earn a medal or two, at least. Because a life where she is still a phone call away was better than being in a reality where she was no longer there.

“Meet me at that station, Teds. Two days. You’ll see.”

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The last thing he heard was a timid “I Love You” before he rested the receiver back onto the phone’s cradle. Those three words. Stunned, he paused, and succumbed to the night. Its silence stirring, of distant nocturnal beasts that roam the woods outside, while his mind wanders into the dark. He could feel closeness of the other half of his heart. He heard the train’s distant howl. Just a couple stops before Quarry Lake.

Just a moment was all he needed before he broke the silence. For the first time in a long while, Teddy started laughing. He was certain this is a new stage in his grief. Where his uncertainty took a leap into confusing moments, when flights of fancy conflicted with reason. Lately, it became a challenge, one that refused to show itself out. Teddy lingered its exit because it asked for change. When fantasy can be construed for reality because your current reality is crumbling from the inside out. Teddy laughed because he was, for the first time, he was uncertain which state he would rather be. Could a grieving man return himself to a semi-normal state, he really wanted to believe it is possible? Just as long as it not away from her memory.

One night, his heart calloused from the hurt, Teddy lost himself in bottle of gin. He tried to reach out to Germany, just to hear her voice. Operators couldn't connect to the call because the line never existed. He blamed it on the medic tents. They often moved to new locations. Maybe the phone was never the same each day. Calls were always made inbound, past that shroud between that nebulous divide between him and his beloved. One that stretches days, seasons, lifetimes, apart.

For tonight, Teddy needed sleep. He could feel it just along the edge. While it certainly helped him embrace the possibility of talking to ghosts, he could feel its equal benefits when he turns in for the night. Only now, despite reason and logic, Teddy could feel that veil lift. That shroud that left just enough room for hope to revive his heart. No matter what he told it, that she is gone, that the phone line was dead, those men who returned her possessions to him that fateful afternoon. No matter the proof of reason, his heart would not let her go. A heart defies all common sense, because it yearns for what made him complete. Just her.

He searched his reflection through the glass, hoping to catch another glimpse of that apparition.

...meet me at that station, Teds. Two days. You'll see...

Each night, he dreamed of seeing her there. Disembarked passengers, from all walks of life, embracing their loved ones, ogling at their newborn children. The train would hiss steam, a couple toots of the horn, and it takes off, to reunite friends with family, with lovers, with our returning, fearless soldiers. Then, within the wonder, he'll happen upon a beautiful woman. Her gaze turned away, peering to the road behind her. He would call out, reaching, as soft as a gentle coo. She would turn to face him. Those hazel pupils will meet his own. Good days, better days, will return.

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IT'S NOT THAT LIFE IN QUARRY LAKE HAD BEEN TOUGH. Most days were spent walking about town, helping where he can. It kept him still tethered to this world, where he found support and kindness from his neighbors. Hell, some friends even helped him in return. Some days were difficult for

Teddy. Days when the pastor's wife, Adelaide, who found Teddy at Meyer's Grocers, standing in the center of aisle seven.

Vacant, lost in some other time. Back when she tapped him on his shoulder. If he stayed still enough, he can still feel her tapping, three times along his shoulder blade. Contact, to a time when she asked a friendly bag boy if there was any barley in that box of crackers. She came to rely on this friendly man, even if it were for a moment, to show her kindness, to make her feel like a native, like she belonged. She did. Her home was within his arms.

When you live in Quarry, you live with a community where you helped your neighbor. It's how Teddy got that glass booth. In fact, it was this glass booth that brought them all even closer. The kindness of once-strangers is the generosity of now-family. Not many people left the town because there was never a need to explore a life outside of this side of paradise.

Two days after that phone call, Merle was collecting lumber when he saw Teddy's pickup kick dust along Red Hill road. He gave a friendly wave as he passed, not knowing it would be the last time he, along with the rest of Quarry Lake, would ever see Teddy.

If you ask them today, his neighbors will talk about seeing that veil of dust drape over their town once again. How the air fell just as still as that fateful day. A memory encapsulated in red dust. Only this time, it wasn't coming for them. It was making its way out of town, flying along the contrails of Teddy's pickup. Some would dread what would happen in his passing, who would take Teddy's place as mayor. But none of that mattered, not today, at least. There will be time: there will be another. Ask anyone in town, they will still ask what drove a man from it? Was it truly losing his love?

