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The Pen and the Pistol

Five o' clock. The massive bell up in the tower past the docks gives a resounding *clang*, signaling the end of the work day for most of us. The tide is already beginning to ebb away, receding into the endless fog. And I've caught hardly any fish.

I look up for a second, squinting up at the horizon over the gently rocking water. There isn't even any need to squint; the sun is nowhere to be found, lost behind the steely gray clouds hours ago. There's a storm on the way. I can feel it in the sharp salty air. I look back down at my net, and the meager amount of fish in it. Four of them. One salmon, one cod, two mackerel. The cod is still flopping pitifully, holding on for dear life. Not enough to sell if I want me and Doris to eat tonight. On good days I have to haul it out of my tiny little boat, but this time it's more of a discouraged dragging.

After making sure the rope is securely fastened to the wooden leg of the dock, I load the fish into the little basket and begin the walk home. It isn't far. That's the funny thing about this town. Everything is close, except for the people. They're about as distant as you can get. No one ambling down the cobblestone street acknowledges me. I wonder how many of them even know my name. They call me a lot of things. The fisherman's boy. The butcher's nephew. Boy. But I don't hear just "Owen" too often.

I walk past the bookshop like I do every day. And like every day, I slow down just a little bit to look at what's in the window. A pen, placed lovingly on a faded red velvet pillow. The

handle, made of blown glass, shades of blue and green and purple blending together effortlessly like the waves themselves. The tip is steel, sharp like an eagle's beak. I've memorized every inch of this pen. It's been in that window for as long as I can remember. Father once told me it's because no one can afford it. It was made by some long-dead master craftsman decades ago. What would anyone in this tiny town, hardly a dot on the coast of Maine, want with it anyway? There's only one schoolhouse up at the top of the hill, but no great minds ever came from there. Most people here are content just to do their jobs. Still, I wonder sometimes what it would be like, to hold it in my hand, to press it to paper, to command the flow of words like the masters of its craft. I think I'm left-handed. At least, that's the hand I use when I fish. But writing...I've never really tried it before.

I stop walking altogether when I see who's behind the glass. Beatrice, the bookkeeper's daughter, talking to a customer. Bea, to me, but I would never call her that. For girls like her, you need permission first. She's laughing, that high twinkling laugh, at some joke the man has made. There's a sudden pang in my heart, one I know too well. Bea is beautiful. She's always smiling at the people who come into the shop. Always has something to say. And she remembers my name. I like when she says my name. I like her smile, her red hair, her soft lily hands. I've always imagined what those hands would feel like.

And here this stupid man is, trying to impress her.

It's not that I'm not used to it; of course a lot of men like to talk to her. She'll probably get married soon too. She's already twenty. Six years older than me. I could be that man, though, if she just gave me time.

Suddenly she turns her head and looks straight at me. She smiles again, but I don't know if it's at me. I feel a sudden heat creep up my neck as I hurriedly look away and keep walking, almost dropping my basket. Why didn't I smile back? Stupid.

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Home. Drumming my fingers on the driftwood table, waiting for dinner. Doris is busy boning the fish I caught. Her huge hulking back and shoulders obscures her fat red face from view. Good. I never like looking at her. Still, she's a good cook, even if she keeps most of the food for herself. I guess she picked a few things up, being around dead meat all day. We don't get many visitors in this town, but the few we do get are always surprised that the local butcher is a woman. She definitely looks the part: big, strong, hands like sledgehammers, merciless with a cleaver. But she always has that smell about her, beneath the usual smell of starch and sweat. Like rotting flesh. Like the smell that never came out of the sheets when Father died.

The two of us never talked much since then. She snorted when I showed her what I had caught that day. "Useless," she muttered, snatching it from me. Then, loud enough for me to hear, "Just like your father." She likes to say things like that. To hear her tell it, everything is his fault. Why we live in this shack of a house. Why we barely have enough to eat. Why Mother died. From what I can gather, after I was born, my mother changed. She grew sad and distant. She didn't feed me. Every day she cried, but when Father asked her why she couldn't say. Little by little she wasted away, until the day she died, and no one could say why. I try to remember her, but as hard as I try no face comes to mind. Sometimes I remember long brown hair, and dark, sad eyes. A faraway voice singing a lullaby, the melody half-remembered, the words

constantly on the tip of my tongue. Father never told me what she looked like. He never said much of anything about her. But Doris was all too happy to tell the story after she moved in to help around the house, all too happy to remind Father of his failure to do anything. *But where were you, Doris, I want to say, where were you when your sister was killing herself?* But I never do. Without Father around Doris was free to show me just how like sledgehammers her hands were. But it doesn't seem like tonight would be one of those nights.

"Well don't just sit there gawking at me," Doris suddenly snaps, barely turning her head, "go do something useful, you little shit." Without a word, I stand and leave the room. I can't be around her rotten smell for a minute longer.

The door moans in protest as I burst out into the sharp night air and plunk down on the rickety wooden steps. Stupid cow. If I were as big as her I'd snap her in half. Maybe then she'd shut up. I feel tears stinging my eyes. No—no, not tears. Just the cold air is all. She can't make me cry. Never.

