

A dark, expressive painting of a man with long, shaggy hair and a beard. He has a wide-eyed, shocked expression with his mouth open, revealing a bloody wound on his chest. The painting is rendered in a style reminiscent of the Scream, with visible brushstrokes and a somber, dark color palette. The word "ERASED" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the image.

# ERASED

ALEC LOWNES



ALEC LOWNES

Erased

Copyright © 2021 by Alec Lownes

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.*

*This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.*

*First edition*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.*

*Find out more at [reedsy.com](https://reedsy.com)*

# Contents

Monday, March 12	1
Tuesday, March 13	9
Wednesday, March 14	22
Thursday, March 15	39
Friday, March 16	56
Monday, March 19	64
Tuesday, March 20	100
Three Days Ago	114
Now	125



## Monday, March 12

The elevator dinged as the doors opened on the dark office vestibule. A man in his early twenties walked out and reached into his pocket for his keys. His short buzz cut and thin face made him look more at home walking on a drizzly sidewalk in England than in an American office. While he turned through his keys, a woman stepped out of the elevator behind him. Her long blonde hair curtained out as she reached back around the door to press the button for the first floor. After waiting for the elevator doors to close, she listened closely for the telltale sound of it beginning its descent. The only sound in the hallway was the jingling of keys.

“The elevator’s still broken,” Christie said, her eyes narrowing at the unmoving equipment. Selecting a blue plastic disc from the keyring, John swiped it in front of the fob reader on the glass door.

“Wasn’t it broken last week? It’s not gonna spontaneously be fixed,” he said, swinging open the door in response to the fob reader’s beep. “And anyways, didn’t you already call the repair people?”

“I did,” replied Christie, following him through the door, “but if we cancel by noon we get a refund.”

John grunted, quickly losing interest in the minutiae of office

management, as he headed towards his standing desk. Christie, after flipping on the office lights, likewise made a beeline for the desk to the left of the door covered in papers and construction supplies.

She sat at the mesh-backed rolling chair and opened her backpack to fumble for her laptop. The desk was cluttered with various papers, office supplies, and light home improvement equipment, but she made space for her laptop by pushing a tape measurer out of the way. The log-in screen had her picture taken at onboarding, and the text “This laptop is the property of GrateRite Inc.” below the password field. She hammered in her password to the laptop and grabbed the planner to the side as it was booting up. She turned to the page marker and began reading entries under the entry for the 12th, while John crossed the office.

While his elderly laptop was taking it’s time to boot up, John went to get his customary cup of coffee. The kitchen was a small area towards the front of the office, containing a fridge, sink, and various snacks. Half of the long IKEA wood lunch tables were also in the kitchen, the other half encroaching on the gaming area. John fancied himself a coffee aficionado of sorts, and ground his whole beans every morning in the electric burr grinder, before using the chemex for his drip brew. But the state of the sink brought him up short. He and Christie were often the first ones in the office, so he’d seen his fair share of after-dinner disasters, but the pile of leftover take out chicken bowls filled to the top with rancid gelatinized chicken water in the sink took the cake.

As he smouldered in anger, he carefully tipped each bowl over to empty its contents in the world’s most disgusting game of Operation. And the fruit flies were back. Why not, he thought.

He finished tipping out the slightly thick water and tossed the containers one by one. Opening one of the cupboards above his head, he took out a small dish, squirted some dish soap into it, filled it with water, and set it out on the counter to catch them. Now he would have his coffee.

Ten minutes and a tersely worded Slack message to the company later, he returned to his desk with his “Keep calm and code on” mug. The ancient ruin finally having finished booting, he started up his IDE and dove into the “out of bounds” error he was tackling yesterday. John and Christie worked at a small startup called GradeRite, headquartered on the third floor of a commercial building, above an Italian restaurant and a clothing store. The company focused on test grading automation, ideally relieving teachers of the grunt work of plagiarism checking. The dream was for the service to be used in every classroom, with optical text recognition able to decode handwritten assignments, but that dream was still far away. Last week they were featured in a New York Times article about technology available in the classroom, and they hoped that would drive some inquiries from school districts, which had proven incredibly hard to get any purchase in.

As Christie was embroiled with the daily task ordering lunch delivery for 17 employees, the elevator doors opened again and David Castillo walked in. They exchanged waves as he hurried by on the way to his desk. At the start of the company, two years ago in his old office on campus, he had two monitors on his desk and coded every day. Now he had a phone and a filing cabinet, as the CEO he had transitioned into the role of funding negotiator. He didn’t wave at John, who he couldn’t see behind the glow of his double monitors, as he set up his laptop. And anyways, John was better mannered after his morning filling of coffee.

The preceding Friday night one of the backend servers had gone down, which backed up the text scanning job. David had jumped into triaging the issue, managing the remaining engineers in the office. Some even joined from home for debugging, like John. The takeout Chinese they ate for dinner was only slightly worse for David than his normal fare at home—

David's eyes darted to the sink as stood up from his chair. The takeout bowls were gone, but they were definitely there when he left on Friday night. Maybe someone else had thrown them out as they left? David eyed John's monitor glow as he sat back down and opened up Slack. There was a new message in the general channel.

“John: This dish situation is getting out of hand. You know some of us need our coffee in the morning, and I can't fill up the boiler with this pile of crap in the sink.”

The best David could do was respond with a smiling pile of poop emoji.

\* \* \*

Ajay Parekh walked into the office at 11:10 AM, one of the later arrivals. By now the desks held a smattering of engineers, nearly all of the employees of GradeRite were involved with software in some way. He waved at Christie as he walked by her desk near the door, but refrained from catching David's attention. He was still weirded out by his proximity to the CEO. Ajay was hired just out of his undergraduate degree, and had started at the company after the winter holidays two months ago. He turned left down the row between standing desks and set his backpack down behind his chair, next to John's desk. John had been one of the first employees at the company, but he and Ajay technically

had the same job title, one which they could change at any time. There was someone in the company who had “Rebel leader” on their business card, but Ajay preferred to go with his offered position.

“Hey.” John looked up from his code at the salutation.

“Hey, did you have a good weekend?”

“I did,” Ajay took out his laptop and began to set up, “I played a lot of league, how about you?”

John sighed, “Well we took out the kitchen countertop, which was all weekend.”

“Oh nice, what’d you put in?”

“Will put in,” John replied, “the butcher block was supposed to come in on Saturday, but it’s delayed until Wednesday.”

“So,” Ajay looked puzzled, “you don’t have a kitchen counter anymore?”

“That’s correct,” John pointed his finger in the air, “so back to eating takeout. It’s almost like living in a hardware store.”

“Well, good luck with that,” Ajay said as he booted up his laptop.

“It’s going to be a long week,” John prophesied and turned back to the code he was debugging.

Ajay still lived in an apartment, in fact the same one he lived in in college. He first met John at the recruiting fair on campus last fall. GradeRite was a local company, it recruited heavily from the surrounding engineering colleges, or as much as it could given its employee size. David had started flying John and Anna, another early employee, out to remote recruiting events a couple times a month. Usually an early bird, Ajay knew Anna would be in late today after arriving back just this morning from such a trip.

An hour and ten minutes later, Anna Chan rolled her suitcase

out of the elevator and through the glass doors. Stopping at Christie's desk, she unzipped her backpack and started fishing around the papers inside.

"How was your trip?" Christie asked over her monitor, which was currently loaded up with the details for the company trip to an axe throwing event later that night.

"Eventful, Stanford grads never fail to impress." Anna extracted a sheaf of receipts, "I have a present for you."

"Lucky me," Christie mock droned as she took the receipts for reimbursement.

"How was your weekend?" Anna asked, zipping her backpack up.

"Eventful too, we're nearly done with the kitchen, I think we'll have it finished by the end of the month."

"Good, good" Anna croaked, as she started to walk away, "come to the tile side."

Anna had barely set up her laptop when the elevator opened again to an overloaded delivery driver with several insulated bags of food.

"What's for lunch today," she leaned over and asked Ajay.

"Pad Thai I think."

She managed to hear Christie say from across the room "...so you'll have to take the stairs back down" and saw the driver swivel away towards the emergency stairs.

"Is the elevator still broken?"

"I heard it's getting fixed today," Ajay replied.

"Good, because this suitcase is way too heavy for that."

With a couple of minutes until the table was set up, Anna checked her email and tasks. It looked like John was working on a stubborn index error in the server, and Ajay was looking into a service alarm from Amazon Web Services. The company

technically had a flat structure, but it had recently been falling to Anna to allocate tasks to the other engineers in her area. There were a lot of other engineers that worked on the website, but her row worked on the server mostly. Christie rang a brass wall-mounted dinner bell, and the company began to migrate over to the lunch tables, like cattle on a ranch.

\* \* \*

The setting sun painted the office a dusty orange through the floor to ceiling windows as Ajay continued to struggle with the service alarm from Amazon. Throughout the day he had tried a variety of code fixes to lower usage rates, but all his efforts only modified the volume a tiny bit. The problem was that the service just had too few machines running, so he needed to up the volume to a more reasonable level. He logged into the web console for Amazon and navigated to the problematic service. Sure enough, the graphs at the bottom of the page were all near the red line. He went to the settings panel and doubled the number of machines. But when he clicked the “Apply” button, an error popped up on screen.

“Service policy prevents changes from unauthorized users. Please contact your administrative representative.”

No problem, they had modification protections on some of their more important services to prevent accidental catastrophic downscaling. Ajay clicked over to the permissions panel. He would have to contact whoever was registered as the owner of the service to make the change for him, probably John or Anna. But it wasn't either John or Anna whose email was listed as the administrator. GradeRite was a very small company, so even at this early point in his tenure Ajay was quite familiar with

everyone who worked there, but he had never seen the email `bgutenberg@graderite.com` before. Maybe this was an Amazon representative they were contracting?

“Hi Christie,” Ajay typed into their chat, “would you happen to have the cell number for someone whose email is `bgutenberg@graderite.com`? I think they may be an Amazon rep?”

A minute later Christie replied, “I’m not finding any external contact info for that email address, are you sure they aren’t a new hire?”

That would make sense, Ajay thought, since they had a GradeRite email address. After quickly thanking Christie, he opened up his email tab to do a search for their welcome email.

He didn’t find a welcome email, his history didn’t go back that far. Instead, pages of emails loaded up, going as far back as his start date, some sent from `bgutenberg` to the entire company, some coming from Amazon referencing the email address in policy changes. They went back months. From Google’s sender contact info, Ajay could see that the “b” stood for Brad. Clearly he had messed up. Ajay thought he was good with names, but this was on a whole other level of embarrassing. But the company was starting to assemble at the front door for the bus to axe throwing, today’s company bonding experience. Sorting this out could wait until tomorrow. But who the hell was Brad Gutenberg?