Merchamp knew. He heard the phone ring. With the morning's lumber, he saw Teddy pack his bags and paid him a visit. He was the only one to not bullshit around the grief, but actually talk to the broken man. Teddy looked delirious, deprived of sleep. Manic, eager to get to some train station out of town.

“She’s waiting for me, Merch.” Teddy’s gaze distant. He told him about the calls. Not just one, but several. The phone kept ringing. She was just leaving Penn Station. She kept getting closer. She was coming back and he would be waiting. There at the station.

Merchamp saw his truck drive off. When the dust settled, and the distant engine fading behind the treeline, he heard the phone ring. He betrayed a fleeting thought, hoping Teddy heard its ring. He would come back and answer it. End that teeth-chattering ring that seemed to echo through his body. He faced the glass booth, and noticed a shadow hung over it. Unsure whether it was a swaying tree, or if his eyes were playing tricks on him. Merchamp dismissed it was from the telephone pole. He didn’t want to further invest thought into it. No use entertaining impossibilities, especially when you have other more-pressing thoughts. Best leave that to the wonder of someone else’s imagination. One that was still ringing across the quiet town.

Another fleeting thought passed. He could have saved his mayor. Perhaps that is what drew him to also leave Quarry Lake. The one neighbor who didn’t hang his convictions over his head. He asked his neighbors if they heard the phone at night. With every “no” he heard, the more Merchamp wanted to dismiss its possibility. It was that endless, harping chime that undid him. That since he picked up that phone, he too has been hearing its ring through the night. Deep down, he knew whoever might be calling, it would be for him. If he only admitted this fact, that we are one moment away from insanity, would he still be standing there? For the woodsman, all he had to do was pick up the phone.

On the other hand, maybe he could have stopped it all. Much like his neighbors, Merchamp could have taken down that glass booth. What stopped them was seeing their mayor’s health improve. His only cure was found in the very place that haunted him. For now, Merchamp dismissed the sound and its impossibilities. He continued towards Merle’s Lumber, to deliver today’s labor. Then ran home, to get into his car and race after Teddy.

TO THIS DAY, NO ONE IN QUARRY LAKE KNOWS WHAT FATE HAD IN STORE FOR THEIR BELOVED MAYOR, except Merchamp. Back in town, they only hoped even heart-broken men like Teddy deserve a happy ending. When life in the town was just as happy before the glass booth, before his wedding, before Esther. A man just happy to help, always about the town, who ensured only the very best from his neighbors and friends.

Teddy arrived at the station with ten minutes to spare. The welcoming brigade, men, women, children, even a brass band stood on standby. All eyes pointed northbound, into the distant wood. Teddy stood beside them and joined the anticipation. Each one silent, as if to catch the first rattle of the rocks against the railroad tracks. Teddy looked beyond the forest line to spy smoke stacks through the canopy. The train's light broke through the scattered thicket of trees. Its repetitive chugging along the tracks beat in time with the live band. Everyone drew out a unanimous cry. Little American flags flew into the air, waving proud of their fellow man, of their sons, brothers, and daughters, all returning home.

Merchamp found Teddy's pickup parked in the dirt lot. Years ago, before the war, this used to be Quarry Union. The station has since moved closer to the city. Away from Quarry Lake, away from the glass booth, away from what it has done to his friend.

What the change did, much like Teddy, was abandon this beautiful, tranquil station to the elements. Just another haunt, among lost memories and reunions of ages past. He found Teddy seated along the benches, still clutching the bouquet of lillies. His gaze fixated over the tree canopy, waiting to catch the puffs of smoke puffing into the sky. The wore an ecstatic grin on his face.

"She's here. Can't you see her?" Teddy exclaimed.

Teddy could see it all. It was exactly as he imagined and more. From each call from that booth, she drew closer to him. Brussels, Paris, London, New York, the miles between two pieces of one heart, drawing closer, nearer, until now, she lies just beyond the train door. Each passenger stepped off, almost as if out of a dream, or some nightmare that is now behind them. They carried bags, the

slings, or each other. Each one embraced that homecoming happiness. Through pain or relief, they still had each other. One step at a time, towards their welcoming committee.

Teddy searched the crowd and held his lillies close. They were her favorite and grew brightest when they were by the lake. Something about the minerals in the water, she once said. Men, women, family, children found within the long embrace of the other. A smile, a kiss, contact. Teddy watched them all, one by one. He basked in their joy, a vicarious yearning for his own, from the one who told him to be here.

two days...Teddy... How each minute and each hour labored around the clock.