I stare straight ahead at the sleeping town sprawled before me. Definitely a storm coming—the clouds overheads are an angry black. From here I can just make out the tiny wink of the lighthouse across town. I can't see it in the dark, but above that lighthouse is a single, albeit giant house, sitting lonesome at the edge of the overlooking cliff. People around town say that that house once belonged to the most powerful family in the county. They say the last surviving heir, William something, was a brilliant writer, one of the best of his time. The bookshop still carries all of his works, which I've never been able to afford. But he went insane after the death of his wife and child, and hasn't left that house in years. No one is sure if he's

even still alive. I can't help picturing him, dead and dried up on the dusty library floor, like the pages of his books. He could have died years ago and no one would ever know. They could tear that house down and all they'd find is bones. How different his life must have been from mine; wine, parties, laughter, women. To be praised as a genius. But to lose someone you loved so much...I guess nothing would really matter after that.

I stand up and head back inside, going straight for my room. I'm suddenly not hungry anymore.

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Nothing. I've been sitting in this stupid boat, working all day and the net is completely empty. The sky has been a solemn, stormy gray all day. I imagine the fish will be gone until tomorrow. I toss the net to the other side of the boat angrily as I begin rowing back to shore. What a waste. I wouldn't have even gone out today, if not for Doris being in a foul mood this morning. And now I'll have nothing to show for it. It's her own fault, the bitch, sending me out with curses and threats, knowing full well I would come back empty-handed. Why is it my responsibility to keep us fed, anyway? When was the last time she brought dinner home? Never, that's when. If for once she got up off her fat, lazy—

A sudden rumble of thunder sounds overhead. I crane my neck up and am greeted by a single fat drop square on my forehead. Perfect. Another drop, and then another, until the rain comes down all at once, a sudden, relentless torrent. Another rumble, louder this time. I keep rowing. I'm not far from the shore, I know it. Only...am I going the right way? The rain is making it harder to see. Then, out of nowhere, I'm blind for half a second. A fork of lightning farther out

on the water. A few seconds, then another thunderclap. That wasn't far. I have to get back, I *have to...*

A sudden twinkle out in the distance. Was that the lighthouse? I hadn't realized I had gone that far west. I'd gotten frustrated when I caught nothing in my usual spot, so I kept moving farther out. I can't remember even hearing the bell. If I'm that close to the lighthouse, then...then it's going to be a long walk home. And I'm already soaked to the bone. Damn it, why did I go so far out?

Minutes pass. Or maybe hours, I don't know. It's getting harder to keep track of anything. Just the rain. Just the rowing. My hands are aching, frozen into fists. My elbows creak in protest. But I have to keep going. I must. Keep heading for that faint light.

Finally I make it to the tiny patch of beach below the lighthouse, the wind howling around me. There's nothing to tie my boat to, so I drop my makeshift anchor, a rope tied thrice around a sizeable rock, into the shallow water, and wade my way onto the shore. My knees give way twice, partly from the freezing water and partly from the shifting sand. But I make it, spitting out several mouthfuls of salt water, resisting the urge to collapse onto the rocks. I won't make it home, I suddenly realize. Not in this storm. I have to find someplace else to go.

My first thought is the lighthouse. I feel my way through the rain like a blind man, even though the door is just a few yards away. But no luck; an iron padlock hangs forlornly on the heavy wooden door. This is bad. Where am I supposed to go now?

I know where. There's only one place that isn't more than a mile away from here. But should I? My eyes slowly travel up the side of the rocky cliff, up towards the shadow of the house, looming overhead like some horrible sea creature. No. No, I can't. I don't even know what's in there. I—

Another blinding flash, this time much brighter, much bigger, and much closer. In that instant I make up my mind. It's the only place I can take shelter. I slowly make my way up the dirt path, shaking badly in the cold. Just a bit farther.

There. I'm there. It's just in front of me. Up the path, to the twisted wooden porch, soaked through from the rain. It isn't as frightening closer up. It just looks like an old, nice house. But I can't just wait out the storm on the porch. I have to go in.

The front door is unlocked, and opens without protest. Like it's been in use. That should be warning enough, but all I'm thinking about is getting out of the storm. I enter the house and shut the door heavily behind me, collapsing onto the dusty floor. I take several moments to catch my breath, and it's only then that I look around me. I can't see much; the room is pitch black save for the pale blue light leaking in from outside. The old windows are rattling from the still-raging wind. It isn't exactly warm in here, but it's dry. That's all I can ask for. Alright, maybe I can stay here, at least until the storm passes. But when will that be? It's showing no signs of letting up. I could be stuck here all night for all I know. I draw my knees up to my chest, and for half a second I consider drifting off to sleep.