## Tuesday, March 13

Anna woke up at 10:30 in the morning, her head pounding with a hangover. Her hands ached as she pulled off the covers, where she discovered several blisters across her palms from last night's company activity. She rolled off the mattress and onto the floor, it wasn't much of a drop, as she had no bed frame. As she shuffled out of her bedroom and to the bathroom, she could still taste margaritas in her glued up mouth.

After a couple of hours at the axe throwing place last night, they had all gone out to their usual cantina for drinks on David's tab. Karaoke led to too much drinking, the same story three nights a week, every week for the last two years. The toothpaste was beginning to wipe that old taste out of her mouth, but a shower would really do the trick. All of the clothes she took on the recruiting trip were still in her suitcase she hauled in late last night, but since she had travelled to California, the clothes were of a lighter fare than what she would need on her walk to the office, judging from the muted gray light coming in through the window.

One upside to drinking all night with the crew was that her backpack was all ready to go in the morning, she hadn't had a chance to take out her computer before going to sleep, so she didn't have to unhook her twin monitors and put the computer

back in her bag. Forty five minutes after waking up, Anna put on her big coat, picked up her backpack and left her apartment on her walk to work.

An elevator ride down to the lobby later, she was out on the sidewalk. The apartment she currently resided in was more of the college senior variety. A generally musty smell, too many floors, a rickety elevator; this was a relatively cheap rental she picked up when she first got to the city, especially after the prices in California. The office was situated close enough to the local tech school, which was close to this apartment, providing her with an easy walk, no more than thirty minutes.

There were still some patches of snow left between the bushes as she left the busier street and turned into a residential neighborhood. A light snow had come down three days prior, but it hadn't gotten warm enough since then to drive off all the residue. Her first winter here was more brutal than she expected, she hadn't even brought any winter clothes, since she hadn't needed them before. That winter was a record setting low, and she spent an embarrassingly large amount of money at the Gap the day after she arrived. Around this time of year, she pretty much exclusively wore the Gap clothes from that original desperate foray.

The sidewalk changed from concrete to paving stones as she got further into the residential street. Due to its proximity to the college and the east side, it was one of the more expensive places to live in the city, and the houses showed it. This was one of the older areas of the city as well, so the property value was reflected in dignified stone and masonry, instead of extra large jumbles of conflicting McArchitectural styles. The houses weren't small by any means, but they somehow looked right at home next to the Hogwartsian private school across the street.

Slowly the houses turned into small shops, and then into street parked cars outside of larger shops and restaurants. This was a small pocket of commerce in the city, separated from the east side as well as downtown. Just a single street of shops, with some outlying oddities, playing home to the Gap of yesteryear. Here was a gelato shop, there was a quirky bookstore. And above an Italian fusion restaurant was GradeRite, but you wouldn't know it to look at it. There were no external signs, there wasn't even an entry for it on the building's banner. The only indication of the office was a floor to ceiling window on the third floor that would look in on the kitchen, if it wasn't reflecting the grey sky instead.

Anna swung open the heavy wooden and glass doors to the restaurant lobby and punched the elevator button. It was still too early for the restaurant to be open, and it had a metal grill pulled down over the inner set of doors leading to the interior staircase. But at the lunch rush it would be more annoying to use the elevator to get back up, having to wait in line with all the hungry people taking it up to the second floor.

The elevator opened and Anna rode it up to the third floor. When she got out, she looked back at the outside of the elevator, searching for some trace of whatever alchemical process that now allowed it to go down again. Nothing seemed different.

She walked into the office and waved at Christie as she went by. The room was darker in the morning, before the sun was able to shine fully through the floor to ceiling windows, and nobody had turned on the ceiling lights. She moved into the half gloom and set her bag down next to her seat. Ajay and John were already sitting at their desks; Ajay was staring quizzically at a github page on his screen while John was scrolling through lines of neon text against a black background. While her computer was

booting up, Anna went to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee. One nice thing about getting into the office before the rush, if you could call it that with only 17 employees, was that the chemex was still full from John's morning brew. Anna didn't know if his fundamentalist weighing and measuring was worth the effort, but she liked to think that the coffee tasted just a little bit better.

Coming back to their row, Anna saw some python code on John's screen, and Ajay still staring at github pages. That's the bad thing about an open office setup, no privacy, she thought. But the good thing was a lack of the loneliness that so often pervaded those labyrinths of beige called cubicle farms. Her computer had finished booting, and she sat down in front of it, placing her coffee on it's customary commemorative 1st year anniversary GradeRite coaster. Ajay turned to her.

"Hey Anna"

"What's up?" Anna asked.

"Do you know who Brad Gutenberg is?"

"No," Anna thought for a second, "A contractor?"

"Christie says that she doesn't have contractor contact info for him."

"What do you need?" Anna asked.

"It seems like he's the AWS admin for the OCR service, and my account can't raise the instance count without his permissions."

"Oh, well David is the super-admin on all of our AWS accounts, so he should be able to approve your change."

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to message David. Oh well" sighed Ajay. "But who is Brad?"

"Probably the AWS rep who set up the instance years ago," Anna speculated.

"That makes sense..., thanks!" Ajay said, and turned back to his laptop.

It did seem to make sense to Ajay, for the most part. Of *course* David would have an AWS rep set the accounts up the first time, before he filled out the company with other engineers. And of *course* contacting David was the right thing to do now. He typed up a message explaining the account permission situation and his proposed change. After reading it over three times, he sent it to David and awaited a response. David would definitely be able to change the instance count, Ajay had also seen his name in the list of super admins on the instance, so the problem was solved.

But the problem didn't feel solved. If he had been confused about Brad yesterday, he was doubly confused after a night of drunken dreams where he ran from laptop to laptop trying to find Brad's chat address. Anna's explanation would have been right, but he didn't tell her about the emails. The emails that were sent from Brad as recently as last week. The email in his outbox, wishing Brad a happy vacation.

\* \* \*

At 2pm John was still working on the problem from that morning, namely a memory leak in the web server. He had traced the problem back as far as a file which set up a strange tree-based caching layer, but the code looked like it was using some tree rotation algorithm that he couldn't quite parse. This was probably where the memory leak was coming from, with so many pointers being kept in memory it would be easy to accidentally accumulate millions of extra references. But he hadn't been able to figure out exactly which part of the code was accumulating the memory. It wasn't that the code was too complicated, or it wasn't *just* that the code was too complicated;

it also had a depressing lack of documentation. Someone would know what algorithm was being used here, and John fired up the file's edit history to find out who.

The list of people who had touched the file was very short, as expected for a file this deep in the code. Ajay had a five line change most recently, where it looks like he added a new function that wrapped the caching layer. The only other change was the initial writing of the file, by a bgutenberg. That initial commit was done a couple of years ago, just before John started at the company, which explains why he didn't know who owned the bgutenberg account. But this code was too complicated, and it had a lot of side effects too, which made changing it without knowing exactly what it did very dangerous. It would be best to contact this..., John looked at the user info for the account..., Brad, and find out what he could about this file first. He messaged Christie.

"Hey, do you have the contact info for a 'Brad Gutenberg'?"

"Popular guy," Christie responded, "but like I told Ajay, he's a new hire, since he has a graderite email address."

John thought for a second. "I think he's actually an old fire," John responded, "but what's the email address?"

"bgutenberg@graderite.com, that makes more sense. I'll update the employee spreadsheet."

Ajay had been asking about Brad? That made things a lot easier, it's always awkward to cold email someone who left or was forced to leave the company. And if Ajay already had a line of dialogue open with him, maybe he could use that to get his question in.

"Hey, have you been talking with Brad?" John typed out to Ajay, even though Ajay was sitting right beside him.

Ajay turned to John and said out loud "Oh thank god, I feel

like a crazy person around here. Who is Brad?”

“I don’t know, but do you have his email address? I need to ask him a question about his caching code.”

*His caching code*, Ajay repeated in his head, as his face fell. There’s code now too, could this get any more confusing? “Anna,” Ajay said, and Anna looked up from her desk beside him, “can we all talk in the conference room? I think we may have a security issue.”

\* \* \*

Anna and John sat at the big table as Ajay closed the glass door behind them, and took a seat across from them.

“What’s with all the cloak and dagger?” John asked Ajay as he finally settled in.

“I just don’t want to alarm anyone else, in case it’s nothing,” he said, but he thought that if he was right, they would want to take care of some things before roping in the rest of the company.

“Alarm about what?” Anna asked from beside John.

“Okay,” Ajay began, “yesterday I was working on the OCR service, you know, the one that’s getting backed up.” They nodded. “I was doing all this work, but I eventually decided I just needed to give it more machines, at least until I could fix the problem. Well, I went onto AWS to allocate more resources, but the plan was locked.”

“That’s not so weird, the more important servers have locked plans,” John added.

“That’s what I thought, so I just looked up who I needed to contact about making the change, and this bgutenberg email was the administrator listed.”

“Right, the AWS rep,” Anna said, and John’s brow wrinkled as he took in this new information.

“I don’t think he’s an AWS rep,” John said, “he has code in the system, and a GradeRite email address.”

Ajay held his hands out in front of him in a “there you go” gesture. This was the outline of the problem. “That’s why I wanted to talk about it in here, someone’s either a contractor, or a new employee, but no one has any contact information for them. Is it possible that we could have been hacked?”

John and Anna looked at each other for a second, then Anna said “Well maybe he really is a new employee, but he’s remote or something. Did you check your welcome emails?”

“I did,” Ajay responded, “but I didn’t find a welcome email.”

They listened to Ajay’s email discovery and then each rushed out of the room to get their own laptop. John was back first, and was already scrolling through the email search results when Anna came back. They both had entries sent and received from “Brad”, each of them having a slightly different set of messages. Anna leaned over and looked through the glass door at David, he was working on his laptop. “I’m going to go get David,” she said.

David was commenting on a product proposal from the design team when Anna came to his desk and asked him to meet her in the conference room. Normally he would have asked her to talk about it right there, but the worried look on her face made him reconsider and put the design proposal on hold.

After he entered the room, Anna took her seat beside John again and he pulled up the chair beside Ajay.

“So what’s this all about?” he asked. Anna motioned to Ajay, and he nervously began his explanation of the last two days’ events over again.

David listened with amusement, which quickly soured to horror, at what they found. After running out to retrieve his laptop, he searched through his email inbox in front of them, finding hundreds of messages from Brad.

“All of our emails from Brad,” John said, “go back to the start of our employment. We were thinking you might have some more historic entries.”

The search results in David’s inbox went on for pages and pages, it would take forever to go through all of them. He switched over to his sent mail and did the same query, but for bgutenberg as the recipient. The resulting list was much shorter, and paging all the way to the end, he saw a series of entries at the very bottom.

“RE: Software Engineer Application”, then “Employment Offer for Brad Gutenberg”. He clicked that entry and read the email that popped up. This was from years ago, he thought, he recognized this paperwork, it was from the early days before he had an employment lawyer on call, drafted up personally by David for each new employee. He looked at the date at the top of the window. This would have been one of the first employees.

“Our code,” David muttered, “and the intellectual property. That’s what this must be about.”