She's gotta be here. He kept telling himself. He tried to convince himself that he wasn't anxious. He fought back the doubts in his head, only to find himself caught up in another ghost story. One that he told himself.

You got drunk and cut the cord. Did you not?

Yes. But how had she gotten through? His thoughts rebutted. Maybe the telephone line still had a connection out. One just enough to remain in contact with her. Can the dead know about a train? About returning soldiers? He waited, still under her spell, in solitude, waiting for that special moment.

He started to feel silly. An old man waiting, lilies in hand for his beloved, seems like a silly thing. Of course, when you are this man, surrounded by reunions, you can only keep up the hope. You tell yourself she is just behind that man with the large hat, or collecting her things from their cabin. Or maybe she is just like before, knowing how excited you get just to see her face. Any woman in love would tell you the anticipation is the best payoff.

Because he would eventually see her. The heartbursting moment is just past the cluster of nurses. Each of them were dressed in white uniforms with a cap adorning the crown on each of their heads.

Their hair dressed in a tight bun, disciplined, someone who watched you survive your worst. Their smile rivaled their uniforms, angelic, just as comforting as their bed-side manner.

Esther was a hero. The men told him that. Back when two men held her uniform, along with their condolences, out for Teddy. She was dressed in that same uniform. Only now, she was adorned with shiny medals pinned to her blouse. Shiny emblems to show her courage, to what she did for those men in the medic tent on that dreadful morning.

She survived. She is here, after all. There's no way....

He catches a spot on her nurse's cap. He can spot a little speck of blood. The same one Merle saw that afternoon when the black car, Teddy's Hearse, arrived in their quiet town. Before he can ask her, she catches his gaze with those beaming hazel eyes. And just like that, all doubt, is gone. This is all too real to be a dream.

There were no words spoken to one another. Just a simple embrace. One he gave before he wished her safety and sanctuary, before she left Quarry Lake, before she was lost from him. Only now, thankfully now, she is found again, in his arms. The juniper-like aroma still hangs in her air as he holds her closer and closer. Or were they lillies? They linger, seducing him deeper and deeper into this moment.

A moment too far from Merchamp's reach. He stayed by lost friend's side for as long as he could handle before he had to leave. He honestly wouldn't know what to do if Teddy were to wake up. He left his friend to his happiness, as Teddy's gaze remained transfixed on the forest canopy while embracing lillies. Flowers that were once full of life, wilted and surrendered its petals back to the ground. We removed them from its source, to take in its essence. Its remnants.

He returned to Quarry Lake and found everyone town waited over by Teddy's house with questions. He told them what they needed to hear, a man who simply yearned to find himself, so he left his comfort zone to find a life outside of Quarry Lake, away from her memory. What he failed to address was the truth: That their leader now stands, even to this day, along an abandoned train

station, waiting for a train that will never come, for a love that has long since passed. He never told them it was the glass booth that led to his undoing. He loved the booth, because she was there, just a phone call away.

It was a gift from the town. It would be useful to jump back onto his rightful place on the pulpit to remind them no good deed goes unpunished. Instead, he told them about the new life Teddy wanted to have, away from memory, but not from desire.

Later that evening, he returned to his cabin, deep into the woods, where he felt the most at peace. By morning, he was back to chopping some wood in the silence of the elements. He tried shaking Teddy's face from his memory by chopping harder, faster, as if carving the very memory from the earth. The trees fell, the world crashed, and it all came back. The quiet surrender of the wind, and that peculiar sound.

At first, he thought it was the coming of Merle's yard, the screech of the electric saws, slicing the wood for the day's delivery, to export over to the city by the river. Even this deep in the forest, where Merch often found old arrowheads and ancient paths leading to old caves. He followed it, dragging his day's share of wood back into town. Once he broke through the thicket of trees, he found himself back at the booth. Inside, the phone rang, insistent to be heard. He looked around the town. People passed between buildings, making trades and exchanging friendly smiles, blindly unaware of the noise that rang in his ears.

One thing Merchamp wouldn't admit was he knew the phone call was for him. He stood over the ringer's source, afraid to pick up the phone, afraid to find out who was exactly calling him. He saw what it did to Teddy, why would he go down the same destructive path?

Fate was just a phone call away. Maybe what can be used to help Teddy is on the other line. Perhaps he can help Teddy and bring him back home. This tipping point, Merch admitted, is what led him to pick up the phone.