There's a sudden noise. A quiet one, but it's there. A sort of scuffling. I feel an unpleasant jolt up my spine as I'm shocked awake. What was that? My eyes scan the room,

even though I can see nothing. I'm not even sure where it came from. Rats? Termites? It's an old house, maybe it just makes noise. Maybe. I stand, trying to quiet the sound of my own breathing. I suddenly don't want to be sitting down. I take a few shaky steps forward, the floor surprisingly silent under my feet. I realize I'm standing on a carpet. There it is again! Another scuffling, louder this time. That sounded too big for rats. I don't dare call out; my throat is so parched I don't think I can even make any noise. At least my eyes are beginning to adjust to the dark. There's something in front of me. Something big. A staircase, grander than any I'd ever seen in person. Despite myself, I edge a little closer. Is that...? Yes, it is. At the top of the staircase, just barely visible, there's a light.

I hear a click just behind my left ear. Faster than I meant to, I turn around.

And I'm staring down the barrel of a gun.

I don't even see the face behind it. All I can see is the cold metal, shoved in front of me. Just one trigger pull away.

I shudder. There's a shaking. A loosening. And then I feel it: a sudden warmth, trickling down my leg.

"Who are you?"

I jump at the sound. For half a second, the voice doesn't make sense to me. My numb brain doesn't make the connection that there's someone holding the gun. Then the face comes into focus. A man, not much taller than me, but hunched over so he's looking me straight in the eye. His face is heavily lined in the shadows, his eyes hollow and black. He has a hawk nose,

long and slightly crooked. His hair is a mess of wild curls, greasy and unkempt. I can't tell what color it is in this light. He's holding a candlestick in one hand, while the other keeps the pistol trained between my eyes.

"Hey. I asked you a question." Such a simple question, yet it takes me a moment to find the answer. I swallow dryly.

"O-Owen. My name is Owen." My voice cracks badly, going all high-pitched like a girl's.

"Owen what?"

"Owen...Owen Traynor. Sir." I don't know why I added that last part. As if he'll decide not to kill me if I address him right. His black eyes narrow, and he shifts the pistol in his hand.

"You're trespassing, Owen Traynor. Why are you here?"

"P-please sir. I got caught in the storm. I h-had nowhere else to go—"

"So you came here? You had no right. This is my house. *Private property.*" The barrel moves a fraction of an inch closer to my face. My breath catches in my throat, my head jerking involuntarily back.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know there was anyone here. I just thought I could stay...stay here until the storm passed." Why hasn't he shot me yet? I try to blink away the water that has formed on my eyelashes. My heart is pounding in my ears. "I don't have to stay here. If you like, I could...could leave."

He just stares at me. His face is unmoving, like stone. We stay like that for what feels like an eternity. Then he suddenly flinches and lowers the gun, just like that. Without a word he turns and stomps up the stairs, vanishing into the hallway above.

For a second I don't believe it. I'm alive. I'm shivering and soaked in rain and piss, but I'm alive. But what just happened? And what now? Is he letting me stay? I don't know, I don't *know...*

It's like something in my brain shorts out. Next thing I know I'm on the floor again, in the fetal position, breathing heavily. I really just want to sleep now. I could just...close my eyes and...and...

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Warm. I'm warm. It's so pleasant that I don't realize how strange it is. There was a storm, I remember. But I made it out. I must be home now, in my own bed. But...but no, I never got home, did I? That doesn't make sense. Why would I be warm if I weren't home? There was the path, and the house, and the light in the dark, and the gun. The...the gun—the *gun--!*

I get the sudden sensation that I'm falling, and I jerk awake. Something is tickling my face. I swat it away. Blanket. It's a blanket, worn and frayed at the edges. Where did it come from? It wasn't there a second ago when...when...

I don't recognize the room I'm in. It's warm and brightly lit. Cozy. Red and gold light bounces off the walls. It looks like a study of some sort. The walls are lined with shelves overflowing with books. More of them are stacked by a mahogany desk, intricately carved,

littered with scraps of paper. A fire crackles cheerfully in the brick fireplace. I almost don't notice the shadowy lump in the chair across from me. Him. The man from before, puffing away on a black pipe. He looks up at the stirring.

"You're awake." He says dryly. It isn't a question, just an observation.

I sit up awkwardly. I realize I'm lying on a sofa. No, it's smaller than a sofa. A loveseat, I think it's called. It's very cushy, a faded bottle-green. More comfortable than anything I've ever slept on.

"How—how long was I asleep?" I have to ask. It feels like days have passed.

"Not long," He says, staring into the fire, "an hour maybe."

"Did you bring me up here?" He looks at me this time, but doesn't answer. I flinch. Right. Stupid question. There's a long pause, with nothing but the crackling of the fire in the still air.

"Thank you." I hear myself saying. It's only polite, right? Again, no response. He just takes a long pull on his pipe. Another pause. Is he expecting me to say something else? I could probably just go back to sleep and he probably wouldn't notice. Or at least pretend not to. I kind of want to. I'm still exhausted. But something is still nagging at me. Who is this man?

"You...you used to be a writer, didn't you?" The name comes back to me. "William Harkin." He exhales, his breath coming out in a billowing white puff of smoke.

"I was."

“Was? Who are you now?”

“No one you need concern yourself with.” I study his face for a moment. In this light he looks nothing like the hard stone mask that stared me down an hour ago. He’s younger than I thought at first, I realize. His hair is straw-colored, with a few streaks of gray. But around his eyes it’s most apparent: a sort of weariness. Exhaustion. The world has aged him much faster than it should have. I wonder how much of the stories about him are true. “You can stay here until the storm lets up.” He continues, “After that you should be on your way.”