“But with Github, don’t they already have everything?” asked Ajay.

“Not what’s written in the future, and they’ve set themselves up to copy all of it whenever they want without anyone noticing.”

“And what’s worse,” Anna chimed in, “they have access to all our product decisions as well, they’re on all the right mailing lists.”

“And hiring decisions,” John offered, looking up from his

laptop, “they’re on that mailing list too.”

“So what was the plan? Just slip into these systems now and low-key siphon off data for years?” Ajay asked.

“It seems like it,” replied Anna, “and it might have worked at a bigger company, but we’re so small that it couldn’t have worked out.”

“This is a clusterfuck,” sighed David, and he leaned back away from his computer. “Can you three keep this to yourselves until I have a communication plan drawn up?” All three of them nodded.

“As for what to do next, David, could you investigate what mailing lists have been compromised? Ajay and Anna, could you go through the code for their contributions? They’ve probably set up backdoors, but we should be able to pinpoint their code through the author history. I’ll ask Christie to go through the github users to find anyone else who’s been injected.”

Ajay, John and Anna left the conference room, returning to their desks, leaving David typing away furiously into his laptop. A few seconds later Christie got a message from him, got up, and entered the glass box. Ajay turned to Anna once they sat down.

“I can’t believe this is happening, how did this happen?” He asked.

She put her hands up on either side and shrugged. “Sometimes this happens in larger companies, but I haven’t heard of it being this thorough before. Someone just really wants our code.”

“I feel a little proud,” Ajay said, “of finding it, but also that we’re important enough to try this on.”

“Well we wouldn’t have been for long with this kind of damage,” Anna replied, and smiled. “We’ll probably hire an auditor eventually, but let’s get started on the first pass. How about you check the mobile apps, and I’ll do the backend.”

This seemed like a good plan, until they loaded up the magnitude of changes done to these two repositories by bgutenberg. Hundreds of files were created mostly or in whole by this user, and thousands of small changes were littered throughout the codebase.

“Anna, these changes go back years,” Ajay said.

“I’m seeing the same thing over on the server.”

“Has this account been here this whole time?”

“No, it’s just not possible. Look at this cache file you were talking about earlier. I remember writing code that uses it, but the history says that it was written by bgutenberg years ago. But I would have *noticed* that there’s this great cache library that no one wrote. What I think is that they’ve rebased our changes onto a fake history.” Anna explained.

“What, like they generated a whole fake timeline and then assigned it to our repository?” Ajay asked.

“Not the whole history, look, the files are what we are used to working with. They’ve just changed a lot of author entries to be bgutenberg when they were originally someone else. Probably to throw us off the scent of any actual malevolent changes they put in.”

“Oh,” Ajay realized, “yeah that’ll make this a lot harder.”

“Yeah, we’ll definitely need to bring in an external auditor. I’ll message David, but how about you quit on the mobile client and take over looking at the DAL layer on the server, I’ll look at the manager layer, and we can go through the server code together.”

After receiving the message from Anna, David began composing an email to Github enterprise support, which would be followed up very shortly with a phone call. He sweated every word, because he knew that one day a copy of this message

would be in obscure security analysis textbooks. It wasn't every day that you were on the forefront of a major security breach in a company that everyone implicitly trusts. Since the changes by this rogue user hadn't been performed only recently, but impossibly in the past, it meant that the Github servers themselves had been hacked and had their data changed. A breach like this was much larger than one company, GradeRite was probably on a list of companies to be affected, but he could imagine any larger ones using Github would have the same problems.

Christie finished her examination of the Github user list, finding only bgutenberg who wasn't traceable to a real life person in the office, and sent the results to David, Anna and Ajay. She opened a chat to John.

"How serious is this?"

"Very, very serious," John replied. "I think we'll have to bring in someone from the outside to analyze the code, from what Ajay and Anna are saying."

"Has anything been damaged?"

"I don't think they're even ready to look at that yet, there are so many changes. The first steps will be to just list them all out."

"What about with the emails? I have some from the account too."

"There's so many," John typed, "David's getting the user removed from our Google org, but it wouldn't hurt to start printing out emails that you need, if something bad happens in the next hour before they're removed."

"I'll do that, thanks," Christie replied. She had a list forming in her mind, a series of emails from various vendors, services, and their receipts. Information that she might not have written down in her big planner. She started at the top, hitting the print

button on any concerning upcoming repairs or services to be rendered. The Konica whirred to life across the office and started spitting out papers. She then moved on to searches, finding the vendor contact information she was after. Whenever “Brad” would show up in the results, she would feel a sense of unease. These were all planted emails, meant to simulate the existence of a person. Everything except the real deal, just a digital ghost.

With a feeling of morbid curiosity, she searched for “sender: bgutenberg@graderite.com”. The most recent email was sent to the whole company mailing list, reminding everyone that he would be inaccessible during a hiking trip...last weekend. Ok, sure, she thought, I guess you won’t be coming back from *that* trip. Below that seemed to be a series of company-wide announcements, spaced every few weeks. She remembered reading these specific announcements in the past, but they certainly didn’t come from “Brad” then. Were they modified? She tried another search, just for “bgutenberg” this time. All the previous emails came up again, but a new worrying segment was included. Emails from Google notifying her of changes to documents and suggestions from bgutenberg. Oh Christ, how much information did they keep in Google? Was it all compromised? She shot off a quick message to David, and dove into Google docs. There couldn’t be that many documents, could there?

## Wednesday, March 14

Yesterday had been a clusterfuck. Christie spent the whole day assisting the company investigation by going through the hundreds of google docs that “Brad” had modified or created, much to the chagrin of her usual slate of vendors and contacts. Everything got pushed off to later in the week. When lunchtime came around, there was no scheduled lunch service, for obvious reasons, so they all went down to the Italian restaurant on the second floor for a not-quite-relaxing meal, at least to Christie, John, Ajay, and David. The rest of the company hadn’t been informed yet. Then it was back to combing through documents until 8pm, when she and John went home.

That night, after reheating some leftovers, they talked about the implications of the breach. Hopefully for the company it meant shelling out for an auditor, and that would be the end of it. But for Github, it seemed like a whole other thing. It’s easy enough to add a user to your google organization so they could make changes to documents, but Github had a much larger problem with it’s security if someone was able to go in and rework previously existing files. David had spent much of that day calling back and forth between different companies and agencies, either alerting of breaches or getting quotes for audits. He had done all the work from the glass walled conference room,

they were trying to keep the magnitude of this breach contained until they came up with a communication plan for the rest of the company.

The next day going into work, they prepared for the worst. Christie had the unshakeable feeling that the further she dove into these document edits, the more documents she would find. The first employees of the company had a bad habit of cross-linking google documents, which at the best of times would make it nearly impossible to switch to a new knowledge-base, but in this case it had been taken advantage of for maximum damage. Every document that “Brad” wrote linked to five more, some written entirely by him as well. They seemed to cover the whole span of subjects possible, and for now Christie was keeping her own document of the URLs for each one, instead of deleting them outright.

That morning David had called a meeting in front of the TV to tell the company about the breach. It wasn’t all that surprising, small companies get breached all the time, until he got to the part concerning Github’s commit history. That one really packed a punch for the software engineers, and lent a new dimension to the issue. He finished up by letting everyone know that the user in question had been purged from all administrative roles, but to let Christie, John, or Anna know if they found more references to this “Brad Gutenberg” in the system, according to the type of reference.

The next bombshell didn’t come from Christie, John, Ajay, or Anna though, it came from Kelly, an employee who started last week. Christie was finally doing a trickle of the normal office work to distract her from the unfolding catastrophe, and she came back to her desk from tacking up new OSHA posters to a message from Kelly.

“Was the unauthorized user named ‘Brad Gutenberg’? I wanted to make sure”

Christie felt her stomach drop. “Yes, did you find something?” The new hire materials were probably contaminated too, she thought. The security audit wouldn’t start until later this afternoon, so the scope of the problem was still unknown.

“There’s an entry in the office plan with that name, it’s in cell C5”. The office plan was a google spreadsheet of everyone’s desk locations, mostly to help new hires find other people in the office for face-to-face talks. Something didn’t sit right about this new information, there was something nagging at her as she opened up the document in a new tab. C5, that was in the front left corner of the office...

She wasn’t ready for the shock of seeing her own name so close to this menace that had been plaguing them. One desk up, two over, that meant it would be the desk in front of her, two to the left. Her stomach took a turn as she shifted her gaze to where this desk would be.

\* \* \*

David didn’t like working in a set office space, he wanted to be in the same room as his employees and coworkers. He had always envisioned the company being like a family, which wasn’t hard in the earlier days, especially with most of his starting employees being straight out of college. But as the company grew, first 10, now 15, that family atmosphere had begun to wane. But he still wouldn’t budge on the issue of a closed personal office, so he sat in the same open office space as everyone else, but a bit away, since he was always talking on the phone.

Now, however, he was in an office, the commandeered conference room, as he kept up a line of communication with Github about their breach. Really, it was our breach too, he thought, but the magnitude of the Github breach seemed to dwarf his own small company. Soon he would have to start thinking about how to release this information publicly. Would it be possible to spin this as some sort of win for GradeRite's vigilance as a test scorer? Maybe.

Christie opened the glass door and walked in, closing it behind her.

"Hi- what's wrong?" David was shocked to see her face so pale. Christy was usually the font of energy in the office, he had never seen her like this before.

"The uh... the seating chart," Christie began.

"Yeah?"

"It's got a reference to Brad on it too."

"Oh, oh well that's okay. We'll really have to go through these files with an author or contributor search to get them all eventually." David was relieved, he was afraid someone had died.

"But I'm the only one who had edit access," Christie almost pleaded. The revelation hit David in the chest.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"Yes, and the edit history only has my entries too."

"I have to call Google," David said in a monotone. This problem just blew wide open. Github getting breached was previously unthinkable, everyone depended on the service as their source of truth. But now Google. This was way bigger than he could have imagined. It was time to compartmentalize.

"I'll call Google now, when is the auditor starting?"

"At three."

“See if they can start any sooner, but until then, I think we’ve got to get everyone involved. No, especially then, we’re going to drop all our current projects and audit the codebase and knowledge base. I think we’ll have to go through every file, there’s no telling how long...” David trailed off as he looked back up at Christie. She was holding her hands clenched in front of her so tight he could see the white streaks in her knuckles.

“I’ll call, but David,” Christie’s inflection caught David again, and he looked into her face. She was on the verge of tears.

“Christie, what’s wrong?”

“There’s something wrong with the desks.”

\* \* \*

David and Christie stood at the glass conference room wall, looking out at the row of desks. Christie had calmed down after getting it all out to David, and David normally trusted her completely, but this was too much. It wasn’t until she pointed out the desk in particular that he started to believe.

“What’s supposed to be there,” he asked, staring through the window toward the desk.

“It’s just supposed to be an empty desk, occupant TBD.”

“What exactly is on it?” He could see a screen resting on top, and some things scattered around it.

“Some reference manuals, a bluetooth keyboard, some notepads, the monitor,” Christie replied.

David could see that it had a couple of sticky notes on the front. “Are you really sure that it says ‘Brad’ on it?” Each person’s desk and chair had a velcro label on it with their name, for when they had to rearrange seating every couple of quarters.

“Yes,” Christie said.

“What kind of stuff was on the notepads?” David asked.

“Do you want to go out and look? It’s not going to bite.” Christie had looked it over before fully coming to grasp with its implications.

“No, I don’t think so,” David said, but whether that was in response to looking or biting, Christie wasn’t sure.

“You know I have to go back and sit two desks away from it again, right?”

“What about James,” David said, “he’s right beside it. When did this happen?”

“It had to be in the last couple of days, I swear that desk was empty.”

David thought for a bit. “I’m going to call the police and report this... whatever this is. Who breaks into an office building and sets up shop here? Is this a burglary, reverse burglary?”

“Just trespassing I think,” Christie responded, “breaking and entering.”

“I think we should use the bottom latch on the front doors from now on,” David said, “so we’ll have to kick everyone out at night to lock up.”

“Joel won’t like it,” Christie said with a smirk on her face, referencing an employee who was known to stay until ungodly hours at night, “but I think it’s safest.”

“Okay, keep an eye on it for the next few, and I’ll call a meeting when I’m off with the police.”

Christie left the glass conference room and David sat back down in his swivel chair, looking at the conference phone. What was he going to say? What was happening? And more importantly, why us? He picked up the receiver and dialed 911.

\* \* \*

It turns out 911 is not the number that you should dial to report a non-emergency crime, as David found out from the tongue lashing he got from the operator, but eventually he was connected through to an investigator in the department. After explaining the situation - yes, on the desk, no, nothing stolen - the investigator set up a time to come by tomorrow. That was the end of that, now it was time to call an emergency meeting.

It was almost lunchtime, so the plan was to transition directly from the meeting to the Italian restaurant downstairs. Christie was on the phone setting up the seating. David had sent out an all-hands message on chat about the meeting five minutes before, and now stood in front of the big TV in the lounge area. Most of the company were sitting on the couches already, but a few were still at their desks. Christie finished with the downstairs restaurant and rang the lunch bell, which got the attention of the last few people, who drifted over to the lounge area from their work.

“Hi guys,” David began. “Well, there’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just rip the bandaid off: we’ve had a security breach.”

The few people still on their phones looked up at that announcement.

“The extent isn’t known yet, but what I can tell you is that it’s mostly a third party breach, changes at both Google and Github have allowed someone to surreptitiously make entries into our code and documentation. We don’t know why yet, maybe we’ll find out one day, maybe we won’t, but from this meeting on all current projects are suspended and we’ll all be working on logic checking all of our resources. For you software engineers, that means going through the code line by line checking for any obvious security holes. After lunch John will have broad area assignments for each team to tackle the codebase. Everyone

else, we'll be on Google doc duty, the offending account has already been removed, so now we'll just go through and make sure everything written down makes sense still. After lunch, Christie will have assignments for you all to prevent crosswork."

David saw Christie mouth "What!?" across the group of employees, but he went on. It was a detail he made up on the fly, and she would just have to draw something up as quick as she could.

"Additionally," David continued, "there's been a physical security breach. The office was broken into, and for reasons unknown, the burglars set up a desk on the first row." Several people turned around, craning their necks to see the desk in question, but John knew that they couldn't from this position in the office.

"You'll know which one because we've set up a sign on the chair saying 'Don't touch'. And really, don't touch it, an investigator will be coming over tomorrow to take evidence."

The involvement of the police drastically changed the mood in the room, there was no longer a sense of curiosity around the audience, but fear. I guess a physical violation like that would do it, David thought, and continued on.

"For those of you sitting in the first row," he looked down at James, a senior engineer who was looking more worried than most, "we'll move your desks right after lunch to other places in the office." James only looked a little relieved, and David could guess why: he was probably wondering why he hadn't noticed a mystery desk pop up right next to him overnight. *You and me both brother*, David thought.

\* \* \*

Back at work after lunch, Christie found it increasingly difficult to focus on her document review. The few calls that came in from vendors were a welcome respite, but her eyes kept moving over to what she could see of “the desk”. The monitor was the same mac display that everyone else at the office had (purchased in a bulk order from the nearby apple store and wheeled up the elevator in carts), nothing made it stand out from its brothers purchased at the same time. The monitor was resting on a reference manual for the SCALA language, the kind of thing you keep on your desk to show you know SCALA, but in real life would use a Google search instead. She couldn’t see them from here, but what she had seen of the notebooks when she went over earlier indicated that they were filled with the same vague ramblings of other engineers in the company: file and line number references, system diagrams, etc. Someone had gone to extreme lengths to convince nobody that a man named Brad Gutenberg used to work here.

At some point, between reading through dry references to GradeRite’s architecture, she started Google stalking Brad. Linkedin, yep, it says employed at GradeRite. But there was also a profile picture. It showed a man in a business suit, smiling, with short dark brown hair and a long, clean shaven face. Judging by the college graduation date listed, Brad hadn’t updated his...no, no. Get your head on straight Christie, she thought. Someone had chosen a picture for this fake account that was too young, too young. It was crazy, were they getting to her? Was this the plan all along, to make them feel so crazy that they would just let anyone claiming to be Brad walk right into the office and sit down at that desk? What then, where does this end? Brad’s doing real well, let’s promote him to CTO. CTO Brad, who... runs the company into the ground? Or who makes

it succeed? What's the end game here?

By 8pm, the new office closing time, Christie had gone through a majority of the administrative google docs for unexpected alterations, and had spent just as much time researching Brad. While unable to find any trace of malfeasance in the documents, there was a wealth of information on Brad for anyone with enough willpower to search. High school robotics trophy, 3rd place for his team, graduated from Cornell, it all seemed very normal, very mundane. As more and more normal information came up, Christie became more obsessed with finding anything out of the ordinary. Some mistake a hacker made when modifying all these sites, some place where the timelines didn't add up. Give me a scholarship to high school, she thought, or a cum laude from MIT, but everything kept fitting together.

At five minutes past eight, she realized she had forgotten to begin closing down the office, and went over to the kitchen to ring the bell. Some employees had already left before eight, but over half were still in the office, and she began shutting down the lights as they wandered out to the alcove to take the elevator down. John was bringing up the rear, and waited in the alcove with David for Christie to finish the power down.

"It feels like we're locking up for good," John said as Christie was doing the floor lock on the glass door.

"Don't say that, it's bad luck," replied David.

"What do you think the chances are that they had a copy of this key?" Christie asked, holding up the brass-colored key she just used. The nebulous "they" hardly needed to be specified.

"Probably pretty good," replied John.

"Well the locksmith is coming on Monday," Christie sighed, returning the key to her big keyring, which she kept on her person at all times.

“Without any hardware in the office, there’s only so much damage they can do,” David said. A strict “take home your laptop” policy had been implemented at the second meeting of the day, and Christie was pleased to see that the break-in had spooked people enough that no laptops were left on desks on her final walk-through.

At the door to the street John and Christie said goodnight to David and they walked in separate directions. On the walk home, John talked about the bug he had been fixing, and how annoyed he was to be derailed from it. Christie outlined all of the procedural fixes she had been going through that day to either lock access to or remove Brad from various systems and documents in the org. Half of these now seemed moot, given the extent of the hack.

After a twenty minute walk, they turned off the sidewalk to their house. It was a small house, only one bedroom, but they had an honest to God mortgage on it and were slowly paying it off. John saw the financial responsibility in such a decision, Christie saw the creative freedom. In front were the beginnings of raised flower beds, but the chilly wet March weather had prevented any real work from being done in preparing them for the spring. The real work was going on inside the house.

Christie opened the door, always the keeper of keys, to a house halfway between renovation and construction. The kitchen, viewable from the front door through the small dining room, was completely gutted, the missing countertop giving a view to the tops of all the drawers underneath. The living room, to the left hand of the front door, had half of it’s wallpaper stripped off, and two cans of paint were sitting on dropcloths in the corner. The wood that they walked on entering the house was the dusty color of newly discovered hardwood-under-carpet, and

the unpainted inch-tall strip of quarter-round molding around the house spoke to the previous ripping and tearing that had gone on there.

The kitchen was currently non-functional. Sure, you could cook a meal on the stove, but where would you put the finished dish? The work-provided dinner, while not the healthiest take-out in the world, gladly supplemented them in their lack of home-cooked dinner, which had been their usual after-work ritual. After dropping his backpack off in the living room, John made his way over to the kitchen and opened the fridge, searching for leftovers. Luckily, there were two plastic take-out boxes from the cantina, and if he remembered right, his contained half of a chimichanga and all the side dishes.

John brought out the take out dishes and reheated them in the oven. While he was in the kitchen, Christie had set up her laptop on the table and was organizing her browser tabs on Brad research for the next day's foray. Minutes later, after she had unexpectedly fallen into another rabbit hole, the oven beeped and they ate their reheated cantina leftovers in relative silence.

In recent days the time it took to make a home cooked dinner had been replaced with new hobbies, at least until the new countertop came in and they could reinstall the sink. Recently, they had taken up the habit of watching youtube on the couch after their quick dinners.

"What say you," John asked after he put down his backpack by the door, "cooking again?" Cooking referred to a series of youtube videos they were making their way through in which someone recreated olden dishes with historically accurate techniques.

"Yeah," Christie replied. She had trouble getting her mind off of Brad, the Cornell grad with the robotics award who

loved hiking and apparently screwing with Github, Google, and Graderite. Maybe there was something there, maybe he just hated the letter “G”, probably not.

John had been at the company for a year before Christie joined as their office administrator, he being one of the first few non-founder employees hired on. Having recently graduated from college, he was still living in an apartment, and so was she. Over the next few months they began getting closer, little talks over lunch and dinner, games of foosball at the office, watching movies with the late-night crew. John hadn’t dated much in college, and while normally a pretty confident guy, he was taking too long, so Christie went ahead and asked him out. They wanted to keep it a secret from the office, in case things didn’t work out, but things did work out. Eventually enough people saw them walking into work together for it to work it’s way around as an open secret. David had talked to them one night about fraternization, conflicts of interest, and keeping things civil, but with his approval he hadn’t spoken of it again to the two of them. David had a sort of paternal relationship with John, being an older, unmarried CEO probably made him think some on his life choices, and what he had given up for his position. When he and John went out for beers, she knew that they must talk about the relationship sometimes, but it didn’t bother her.