“R-right. I will.” Of course. Why should I be able to stay any longer than that? Even if it’s comfortable here.

Something catches my eye. The gun from before, on the end-table next to me, catching the firelight. My curiosity gets the better of me. I reach for it.

“What are you doing?” He says sharply. His tone is more annoyed than afraid. I smile apologetically.

“I’m sorry, it’s just...I’ve never seen one in person before. Can I look at it?” He stares at me for a moment, then gives a jerk of his head, barely a nod. Carefully, almost reverently, I pick up the gun and slowly turn it around and around in my hands. It’s one of those old dueling pistols. The barrel is long, thin and silver, the gold handle fashioned with an intricate design. It’s strangely beautiful, in its own way. I have to wonder why he’s even letting me handle it like this. And then I open the cylinder and see why.

“You know, if you ever threaten someone with a gun, you might want to make sure it’s loaded first.” I say without thinking. He cracks a thin smile, the first one since I’ve met him. It’s more of a smirk actually.

“Still got you to piss yourself, didn’t it?” I instantly feel my face flame up. I forgot about that. “You might want to change those pants, by the way.”

“I didn’t bring a spare.” He snorts at me, then gets up and disappears into the other room. In a few moments he’s back, holding a pair of breeches.

“You’re a shrimpy little thing. You’ll have to pull the belt as tight as it’ll go.” I blink stupidly.

“You don’t have to—“

“I don’t want you stinking up my study. Go change.” He shoves the breeches at me. I shakily take them from him and do as he says. The pants are worn, but well-made. Certainly nicer than anything I’ve ever owned. I come back holding the soiled pair.

“I guess I’ll just keep these? Sorry about the blanket.”

Harkin shrugs. “It was old. I was going to throw it out anyway.” What a strange man. It’s hard to believe this is the same person who pointed a gun at me not an hour ago. Even if it wasn’t loaded.

“Sir, I appreciate everything you’ve done, but...why are you helping me? You didn’t have to and...and not that long ago I thought you were going to kill me.” The words come out

clumsily, but I don't care. I'm probably never going to see this man again. I figure I might as well ask him whatever I want. He gives me that same annoyed look.

"I thought you were a thief." He says simply. "I've had them before. Little street-rats who think I'm dead and gone, and my things are ripe for the picking. Doesn't take much to scare them off."

"But how did you know I wasn't lying?"

"I used to be a writer. I lied and told stories for a *living*. I know a liar when I see one. And you aren't one. Hell, you probably couldn't lie even if you wanted to." That stings, though I can't say why. He didn't exactly say it disapprovingly. I sink back down onto the loveseat.

"Do...do you still have copies of your books?"

"I've got copies coming out of my ears. Why?"

I almost dare not ask. I've never owned a book before. Could never afford one. Still. "Could I take one of them with me?" For half a second something like surprise crosses his face, and then it's gone again.

"Can you read?"

"Of course I can." My ears burn. I can read—barely. It was one of the few things Father managed to teach me before he died. But I've never had much chance to use it. Maybe this would be my chance to start. He gestures towards his bookshelves.

“Be my guest. I should be glad to be rid of the damn things anyway.” I scurry towards the stack of books, a strange elation flowing through me. Father said always choose a book that spoke to you, but there are so *many* of them. So many interesting titles I have to tilt my head or squint to make out. After a few minutes I look back at Harkin, who’s gone back to his pipe.

“Can I only take one?”

“I really don’t care.” He means it, too. I take as many as I could conceivably carry home with me, and he doesn’t object once. I pick one from the bunch and immediately go back to my seat and start reading. It’s hard at first; I stumble over a lot of the words, but Father’s lessons slowly come back to me. And the *story*—I only read a few pages and I can already tell Harkin is a brilliant writer. The best one I’ve ever read. Well, alright he’s the *only* one I’ve ever read, but it’s still good.

“You don’t write anymore, do you?”

“No. I don’t.”

“But these are so great. Why’d you stop?” I see the grimace cross his face, and I immediately regret asking, though I can’t say why.

“I don’t know. Life.”

“What’s that mean?”

“None of your business.” His response is harsher than I was expecting. I clam up at that and go back to my reading.

Before I know it, the pale light of dawn is coming in through the window, and I'm not even halfway through the first book. But the storm is gone, and that's all Harkin was waiting for.

"Well, you should be able to go home now." His hint isn't very subtle.

"Right." I say getting up from my seat. "I'll leave now." I gather up all of the books and stumble towards the door. "Um, thank you sir, for...for everything." I'm out the door before I even hear his response. All I'm thinking about are the books.

As I begin the long walk home it begins to dawn on me. Where am I going to keep these? Doris might accuse me of stealing them. She'll look for any excuse to harp on me. I'll just have to sneak them past her somehow. It's not like she ever sets foot in my closet or a room. What would she do in there, clean? I doubt it.

I make it back into town with the stack of books in my arms. Not much farther...