Christie didn’t make it a full thirty seconds into a video about 17th century mac and cheese before her mind wandered off again to the problem at hand. Why their company, she thought. If this hack extended all the way up to Google, then why was so much work put into their company in particular. It wasn’t like there was a “the man” that they were fighting against, some company that was large enough to spend the resources to squash them. As far as they knew, the company was in a relatively new field, not

stepping on anyone's toes. Or was it just their company? Were there Brads at most tech companies now, surreptitious entries in the code or Google docs with some other unknown name, like Andy or Chris? But that didn't explain the desk, the desk that was somehow so easy to forget about, only marked as "other" by the name tag below the surface.

"What are you thinking about?" John asked.

Christie felt momentarily guilty, she had taken out her phone and was looking up more Brad references while they were watching the screen.

"Just Brad stuff," she sighed. It seemed impossible to get him off of her mind.

"Brad stuff?" John asked.

Christie explained to him the historical entries she found through search, and the current sites like LinkedIn, that all referenced the same Brad. John looked shocked, as far as he knew from that day's work "Brad" was still just an entry in the Google docs.

John was fascinated. This forgery was way more widespread than he thought. Christie felt a little embarrassed telling him about the supplementary research she had been putting in at work, but he was enrapt by it.

After dismissing the video, they both took out their laptops and began scouring their respective corners of the internet for more Brad. Christie was able to find a photocopied yearbook with a younger Brad picture in it, and John was able to guess his personal website address and begin scouring that.

"Do you think this is a real person?" Christie asked, turning the laptop towards John.

"Brad?"

"I mean the pictures. Do you think they're real people?"

“Oh, um, I guess you could generate these faces,” John leaned towards the screen and scrutinized the yearbook photo, “but they always have something a little wrong with them, like three front teeth or whatever. I’m not getting any uncanny valley vibes from this one, so it’s either the best I’ve seen, or it’s a real person. Have you tried reverse image searching it?”

“Ah no, I didn’t think of that,” Christie replied, as she paged back to the linkedin photo. Unfortunately, there were no other references to that photo on Google, and the similar photos feature didn’t help at all, since pictures of white men in suits aren’t exactly rare.

A notification came up from her chat app, from their company bug tracker. She was subscribed to all the channels, and this integration pinged the bugs channel whenever one of their institutional customers reported a bug. She dismissed the notification, but it gave her an idea. She began a search for Brad’s name in the logs, maybe there would be references to him in the integration channels. But she stopped, staring at the screen, after only four keystrokes.

The first auto-suggestion that popped up when she finished typing in “brad” was “direct message with @brad”. Well, there was no one at the company named Brad who would have that chat alias, and at this point it was unsurprising that the chat program had been hacked too. She clicked on the entry.

“Come look at this, it says I have a chat log with Brad.”

John leaned over again. “How far back does it start?”

Christie scrolled up as if she was making it rain, but the entries just kept on going. Eventually they got to one year back in the timestamps, and Christie stopped scrolling.

“Very far back, apparently” she replied.

John turned back to his computer, and she could see him bring

up his chat program. "I've got one too, ...it's mostly engineering talk. Just... normal stuff, as far as I can tell."

Christie hit the "back to bottom" button, and started to read up. "I've got hiking talk. Hiking, hiking, hiking," as she scrolled up, "oh, out of office. I remember this, I found an email yesterday where he gave an out of office announcement."

"I saw that same one," John replied, "it's just confusing, what's the point of the out of office announcement?"

Christie was reading through the latest chat messages, starting with the chat about being out of office. It was eerie seeing chat messages in her name that sounded so much like her, but weren't. Here she was asking about his hiking plans, that sounded right. These were things she was interested in in real life, but how did they know? Maybe she should cut back on her online presence. She had a feeling that they would all be doing that soon enough.

"Allegheny forest," she muttered.

"What?" John tilted his head to the side, his eyes still on his screen.

"He said he was going hiking in Monongahela national forest," she said. "Near Marienville."

"Where is that?" John asked.

Christie beat a staccato on her keyboard. "Down in West Virginia, Marienville is in Monongahela national forest, but it looks like just a blip on the map.

John leaned over to look at her screen. "It's not much more than a couple of roads. This is a one streetlight town if I've ever seen one." Christie said.

"Why there though?" John asked.

Christie pointed to her screen. "You've got several big trails in the area," she said, tracing dotted gray lines with her finger,

“it looks like. With so many around, this town probably caters to hikers.” Christie consulted the screen closer. “State route 250 goes into the town, then it dead ends in the forest, and this structure here is probably a ranger camp.”

“But why Marienville? Aren’t there lots of trails around here?” John asked.

“There are, but,” she switched back to her chat window, “he said he was hiking to Marienville. So... starting here, going to Marienville, that’s over 25 hours of hiking. Maybe he was starting closer.”

“Or...or maybe there isn’t any hiking going on!” John exclaimed. “What are we even talking about? No one went hiking to Marienville, because Brad doesn’t exist. He’s just a computer generated face, some websites, and fifty thousand lines of unaudited code. I feel like I’m going crazy!”

“Yeah,” Christie trailed off, looking at Marienville and its various trails on the map, “yeah, maybe.”

## Thursday, March 15

It was drizzling this morning as Ajay walked through the damp air towards work. He still lived in the same apartment he had when he was going to college, but with his software engineer's salary he hadn't needed to get new roommates when his old ones moved away, leaving him with a 3 bedroom apartment close enough to his workplace. What had been a medium distance apartment from school had turned overnight into an extremely close apartment to the set of shops that GradeRite was embedded in. The only thing he liked more than all the extra space was the reduced walking time.

He had grown up in Tennessee, where they only rarely got snow, so it was a shock coming to Pennsylvania where the city is snowed-in a quarter of the year, and the other three quarters are overcast or raining. But over the four years of his undergraduate he had gotten used to the inclement weather Pittsburgh was known for, although he never got to love the slushy snow indicative of this time of the year.

Ajay didn't suspect that his AWS question would have blown up into a full-fledged investigation by Wednesday, but now his task at work continued to be checking through files for suspicious code. He had been surprised at the caveat announced by David that we couldn't trust the Github changelog anymore. *That*

indicated a much more serious breach than he had imagined in the beginning. So all of the engineers in the company had been going through the files line by line to look for suspicious code. David had wheeled out three long whiteboards near the end of the day yesterday and told everyone to write down their suspicious entries on these as they found them, which Ajay then saw him take pictures of at the end of the day before Christie closed up the office.

The announcement of the desk-not-to-be-touched in the office helped to set Ajay's mind at ease. That someone had broken into the office and uploaded an overwritten change history to Github seemed way more likely to him than someone having hacked Github itself. And, he hadn't seen anything in the tech news sites he frequented talking about any security breach, which he would have imagined would be such big news that it would be impossible to miss.

He took the elevator up to the third floor and walked into the office. Christie was already there, and he waved to her. In the previous day's meeting it was also announced that she would be manually unlocking the office at 8am in the morning, so not to try coming in until after that. He walked back to his desk row, past the support pillars and the mysterious desk, to where John was already sitting and reviewing source code in his browser.

Ajay slung his backpack off one shoulder, bringing it around the front and unzipping the top of it to access his laptop. His desk had the same mesh-backed chair that everyone else's had, rumor was that the company got them at a fire sale when the local Yahoo branch went out of business. Using one foot to pull out the chair from in front of the desk, he pulled the slick aluminum macbook out of the top of his backpack and placed it on the suspiciously laptop-shaped clear center of

the cluttered wood veneer desk. Everything from notebooks to candy wrappers to old mugs were scattered around on the surface. Every so often he would get self conscious and make a clean sweep of it all, moving the mugs down to the sink and throwing all the trash away, but he was deep into a bout of un-self consciousness at the moment. Unlike John, Ajay preferred tea in the morning, and once the laptop booted up he went over to the kitchen to fix some.

No one ever made a teapot in the morning, Ajay thought, not for the first time, as he brewed his tea beside John's steaming Chemex. But, the decaf folks also didn't have a chemex, so it was a tough world all around. He leaned back on the counter while his steeping timer counted down. The windows in the office showed the tops of the surrounding shops, backdropped by the gray drizzling sky. Rain ran in slow runnels down the windows, bejeweling everything with pinpricks of light. It being so early in the morning, the back half of the office was still unliit, the half dozen or so people in the office already were sitting in the front half.

With his tea - sugar and cream - in hand, he went back to his desk and his day's work which awaited him. He was still auditing the view layer, the code that shows the user interface. The more junior developers were assigned to that and similar layers in the codebases, layers where a missed change wouldn't do that much damage. As seniority went up, the depth of the code went up as well, and John was assigned to the DAL layer, which modified data before it was stored in the database. One change there could affect everything else in the application that called it, and that would be the most surreptitious place to plant a malicious change.

Ajay didn't mind being relegated to the frontend, he actually

liked user interface work better. Recently he had been getting moved more and more onto the server code, but with this discovery he was now back where his expertise was. Although auditing code wasn't exactly as fun as developing new visual components, he felt confident in what he did know enough to be able to catch anything malicious.

His editor had a plugin that displayed the author and timestamp of the code next to any line he put his cursor on, and every so often he would see "bgutenberg" even in this frontend code. He knew not to necessarily trust these entries, since the main changelog had been modified, but curiosity still pressed him to pull up the specific changelogs that bgutenberg was involved in when he found them. They were for the most part older entries, most seeming to establish the base version of the file that was later modified as more features were added. Thus, his name would come up every so often, on the lines that were still the same from years past.

But some changes were newer, supposedly made within the last few months. Here was a page that was added talking about Pearson. GradeRite had been hashing out a deal with the Pearson network for the last six months that would add references in the Pearson study materials to the GradeRite essay grading system. The codes that would be put in the books would let the users have so many practice essays graded automatically. This page that was pure bgutenberg was the landing page for these links in the Pearson study materials. This had to be a modified changelog entry, since he knew of the existence of this page even before this big uproar. Was it Anna who wrote it? Maybe one of the newer web engineers. It felt very disorienting to not be able to trust the changelog anymore.

\* \* \*

As the day wore on, the whiteboard entries grew in fits and starts. One of Anna's tasks in this investigation was to go over the suspicious entries and either confirm a vulnerability, release it from the list as not vulnerable, or keep it queued up for the security auditor to get to. As entries got added to the whiteboard, they would derail her work for some number of minutes while she investigated, but she almost always erased them afterwards as non-dangerous. Mostly the entries were of particularly bad segments of spaghetti code, some in files she had authored herself, some parts that she remembered writing, but others that she remembered John had written too. One entry that stayed on the board was the cache file, which she couldn't make heads or tails of either.

After two days of going down to the Italian place for lunch, the return of catered lunches to the kitchen was a great boon. Today Christie had gotten Chipotle catering, so everyone had some combination of quesadilla, meat, and tomatoes on their plate. The topic of conversation was, as always, the breach. With everyone in the company turned toward the audit in one way or another, lots of instances of spooky entries by bgutenberg were cropping up, but none so far from anyone else unknown in the company. David chimed in with a reminder that any code lines could be modified, so not to let the changelog lure you into a false sense of complacency. But it was this that annoyed Anna so much, she had always been able to trust the changelog, and as far as she knew, engineers at other companies placed a similar amount of trust in the feature. Sometimes it seemed impossible that such a foundational feature of software development would be rendered useless overnight.

The auditor, Jan, had her own integrated channel in the chat, which she used to communicate with John, Anna, David, and anyone else who might need updating. She was slowly but surely making her way through the files left over from the double check. Anna received a new message alert in the channel.

“I’ve just gotten back from a security meeting with my colleagues,” Jan began, “we discussed the cache file in your repository. It turns out it is using an established algorithm for cache rotation, which seems largely copied from a post explaining it on the internet. This file can now be marked as secure.”

Anna was surprised at her mixed feelings. The cache file was as close as she felt to some kind of malfeasance, some evidence of a *reason* that any of this was happening. Bad code could be hidden anywhere, but with a file that complicated, it seemed like there would be some insecure code sneaked in there somewhere. Something that would let an attacker emulate an admin, steal our registration records or change a score, something like that. But there didn’t seem to be anything set up like that, there didn’t seem to be any reason for any of this to be happening.

She got up from her desk and went over to the kitchen for an after-lunch cup of coffee. Ajay was brewing another pot of tea.

“How is the audit going along?” Ajay asked.

Anna sighed. “It’s going fine, we’re still not finding anything that looks out of place, which is good...”

“Congratulations?” Ajay said.

“It’s just that... why is this happening? What was the reason for any of this?”

“Indeed, what *is* the reason for any of *this*?” Ajay intoned, raising up his hands and sweeping around the room. “We are but a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.”

“You know what I mean,” Anna sighed “It seems like such a large amount of work just to get in and do nothing. You could do things so much easier than this, if you had free access to modifying the change log. Why even use a new user to make changes, they could all be hidden behind an established user’s account.”

“Maybe they didn’t know our account names?” Ajay ventured. “No, that doesn’t make sense, if they were modifying the changelog. Maybe it was a mistake.”

“How so,” Anna asked.

“Well, like they meant to put a bunch of changes in under one of our names, but forgot to set the username or something. Maybe this is leftover from some other company that they were modifying at the same time, like someone on twitter replying to their own comment.”

Anna pondered the idea. It did have a sort of ring to it, the idea that so much of this mysterious activity could be attributed not to undiscoverable malice, but to incompetence. It was certainly true that any mistakes that came up in the job normally were all the result of incompetence, at least from her.

“But that doesn’t explain the changelog switches.” Ajay said.

“What are changelog switches?” Anna asked.

“Oh, it’s what I’m calling it when some change that exists, which was definitely done by someone in the company, has its author changed to bgutenberg. Like, for example, the Pearson landing page, you remember that project don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Anna replied. “Is this the one that you enter the code into?”

“Yes, the redeem code. Anyway, I remember when we made that page go live, so someone here wrote it, but it’s base revision, the initial change adding it in for the project, has that username

associated with it.”

“I guess they really did switch things around in the changelog like David said,” Anna pondered.

Her coffee was finished brewing, and Ajay accompanied her back to their desks. Anna walked automatically, avoiding the support beams in her way. She was trying to search her memory, who *had* written that file. She had been on the project as the backend developer, working on the server code, but who had done the frontend for it? She remembered that it was just a tiny amount of work, not enough to requisition a whole engineer-week for, that was saved for the backend that had to support redeem codes. So they would have had to pull someone in to develop the user interface. Her first thought went to Ajay, but he clearly wasn't the one who wrote the page. Another junior developer?

When Anna sat down at her computer, she opened up her chat client and went to the general engineering chat room. She typed in a new post.

“Does anyone remember who wrote the frontend code for the Pearson redeem code project?”

She sat staring at the post for a good ten minutes while she drank her coffee. “Work the problem,” her father's voice seemed to say in her head. He had been an engineer too, but a mechanical one as opposed to one in the realm of software. From an early age he peppered her with logic puzzles, chess, and his favorite: a block game he played on his palm pilot called “traffic”. She would frustrate herself at these challenges while he watched her, working for that satisfaction she saw on his face when she finished. Now she got her own satisfaction, her dad had called software engineering the engineering of the future, and it provided no end of bite-sized problems to conquer. But

this was more like a shark-sized problem, or a whale sized problem. What could be the solution to this one?

She opened her chat with John, “Hey John, for the Pearson code project, do you remember who wrote the frontend for that?”

John typed back, two seats down, “Honestly, I thought you wrote it. Maybe Ajay did, that seems familiar.”

“No, definitely not Ajay, he was the one who started asking.”

“Does the initial commit say ‘Brad’?” John asked.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Anna replied.

She could hear John start typing again and in a few seconds a message alert popped up in the general engineering room. “^ @here, do you recognize this code?”

“That should do it,” he chatted back.

“Oh God, I didn’t need the information that bad, I was just curious.”

“But now I am too, it’s freaking me out, all the files that are like that,” he typed back, “it would make me feel a little better to have the answer to just one of these problems.”

Anna understood that frustration. Normally in software engineering you combatted one problem at a time, and the winnings came in quick succession. After a bunch of them, you had a new feature, or a solved bug. But recently the problems just kept piling up with no solutions in sight. It was very unlike normal software engineering.

“Thanks a lot,” she chatted back. She was glad that he made the in-room announcement, although she wouldn’t have done it herself. John was like that though, very direct.

John, on the other hand, was even more upset now. He had added few entries to the whiteboard of suspicious code, after closer inspection almost all the code was understandable, if not

badly written. But what he had been adding to was a notepad on the side of his computer. Entries listed in this notepad corresponded to unexplained files he ran across. Nothing seemed off about the files, in fact some of the files were even pages on the website which he could look at in his browser, and they looked just fine. But the history for each one was questionable, with “Brad” either having created it or in large part modified it. These files were more common in the application layers deeper down, parts of the application that he should have known about. When he traced these large changes, he also found entire projects supposedly headed or implemented by “Brad” that linked them together. Anna had found the same thing that had been bugging him all day, he remembered these changes going in, these projects being completed, but he couldn’t remember who did it. He should have known, for God’s sake he was the co-author on half of these changes, but he couldn’t remember who wrote the code with him.

At her desk, Christie was plotting hikes on a map, hikes to and around Marienville, West Virginia.

\* \* \*

At 8pm the dinner crew were all standing around the lunch tables, picking their orders out of a series of plastic bags that had just arrived via Sushi Also, a Japanese restaurant down the street. David’s earlier proclamation about office closure at 8pm had left a lot of the crew hungry that night, as they unfortunately discovered they had no pantry items for making dinner. After some chatting back and forth, David relented a little and let the office stay physically unlocked after 8pm, with the caveat that Christie had to lock it, and thus be the last one out, on any night

she left. This meant no dinner if Christie had to leave early, but such a case was rare for her.

“Sushi, sushi, sushi, how I’ve missed you,” sang Ajay as he lifted out his plastic tray of rolls.

“You know you can go to restaurants when we don’t have dinner, right,” John ribbed.

“It’s not the same, people look at you funny when you eat at a restaurant alone, kind of sad,” Ajay responded. Anna nodded in agreement.

“Why don’t you just cook dinner at home like a normal person, like Christie,” David said. He was one to talk, thought Ajay, eating with the dinner crew every night.

“Not anymore,” replied Christie, “not since the countertop came off. We’re getting the new one delivered on Monday, butcher block.”

“Are you putting that in after work, or waiting until the weekend?” Anna asked.

“After work I would imagine, unless next week is as bad as this week.”

A silence filled the space after Christie, everyone had their own troubles with the mysteries of the week.

It was after they had all sat down at the tables in silence that Ajay spoke up. “What happened?” he asked, “What could have caused this much damage, who could have done this?”

David and Christie exchanged a look. Until that point, they had kept the discovery in the Google documents a secret between them, David conducting his phone consultations exclusively from the glass-paneled conference room.

“And why us, it’s not like we’re lucrative.”

“Hey,” David shot back, “we’ve got the Pearson deal.”

“Well not yet,” Ajay replied, “you know how much I worked

on the Pearson deal, but even I can't claim that we're making anything from it yet. It'll be months yet until the textbooks get printed with the codes in them. If you're going to go to all this trouble, why not hack a company like Google instead."

Ajay's comment hit uncomfortably close to home. What had been bugging David was not so much how widespread the hack was, but why them? There *were* a million other companies that used Google and Github that you could break into, and at least a few of them must be making some sort of profit. Was it just because they were so unknown that they wouldn't have good security practices? That was a depressing thought, but not so far from the truth of their bungled response. How long had this been going on that they hadn't been aware of. Hopefully not the years that "Brad" had been making entries in the code. That would be impossible.

The silence dragged on. Finally, Christie said, "Brad's going on a trip."

"A trip?" David asked.

"At least that's what they wanted us to think. I have a few direct messages with Brad that show him planning a hiking trip."

"So long Brad," David held up his drink, "we knew ye not long enough."

"It was down to a town in West Virginia," Christie continued, "I don't think from here, at least from what the messages were saying, but starting somewhere in between, going down to Marienville, and coming back to wherever he had parked."

David lowered his drink, his attempt at humor spoiled.

"That seems fairly specific," Anna said.

"It is, Marienville has a few major trails pass close by so it's not at all unrealistic for someone to plan to hike down to it. From

what I could find online it's even got a resupply shop for that purpose."

"But why make up this hiking story," Ajay asked, "what was the point of planting that trail?"

"I find myself asking that all the time now," John said, "what's the point of mixing up the changelog, what's the point of this desk, what's the point of this hike? It seems like it makes more sense the less you know about it, and goes more off the rails the more you find out. This is either the most complete corporate espionage I've ever heard of, or something else."

"What else?" David barked, "What else could this possibly be? What else could motivate someone to go to these lengths?"

The table fell silent. David was usually the most level headed one in the room, a status necessitated by his position, but the unknown unknowns presented to him over the last few days had felt like they were unwinding him, like an apple in a peeler.

"Maybe Brad is real," Christie said, almost under her breath.

David looked horrified at her. "What are you talking about!?", he shouted, "You think I hired a staff engineer and don't even remember it?"

"But there's his desk!" Christie screamed and pointed at the same time John said "Staff engineer?"

That little tidbit had been hardest to swallow for David. He had gotten a hunch earlier in the day and logged into the company's HR portal. Christie was usually on top of stuff like this, but he hoped not to find what he was looking for. Unfortunately for him, he did find Brad there, along with a local address, phone number, bank info, and rank: staff engineer. The more things made sense, the less they did. The types of changes and projects that "Brad" was assigned to across the changelog made sense with this newly discovered rank. And the bank info made sense

too, it's how someone was extracting value from this hack. But the address creeped him out, it was for an apartment building just up the street, one of the nicer ones. How hard would it be for him to go to that building now and look at the floor list? Would it say Brad there too?

"Yes, and the master plan is revealed," David said like a showman, "'Brad' has an entry in our salary roll, and next week he would get paid, and maybe already has been paid, a staff engineer's biweekly salary. Who knows if any payments have gone out yet, *that* system is a victim too."