"Owen!" A high, clear voice calls my name. I almost don't believe it's who I think it is. I turn my head and there she is.

"Oh, ah—good morning Beatrice." She's leaning against the doorway of the bookshop, that half-smile I love so much on her lips. Her rosewood hair catches the sunlight perfectly.

"Good morning to you too. Where did you get all those books? I don't remember selling them to you." Her tone is playful, but genuinely curious. I feel myself blush. Oh. That's what she wants to know. Her father's bookshop is the only one in town. This must look strange to her.

“I borrowed them from a friend. I need to return them later.” She steps out of the doorway, bobbing up and down as she walks towards me.

“Why Owen, I didn’t know you were such an…avaricious reader.” I shrug; no small feat when you’re carrying a stack of books.

“I am now.” I don’t know what that word means. She giggles.

“Well, since you love books so much, do you think you could do me a little favor?”

“I, ah—sure.” I should really get home, but somehow I doubt I’ll be missed. “What do you need?” Bea sighs theatrically.

“Oh, I’m such an idiot. I was running around all day yesterday running errands that I forgot to organize the back room of the shop. Father’s been telling me to do it all week, but I keep forgetting. It won’t take long, I promise.” She bats her long eyelashes at me. “Please? It would mean the world to me.”

“Of course I’ll help you.” I say, a little too quickly. This is my chance, and I’m taking it. She smiles dazzlingly.

“Oh, thank you so much! Here, you can leave those by the door. I’m sure Father won’t mind. Now, let me just show you the back room and you can get started.” I follow her into the shop.

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I collapse onto my bed. *My sweet, sweet bed. I've missed you so much.* Bea's little favor kept me busy for a good part of the day. The back room turned out to be a mess. Books were tossed helter-skelter everywhere, no sort of organization in sight. And I, the fisherman's boy who could barely read, was somehow supposed to alphabetize everything. It was exhausting and annoying, but whenever I found myself wondering why I agreed to this, I reminded myself that Bea was counting on me, and that this could be my chance to get into her good graces.

And she was overjoyed when I had finally finished. I even got a kiss. It was definitely worth it in my book. And now...now I can finally sleep.

"Where the hell have you been?" The harsh voice cuts through my dreaming. Oh no. I forgot. I sit up to see Doris, completely blocking the narrow doorway. Her fat face is dark with anger.

"I ah---I was out fishing."

"All night and all day? Well, where's your catch then?" Almost instinctively I scuttle up against the wall, away from her.

"There was a storm. There were no fish out." I don't even bother telling her I might have drowned out there. She won't care.

"Really. Then why did I see you with that girl in the bookshop this morning?" She cuts me off before I can even speak. "No, I'll tell you why: you just didn't feel like working today and thought you'd slack off. I don't believe how selfish you are sometimes. All these years I've worked my fingers to the bone to keep us afloat, and you—you're still the same lazy, ungrateful

wretch you've always been. You know, your father was lazy too, and look what happened to him." She goes on like this for a bit longer. It's always the same with her. Always the same speech about me and my useless father. I'm almost surprised she hasn't hit me yet. But right now, I'm really too tired to care. I just let her vent. Eventually she realizes she's getting nothing from me, and slams the door shut in anger. She didn't even seem to notice the books stacked up in the corner. Good. Now I can sleep.

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Throughout the next few weeks I make my way through the books Harkin gave me. Each is amazing, better than the last. In this way, the days pass in a pleasant haze. My catches are good. I'm able to ignore Doris. And Bea talks to me every day. Usually it's because she has something for me to do, but I don't mind. As long as it's her asking, I'll do anything.

But before I know it, I've run out of books to read. Once that happens, and I'm still not sure why exactly, I find myself on Harkin's doorstep once again. He stands in the doorway, looking at me as if I were something slimy that crawled up from the beach.

"You again."

"Y-yes. Sir." Suddenly the confidence I had coming up here has left me. Harkin's eyes narrow suspiciously.

"Look, I don't know if you misunderstood me, but you don't have to return those pants. I outgrew them a long—"

“No, it isn’t that. I just wanted to...” I look down at my shoes, “...well, I was wondering if I could borrow some more of your books. See, I have the other ones I took here with me.” I gesture to the stack I put down beside me before knocking on the door. He looks at the pile, then back at me. He rubs a spot in the middle of his forehead like he has a headache.

“Fine,” he sighs, “bring those ones up and make it quick. And try not to take anything else of value from my study while you’re at it.” He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I gather up the books and hurry into the house.

A few more weeks and this happens again. This time he doesn’t seem quite as unhappy to see me. He still watches me from his chair while I collect the books to make sure I don’t steal anything, though. I feel his gaze boring into the back of my head while I’m facing the bookcase. The silence is so uncomfortable I have to break it.

“What made you start writing anyway?” I turn to face him, my latest read clutched to my chest. He scratches his faint, scraggly beard.

“I don’t know. Expectations, I suppose.”

“Of who?”

“Lots of people. My family, my peers. I come from a world of intellectuals; you need some kind of talent to boast about at all the parties and galas, otherwise you’re just a big bore. Not as impressive as, say, a doctor, but there it is.”