John didn't ask to clarify if David was talking about the bank records or the HR system, and he didn't want to know. Somehow David's reveal about the HR entry had unnerved him even more, not less. It was like Brad was a drawing in a fill-in-the-lines color book, and everything new they found helped to color him in. At this point, Christie's exclamation about the desk had just as much weight for him as David's rebuttal.

The dinner continued in muted tones, any of the dinner crew fighting was a rarity, unlike political discussions at lunch, which happened far too often. At the end of the night, Christie and John threw away the containers and the trash while David turned off the lights. Everyone else got the hint, and left.

When they were all three standing in the alcove waiting for the elevator, David turned to Christie.

"Christie, I'm sorry that I raised my voice earlier, that was very inappropriate."

Christie felt stunned at this formal apology from David, who was usually just on the cusp of being CEO-like, half the time acting more like one of his new-grad employees than an executive.

"It was, and apology accepted," Christie replied, "I can't believe I missed the HR entry, I should have..."

“No, don’t think anything of it,” David interrupted, “I shouldn’t have hidden it from you after I found out. I think we’ve all been feeling a little crazy over the last few days. Maybe I need to hire a firm to help us or something. Maybe we aren’t cut out to deal with this kind of thing.”

“Maybe we should hire a company therapist,” Christie said, and David smiled.

“I’ll call around tomorrow, see who might be good at quietly cleaning up these kinds of messes,” David said as they exited the elevator, “if anyone else has these kinds of messes.”

David waved to John and Christie as he turned left out of the building. They waved back as they turned right. When they reached the intersection, John asked “How are you feeling?”

Christie didn’t answer right away. “I feel confused, and hurt. The worst thing is that no matter how angry David gets, that desk is still *sitting there*, right in front of me, every day. It’s like a big middle finger to me and everyone else in the company, a big sign that says ‘You don’t know what’s really going on, and you never will’.”

They walked the rest of the way home in silence, Christie deep in thought, and John deep in worry. These developments bothered him too, more and more as time went on, but not in the same visceral kind of way that they got to Christie. Maybe it was the desk being so close, a physical artifact of an impossibility. Maybe part of it was her role as the office administrator, to have something be so wrong with something she thought she knew so well. Holding her hand as they walked, he could feel the ragged edges. She hadn’t used to bite her nails.

They arrived home in silence. Everything was the same in the house as it was yesterday, but the mood had shifted drastically. John could tell that Christie was thinking about something,

he knew it was probably about “Brad”, but he didn’t want to interrupt. After putting up their bags, they both sat on the couch in silence.

Christie decided to make the big ask. “John, I want to go to Marienville.”

“Okay,” John replied.

“I really thi...” Christie started, then “Huh?”

John looked her full in the face. “Yes, I think it would be a good idea. Did you expect me to argue back?”

“I thought so,” Christie said.

“Maybe I would have before, maybe even earlier today, but it all just keeps mounting up higher and higher, doesn’t it? It’s getting to the point where the more fantastical the explanation, the more it makes sense.” John paused for a minute. “And, I found something today.”

“What is it?”

“I was looking through my notepad, the one I keep on my desk, for something, I don’t remember what now,” John let out in fits and starts, “but when I turned a page, I found something, not because it stood out, it didn’t stand out as different at all, but I think because I’ve been looking for the name all day. It said ‘ask Brad about the service DAL’”.

Christie listened, hearing in John’s voice the same fear that had struck her the first time she looked up at that unknown desk across from her.

“I mean, it looks so real,” John continued, “and it’s just in the middle of the page. It isn’t inserted at a weird angle, or between lines, like it was added, it’s just in the middle of the page like I wrote it. Like it’s been there for the last three months, or however long ago I wrote those notes. I could tell myself ‘this is just another forgery in the office’, but what ridiculous cost

to benefit ratio is this? I rarely ever look back at my notes, how could forging this possibly be worth the effort. It looks exactly like my handwriting.”

Christie waited for the other shoe to drop, that unsayable something that was still stored up in John. “Maybe,” he continued, “there really was a Brad, after all.”

“I think,” said as she reached out her hand for his, “that maybe there was. I don’t know how all this happened, how he was inserted into our lives, but I think that there might have been a whole person called Brad out there, somewhere else, and now for whatever reason traces of him are all over.”

She felt her mind calming, like the sea after a storm. Having someone else say those unutterable words, the same words she had said at dinner, brought her back to the reality of it all, the fact that this impossible problem was somehow intersecting with their reality.

“Well,” Christie said, “I’ve come up with a trip plan, tell me what you think.”

## Friday, March 16

After expressing that impossible thought, John somehow found it easier to deal with the inexplicable at work. The entries in the code with “Brad” on them became less menacing, and took on new meanings. It was like some sort of messed up Occam’s Razor, by accepting the possibility of the impossible, all of the contrived probable explanations fell away. When you took away the threat of system hacks that had been looming over their heads for the last week, the entries and references to him looked less ominous and more normal.

He went back and looked at his notepad again, he had marked the page with Brad’s name on it. Staring at it, yes, it still looked normal. He half expected it to not be there anymore, the piece of evidence that had taken him over the edge suddenly disappearing just as he had gone too far.

They made the decision last night to keep new developments from David, he didn’t seem to be taking what was currently happening particularly well anyway. Depending on how their trip this weekend went, they might have enough of something to confront him with, or maybe not. John knew he didn’t want to feel like an idiot for saying the unsayable, but then afterward having all of his evidence be easily disproved. Maybe there would be something in Marienville, he mused.

John flipped through his notepad, front and back pages filled out, to try to find anything else weird or out of place. As he went further back, the entries became fuzzier in his memory, until he got to the section where he was just taking notes on everything and anything, which was right after he started at the company. No more mentions of Brad.

He tossed the notepad back onto his desk to the right of his keyboard. There was all of this code in the system with Brad all over it, but it was so easily explained away, regardless of the missing reasoning, as a hack. But no one had yet answered the question at the root of it, why our code? There wasn't any reason John could think of that would single their company out as opposed to any other company, no particularly valuable intellectual property, although David would argue this point, that was worth a fabrication on this magnitude.

John was trying to understand what could have happened, through a more fantastical lens now. He talked to Christie last night about a movie he had seen, where an astronaut was shifted to a parallel universe, and ended up getting stuck in the internals of a space station. Could something as crazy as that have happened here, except instead of Brad getting stuck, it was all of his peripherals that jammed their way into the company? That somehow the code was there, the desk was there, but Brad didn't make it? Or maybe Brad was emerging, being born into the world in reverse order, details first. Would Brad show up to work one day and this all be over? The fantastical interpretations were making more sense at this point than the confluence of mundane factors that would have had to come together to explain it.

That morning, he started to think about the problem in a more global way. If in some universe there was a Brad, and this Brad

had been a senior engineer at this company, what might have changed or been effected even though there wasn't a Brad here now? It was a little like looking for a black hole by measuring the stars around it.

As he went over for his second cup of coffee that morning, he tried to surreptitiously register all the items on "Brad's" desk. There were the normal assortment of notebooks and loose papers on most people's desks, and some larger reference manuals. The one his monitor was propped up on was a reference book on the SCALA language, an academic computer language known for its "scalability", which, in other terms, meant it's utter impossibility to understand. Why anyone used it, John couldn't know.

But... one of their backend services *was* written in SCALA. He had grappled with it many times before, barely learning enough to make the changes he needed to make. Who had known SCALA well enough to review his buggy code? Who owned that repository? Jason? After getting his coffee, he came back to his desk and looked up the repository. Brad owned it. After a quick query, in the thirty repositories maintained by the company only two were owned by Brad. The odds of it being a lucky guess went mostly out the window. He could imagine in another place, much like this one, Brad arguing for the memory benefits of the SCALA interpreter for this server, for the safety of the language, and then being the only one at the company that knew anything about it, except for the few unfortunate souls he had to guide through the process of making changes to it. In the age of Google, the reference book was mostly a display item, a badge proclaiming mastery of a language. He could imagine Brad sitting it proudly in the center of his desk, below his monitor, beginning the rule over his SCALA fiefdom.

All of this was to say that John didn't know SCALA, didn't know anyone in the company who knew SCALA, and didn't know anyone who liked SCALA enough to write a whole service in it. It seemed to make sense, this one detail of a non-existent Brad bending everything around it in the direction of SCALA, like light to a black hole. At first the dominant thought in his head, but now reduced to a nagging sensation, he worried about the idea that it *was* all just a hack and he was going crazy too. At what point can you say "the probability of all this normal stuff happening is now less than the probability of this impossible thing"?

While John was having his crisis of faith that morning, David was in full recovery mode. He was consulting with his board advisers, and the contractors they recommended to help fix this mess. In a conference call with their banking institution, they had confirmed that they had on-paper receipts for Brad going back nearly four years. This changed the nature of the attack completely. Not only was Brad somehow inserted into the HR records at the company's inception, this also meant that at least some of their changes to the codebase were genuine, at least by misdirection standards. There was no way that Github hadn't been hacked though, there was too much unexplained standalone code that someone would have had to build, so at least the author tags had been changed. But they had for some reason decided that now was the time to really kick the ruse into high gear with the office break-in. All that seemed small potatoes now that he had to inform the board that four years of a senior engineer's salary had been siphoned off by hackers. The money, at least, was depressingly real. No chance of forging that change.

Luckily no one had gotten greedy, and the bank account still

stood at roughly five million dollars, enough for a couple of years of runway still. There would be a couple months more if this hack hadn't happened, but David was more concerned with the Board's changing view on his competence than he was at the reduced runway.

With all of these software engineer salaries, it wasn't like the company was slowly burning through the cash before, but now he was really spending it with the new contracts he was signing by the day. Investigators, auditors, analysts, accountants, everyone was digitally descending on GradeRite to fix this, and it was costing a pretty penny. Maybe he wasn't alone, maybe a lot of companies his size had their own hacks and never reported it. He didn't blame them, he couldn't even imagine what he would say standing in front of a podium to explain this to the press. This could be just a normal growing pain that went with the territory, he just wished that it wasn't so damn creepy.

After lunch, which was pizza, things settled back to their new normal. The whiteboard continued to grow, David periodically took pictures of it (with a polaroid camera he picked up in a vintage store), and the company collectively put their noses to the ground to sniff out any weirdness. By three PM, Ajay had finished with his original section of the code audit, by four PM most junior engineers were finished and reassigned. By six PM the code audit was mostly done, and for the majority of the company this was a chance to get back to their blessedly less stressful normal work.