“But it can’t be as simple as that, can it?” I press, “With the stories you come up with, you had to have gotten your inspiration from somewhere, right?” Harkin gives me an annoyed look.

“I don’t know what you want me to say. It was something I was good at, so I used it to my advantage. There was no profound inspiration, no amazing person or event in my life that made me want to write. I just did.” He shifts a little in his seat, drawing his arms almost defensively up to his chest. For some reason I feel bad for asking.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry, I just...”

“It’s fine. I don’t think it’s something you would understand anyway. It was a different time, a different place.” He laughs dryly, his throat sounding like sandpaper. “Look at me, reminiscing like a senile old man.”

“I-it’s alright. I don’t mind.” I draw the book a little more tightly to my chest. “I suppose it’s been a while since you’ve had to explain it.”

“It has. Truth be told, I don’t even remember the last time I had a conversation with someone. I’d forgotten what it was like.” He leans forward, elbows resting on his knees. He shakes his head abruptly. “Anyway. You should be on your way.”

“Ah—right. I will be. Thank you for the books.” I gather them up and scurry towards the door. I’m almost disappointed I can’t stay. I’ve just about reached the doorway when his voice stops me for a second.

“You can come back later,” he says, almost meekly, “if you like.” I give a hard swallow.

“Thank you. Maybe I will.”

~

This continues for quite some time. Each time I finish a book, I come back. Harkin gets less and less resistant to my visits as time passes. Eventually I start coming even when I don't want a book. Doris has become so insufferable lately I can't stand being home. And Bea is always busy during the day. I never really thought about it, but until now I didn't have anywhere else to go. We don't do much, just talk. Harkin is reluctant to say much about his own life. But we talk about his work endlessly. I probably ask him more questions than I should. One day, in annoyance, he asks me,

“Why don't you just write your own stories? You'd be a lot happier that way than just reading mine.”

I blush. I'd never really considered it. “I...I suppose I've never really written before.” Harkin raises his eyebrows at that.

“No?” He fetches a piece of paper and pen and hands it to me. “Write something now.”

For a few long minutes I just sit there, looking from Harkin to the paper and back to Harkin again, mouth opening and closing like a fish. I do what I can, the words tumbling out of me painfully and awkwardly. It's a simple story about a dog. I really don't know what else to write about. When I finish he snatches the paper up and scowls at me.

“You write like a two-year-old. Here, let me show you the proper way.”

And he does. The days pass and for each one he has a new lesson for me. I didn't even realize there was a "proper" way to write a story, but apparently there is. The words he uses mean nothing to me at first. Narrative arc, character development, plot device, one-dimensional. They go in one ear and out the other. I feel myself nodding off at one point. Harkin picks up on this.

"Are you listening?" He finally snaps. I snap out of my stupor.

"I...yes, of course I am. It's just..."

"What?"

"Well...I thought the point of a story was that you could write whatever you want, however you wanted to. It all comes from your own mind, right? Your own imagination?" Harkin puts the pen down.

"Not if you want to get it published, you can't. There's a big difference between writing for yourself and writing for other people. Yes, you could theoretically write whatever the hell you wanted, but if you plan on sharing your work, letting other people see it, be prepared for some brutal criticism."

"But what right do other people have to tell me how to write? It's my work."

"It's not that simple. You could step back, look at a finished story, and think it a masterpiece, solely because you were the one who wrote it. Who created it, gave it life and breath and a voice. But not everyone will see it that way. They won't have the same bias you do, because it isn't theirs. They won't know the character's history you have perfectly planned

out in your mind, won't see the places you can conjure up clear as day. If you ask for honest opinion, they won't be afraid to pick it apart, word by word. Until they can see it the way you do, they won't love it the way you do. That's why we have these rules—I suppose you could call them 'guidelines', but when it comes down to it, if they're not followed your work will suffer for it. They're put into place because they outline aspects of a story that are accepted as universally good, so anyone who reads it could appreciate it just as much as the writer, or at least close to it.

“So what about your stories? They follow these rules, right? Does that make them perfect?”

“God, no. My boy, there's no such thing as a perfect story. Like I said, how much someone likes a piece of work depends on the person. I've met plenty of people in my time who hated the way I write, even if they were too polite to say so. Everyone has different ideas of perfection, and writing is no exception. The best I can hope for, the best *any* writer can hope for, is that the people who like my work outnumber those who don't.”

I look down at my piece of paper, squeezing the black pen between my fingers. “But what if I don't even like what I've written? I could do so much better than this, I know it.”

“So why don't you?”

“I don't know how.”

“Then listen to what I'm saying.”

“I still don't get it. Why do I have to follow your rules of writing?”

“They’re not mine. They’re everyone’s.”

“But you just said everyone has different rules.”

Harkin snorts, though it’s a bit more good-natured than usual. “I swear it’s like talking to a wall. You have a lot to learn, little Owen.”

I don’t realize it at first, but it’s in that moment that Harkin becomes my teacher. It’s strange; neither of us is used to being in that position. But it happens nonetheless. And we continue like this for a long time. Days turn to weeks turn to months turn to even a year or two. And eventually we start talking about other things. Mostly we talk about me; my life, Doris, my parents. I bring up Bea a lot. One day, Harkin stops me.

“You talk about this Bea girl quite a lot. Tell me more about her. What’s she like?” So I tell him. I try my best to describe Bea, everything that she is, using the new words I’ve learned, but somehow even then I don’t feel like I’ve done her justice. Harkin doesn’t seem impressed either way.

“That’s all well and good, but tell me...what does this girl do for you?”

“What do you mean?” I feel my face scrunch up.

“Well, you’ve talked about all these things you’ve done for her, but what exactly does she give you in return? A pat on the head? A gushing statement of what a nice boy you are?”

“Well, I...she’s kissed me a few times.”

“Where? On the lips?”

“No. What does that matter?” Harkin looks very amused and I’m not sure why.

“It matters a lot more than you think. Now remind me, what family does this girl comes from?”

“The Masons.”

“Ah, the Masons. Yes...if I remember correctly, in my time Mr. Mason was a simpering bootlicker who would kiss anyone’s ass if it meant bolstering his own reputation, and Mrs. Mason was an insufferable gossip. Couldn’t go one day without opening her mouth. Put those two together, and I bet that entitled little twat hasn’t read a book in her life. Oh no, she has much more *important* things to do.”

“Don’t talk about her like that!”

“I only know what you’ve told me about her. From what I can tell, she spits out a few big words and bats her pretty eyelashes and men fall at her feet. And I hate to be the one to tell you this, but it sounds to me like she’s turned you into her little errand boy. Really, do yourself a favor and let this one go.”

I’m seething at this point. “You’re saying I’m not good enough for her?”

“I’m saying she’s not worth it. I’ve seen girls like her before. My parents, God rest their souls, even tried to marry me to a few of them. It all comes down to what you can do for her, and for how long. She may pretend to be interested, and hell, maybe someday she’ll even let you into her bed. But mark my words, she’s going to marry some other man, probably one with money, who’ll take care of her for the rest of her life, the whole time insisting you were never

more than a little brother to her. Do you really want to be that sad bastard looking in on that from the outside?"

I'm stunned into silence. I really have no idea what to say to that. So I just stammer like an idiot. Harkin seems satisfied with that answer, though.

"I'm not trying to break your spirits. I'm only saying you'd be better off focusing your efforts elsewhere. Find a girl who's more...hmm, on your level let's say. Someone who will talk to you like you're a person, not a puppy. Someone you could challenge and who could challenge you. Someone you could see yourself spending the rest of your life with. Someone—"

"Someone like Amelia?" I say. It's painfully obvious we're not talking about me anymore. Harkin flinches visibly at the name, but keeps his composure.

"Yes, that's what I'm trying to say. Someone who is to you what Amelia was to me."

"Your inspiration, you mean."

Harkin draws in a long breath. "Yes. Yes, I suppose she was my inspiration. Not just to be a writer, but to be a better *person*. To be a man worthy of her and what she could give."

"You never talk about her much."

"No. No I don't." He exhales through his nose, mouth set in a tight line. "Maybe it's time I did."

"What was she like?"

“Incredible. And I’m not just saying that. Not to brag, but I’ve known quite a few women in my life, and many proved themselves to be...exceptional. But none like her. My family name had weight once. Power. Other families from all over would flock to our estate to curry our favor. I was raised on the art of conversation, of humor and intellect and wine. Lots of wine. But in time I grew bored with this lifestyle. It became stale and uninteresting to me, always the same parties, always the same conversations, always the same women. I stopped appreciating what I had.

“I still remember the night Amelia walked through our door. Her family wasn’t the most influential, so at first I paid her no mind. But somehow, in that one night, she found her way into my inner circle. She could hold her own in any conversation, could keep up with any intellectual trying to undermine her. She wasn’t like the other girls; she never concerned herself with social standing or appearances. She showed you whatever level of respect you showed her. And she was beautiful in her own way. Not fluttery and delicate like the women I was used to...tall, strong, with wild dark hair and eyes that glittered like onyx.

“Though my parents didn’t exactly approve, in time we married. Eventually they came around—she was hard not to love. It was not long after that she found herself with child. It was the happiest I’d ever seen her.” A darkness falls over Harkin’s face. “I lost both of them when the child was born. It was a girl. We would have named her Jane, after my mother.” He looks up at me. “I...haven’t really kept track of what happened in the years after. When my parents passed the parties stopped. I suppose I just couldn’t be bothered anymore. And I couldn’t write anymore. As ridiculous as it sounds, my inspiration left with her. And now...now I am as you

see. A once-great writer who's been all but forgotten by the people who once looked up to him."

His words are followed by a heavy silence. What do you say to something like that?

"It's not too late for you." I say. Harkin raises an eyebrow.

"I don't know what you mean." I don't either, but I keep going.

"I mean you don't have to stay locked up here for the rest of your life. There's nothing holding you here. You could go someplace else. Be someone else. Start a new life for yourself."

He gives a short bark of a laugh.

"And what about you, my little friend? Where would you be without my guidance?"

"You've taught me enough. And I'm not your responsibility. I never was. I'll be fine."

Harkin's gaze drifts down towards the floor. He laughs again.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it is time I've moved on." He looks back at me, dark eyes more alive than I've ever seen them. "By the way, happy birthday."

"What?"

"Your birthday. You're sixteen today, aren't you?" I have to think for a second. What day is it?

"Oh. I guess I am." I had completely forgotten.

~

I'm heading home for the day, basket of fish in hand. Today was a good haul. Doris will have nothing to complain about tonight. I start whistling a cheerful, tuneless song as I stroll down the street. The bookshop is closing for the day. And Bea—

Bea is in the alleyway beside the shop. With some man. The tune dies on my lips as I slow down. They're whispering. Giggling. He takes her hands and draws her in for a kiss. A real one, not like the quick little ones she's always giving me. And she doesn't pull back quickly like she does with me. She leans into it, letting his hands go where they may.

Maybe this is the man Harkin was talking about. The one she's going to marry. Or maybe he's just another sad bastard like me. Either way, I don't feel the same pang in my heart that I used to. I turn away and keep walking.

"Owen!" I haven't walked ten steps before she calls my name. I'm tempted to keep going and pretend I don't hear her. But some part of my routine remains, and I stop. She catches up to me, smiling brightly. I don't say hello like I used to. "Owen, dear, I'm so glad I caught you. Listen, Father was so impressed at the job you did cataloging the books last week, and I was thinking..."

"Isn't that your job?" I say. Bea blinks; I've always agreed to help her without hesitation. But that smile quickly returns.

"Well, yes it is, normally. But you do it much better than I do, and you see I've been so busy—"

“Busy doing what? Buying new dresses? Flirting with customers? Kissing strange men in the alleyway?” I come off ruder than I mean to, but I don’t want to hear her excuses. They’re always the same. Bea’s bottom lip quivers. I’m sure that’s all she’s ever needed to do to get what she wants. But not this time.

“I only meant that—Owen, this isn’t like you. Why are you being so mean?”

“I’m not. I’m only saying that maybe it’s time you learned to do these things for yourself. You won’t always have some man around to take care of you.” I turn on my heel and walk away. She calls my name again, then again, then again. First confused, then sad, then angry. For half a second I regret what I said. And then I don’t. I can’t be her errand boy forever.

~

Home. The encounter with Bea has left me in a dark mood. She probably isn’t going to speak to me anymore after that. I only hope it was worth it. Without a word I drop the basket of fish at Doris’ feet. I was wrong. She does have something to complain about. Something about leaving the fish out for too long, it was hot out today, incompetent, lazy, me, my father...I don’t even hear her. I start to walk away. She thunders after me, screeching about ignoring her when she’s talking to me. I hear the whoosh of her fist before it makes contact with my ear.

Something moves. Or breaks. Or snaps. I’m not sure. But the next thing I know she’s up against the wall, with my elbow jammed at her throat. I’ve grown over the past few years. She’s

strong, but I'm stronger. I know that now. And with that knowledge, I lean in close so she can hear me.

"I'm only going to say this once, so please listen. I know you're upset about your sister. I am too. She was my mother. And I know you want someone to blame for how lonely and pathetic your life has become, and that I'm the only one left alive to blame. But from now on, you are not going to say one more word about me or my father. Or we're going to have a much bigger problem than we do right now. Understand?" She gives a tiny nod, never taking her eyes off of me. Those small beetle eyes are shining with something I've never seen before. Fear. She's afraid of me. And that's all I need. I drop my arm and stalk outside. I need some air.

The cool night is a blessing; it's been a vicious summer, day and night. And more than anything right now, I need to cool down. I take a few glorious gulps of the crisp air, taking in the view of the town from atop our little hill. Off in the distance I see the familiar twinkle of the lighthouse, the one that saved me all those years ago. And above that...wait, why are there two lights? There's another one, brighter than that of the lighthouse, blazing orange like some angry star. And then it hits me.

Harkin's house is in flames.

~

The news reaches the town first thing in the morning. The old Harkin house, burned to the ground overnight. Police are still investigating it. Possibly accidental, but they aren't ruling

out arson. No body was found, they say. I hope it means what I think it means, however horrible even that is. Harkin wouldn't...would he?

The day passes in a numb haze. For hours on end the summer sea rocks me gently back and forth. I forget what I'm even supposed to be doing there. The bookshop window seems strangely bare as I walk by it. Bea is there. She doesn't even look at me. At home, Doris accepts my meager catch without a word. For a moment I don't realize I've drifted back out onto the porch. This is where I was standing last night. When I saw it. When everything changed. Wherever he is, I hope Harkin is in a better place now. Even if it's without me.

Something catches my eye. At my feet there's a tiny, rectangular parcel. I blink down at it. That wasn't there this morning. I pick it up, turning it around in my hands. For a moment I consider calling Doris over. It's probably for her. But something tells me I should open it. As carefully as I can, I pull away the layers of paper to find a box. I open it. The sharp steel pen looks up unassumingly at me, the blue and green and purple glass catching the rays of sunlight like the waves themselves.