Christie, John, and David, however, didn't get back to their normal work. David was navigating the intricacies of handling a major company breach, but John and Christie were involved in their own surreptitious investigations. After a quick chat earlier in the day, John had taken over the internet-stalk-in-progress

they had on Brad, while Christie continued to plan their trip to West Virginia. John was able to link Brad to a couple of different third-party accounts based on similar link sharing. First, a post on hacker news advertising one of his personal projects led him to the account which linked that hacker news user to a reddit account. This user only had a few posts, but they went back years. Some in the Pittsburgh subreddit, some in engineering, and some in the video game Ingress's subreddit. It all seemed like fairly normal, mundane stuff.

Even though they had put some stock in the idea of something strange going on, John and Christie still hadn't completely given up on the idea of some massive hack. They shared information through text messages, not their company's chat, just in case. Unfortunately, nothing John found helped Christie figure out which set of trails they should investigate. Brad, if he was ever here, or made it there, would have stopped into Marienville to restock, he had said so in his messages. But his messages were lacking in information on what specific trail he was hiking, so John and Christie planned to walk down the last segments of several during the weekend. They weren't sure what they were looking for, maybe they were hoping that they would find nothing out of the ordinary. The two of them were going to ask around in town as well, Christie would print up a few flyers with Brad's LinkedIn picture on them to put up, in the off case that someone did remember this impossible person passing through.

At seven thirty the dinner order arrived at the office early, so the night crew quickly packed up their work and sat down to eat. Today's order was from a local fancy burger restaurant, and most of the crew got big burgers in cardboard takeout boxes and 32 oz cups of milkshakes. David, who had been trying to shift to a healthier diet, had gotten a bowl of chilli.

The conversation that night was light, there was no mention of the hack that was still on John, Christie, and David's minds - everyone else had moved onto their normal work and seemed to want to leave that unpleasantness in the past. The question went around on what everyone was doing this weekend. Ajay was planning on playing video games, Anna had a show queued up that she wanted to binge, David would go to the movie theater, and John and Christie said they were going hiking.

"No more construction work this weekend then?" David asked.

"There's no more to do," replied Christie, "not until the countertop comes in."

"That's not this weekend?"

"No," Christie replied, "Monday afternoon, I'll have to go and let them in when they call, but we'll finally have the counter in the house afterward. Installation is another matter."

"Well I think I can say for all of us that we've really enjoyed having you at dinner these last two weeks," David said, "and we'll be sad to see you go back to a responsible life."

"Here here," Ajay raised his milkshake.

"You know we'll be eating dinner with you on Monday too, right? How long do you think a countertop takes to install?" John asked.

"Oh, a couple of hours?" David ventured.

"Nah, it'll be a whole thing, we'll probably end up doing it over the next weekend, it's not exactly plug and play."

The rest of the dinner continued like they did one week before. Everyone cleaned up the table, John washed the leftover dishes in the sink and put them in the stand to dry, and the dinner crew gathered up their things and headed to the door. After everyone was in the atrium, Christie turned off the last lights

FRIDAY, MARCH 16

in the office and floor-locked the glass door to the office. The elevator was just big enough to hold the dinner crew, and they said their goodbyes at the door to the street. For a block Ajay walked with them and they talked about his gaming plans, but soon enough it was just John and Christie walking back home.

## Monday, March 19

The alarm clock blared in its electric tone at 6:30 AM. The sun hadn't risen yet and the outside world was as dark as the bedroom, as David swung his arm over and hit the dismiss button. He was all tangled up in the sheets of his king size bed, and he took a sleepy moment to gather them up and throw them to the side. He got out of bed and padded to the lightswitch on the wall, which lit up the bedroom.

David walked from the lightswitch into his adjoining bathroom. He winced as his feet hit the cold tiles, and turned on the light in there. The bathroom was larger than any he had before, the double sinks representing a hopeful aspiration. He only brushed his teeth before his morning treadmill run, he hated the taste in his mouth from the night.

David ran five miles that morning before needing to stop. He was going for longer and longer, and eventually he would need to limit his morning runs by time and not endurance. But he wasn't there yet, so he walked like a zombie back up to his bathroom and prepared his tortured body for a shower.

David's wardrobe normally consisted of some variation of jeans with a t-shirt. He had worked at bigger tech companies before where you had to wear business casual: button up shirts and khaki pants. Maybe on Fridays you could wear

jeans, depending on the company and team. He found those restrictions unbelievably stifling, maybe they reminded him of the dress codes in high school, and purposefully dressed down every day to set the example for his company.

Today he chose his dark blue jeans and a rock n' roll band t shirt from his closet. After dressing, while making his way down the stairs, he checked the business metrics on his phone from their internal tracking website. Everything looked fine from the night before, he checked these at least five times a day, and he turned off the phone screen as he made his way to the garage door. One of the aspects of his job that he relished the most was making the office kitchen order, where he could choose whatever cereals to restock. That's where he got his breakfast every morning, after all.

David stopped on one foot right before reaching the garage door. He forgot to get the office key. He turned and went up the stairs again into his bedroom. After a few minutes of searching through his bedside drawer, he couldn't find the key, so he went into his home office. A few drawers and a couple boxes later, and he finally found the key, attached to a big tag with the label "Office Door Floor". He stuffed the key and the tag into his pocket as he walked to the garage again.

He drove his old Mazda for ten minutes to get to the parking garage for the office, and began the spiral up to park on the first floor with a free space. That turned out to be the fourth floor. A couple of years ago David had decided to buy a house, but he had the decision to make on whether to live near the office or away from it. Eventually he decided that the office's location was more fluid than his own home's, and also under his control as well, so he opted for a larger house farther away. He found that the drive in the morning was a nice way to privately compose

his thoughts and plans for the day, as opposed to walking, or his brief stint taking public transportation.

The parking lot was at the other end of the shops, and he had to walk down the sidewalk in front of the store windows on his way to the office. Some of the stores were just opening up, some were already in full swing, although with few customers. He entered the main building and called the elevator down. As he rode it up, he wondered to himself how much longer it would last until it would need to be repaired again. For whatever reason, this particular elevator seemed to malfunction much more often than in other buildings he had worked in, or maybe back then he just wasn't privy to how often they needed to be fixed.

The elevator doors opened at 8 AM on John sitting on a bench in the alcove.

"Hey John, you're here early." David said.

"Hey, yeah my alarm went off early this morning, so I thought I would just come in."

"Are you doing alright?" David asked, noticing John's pale skin.

"Now, but this weekend I had the worst food poisoning, I stayed in bed nearly the whole time." John replied.

"You don't look so great still," David said.

"Maybe, but coming in beats spending more days in bed."

David could understand this, sometimes all there was was work to get your mind off things.

He took the key with the big folded tag out of his pocket and unlocked the lock at the bottom of the door and held it open for John.

"Thanks," John said as he passed David by.

As John walked on to his desk, David began the morning ritual by flipping all of the light switches up next to the door. The

office was lit up, eliciting a groan from John.

“Oh, sorry man,” David said, and selectively flipped the switch for John’s row to leave it in the dark for now.

As John made his way from his desk to the kitchen, David set about arranging his desk in the conference room for the upcoming day’s appointments. How much he would love to move out of there, he thought, maybe at the end of this week he could move back to his old desk in the office with everyone else.

David shuffled around some papers, then lifted up another stack and looked through them. Where was the invoice and schedule for the locksmith? He had specifically thought of that when he unlocked the door, but the time of arrival had slipped his mind over the weekend, so he needed the invoice. But it wasn’t here.

He left the glass conference room and walked over to his desk, taking a few minutes to leaf through the papers and piles there for the pink carbon copy itinerary and invoice. Not here either though.

On his way back to the glass conference room, he caught a flash of pink paper on the extra desk just outside it. In amongst the various tools and computer equipment that was stored there was a pink sheet with the locksmith’s invoice on it. 10AM, that was the time that the locksmith would arrive. With the pink invoice in hand, he returned to the conference room.

It wasn’t five minutes later that David ripped open the conference room door again and stormed over to his old desk. He hurriedly began shuffling through the papers again, to no avail. None of his other files were there. Where was his inbox, outbox, or todo tray? He knew that some number of vendors would be calling today, but how many and when? He needed these sheets, and they weren’t there.

David swung his head over to the desk that he found the locksmith invoice on. Could they be there? When he straightened up above his old desk, he could clearly see a plastic tray with three shelves, his plastic inbox, outbox, todo tray, as far as he could tell. He walked over to the miscellaneous desk and looked at the tray. Yes, here were some scheduled calls taking place today, here was another invoice, this time for phone service. These were all the things he expected in his trays, but what were they doing here?

A smile slowly spread across his face. It must be Ajay, he must be pulling one of his pranks. You wouldn't expect it of him, with his timid personality, but he had pulled some legendary (at least in the company) pranks since he had started. He remembered how angry he had gotten when Ajay had switched out his computer, which he used to keep on his desk overnight, with one of their new macbooks, replicating the stickers on the cover exactly. The next day he had a tense hour where he was sure his computer had reset and lost all of his data. When Ajay had come to him with his old laptop in his hands, the relief overwhelmed the anger that rose up, which probably gave a bad example in hindsight. Since then he had been sure to take his laptop home every night. This seemed like one of those pranks again.

David picked up the plastic tray and was turning towards the conference room when another thought struck him. The office was locked all night now, and all weekend, and David was the one that had been locking up for the last week, so he was the last one out every night. There was no way Ajay could have gotten in over the weekend. Unless... unless he switched it out after dinner, but before they left on Friday night. That could be possible, but what an inappropriate joke to play right after they got broken

into last week. Maybe he *would* have to speak with Ajay about these pranks after all.

After moving the paper tray over to his conference room, David looked through the papers on the desk to the left of the door, which ended up having quite a few of the papers he needed on it. He gave up and put the papers back down, he would just check out here when he needed to find something, more likely than not it would be here instead of in his office.

\* \* \*

At 11am the elevator doors dinged open and a man with a toolbox walked into the office. He looked left and right, but there didn't appear to be anyone there to check in with. In the kitchen he saw a young Indian man perusing a shelf full of snacks. He went over and held out his hand.

"Hello, I'm George, would you happen to know where Christie is? I'm here to change the locks."

"Oh, well I think you want to talk to David, he handles these kinds of things. And I'm Ajay by the way." They shook hands and Ajay led him over to the conference room.

"Hey David, the locksmith's here." Ajay said while poking his head into the office, and left.

David came out and likewise shook the locksmith's hand, then pointed him to the lock at the bottom of the front glass door that needed to be changed. David went back into his office and fished out the invoice for the locksmith. He drew up a check for the amount specified and laid it on the desk beside him for when the locksmith was done.

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later the locksmith was paid and out the door. John had been sitting at his desk since 8am but had gotten hardly any work done. A splitting headache and waves of nausea kept attacking him, making it all but impossible to focus on the code in front of him. He had been having these attacks off and on since the weekend, since he had returned early from his hiking trip. For some reason he had decided to take a trip down to West Virginia to hike in the woods, but his first attack had left him doubled over not 500 feet into the forest, groping back to his car left on the side of the road. The drive back had been better, but since then he had been bedridden the rest of the weekend in his house. Today had been the first day he felt well enough to get out of bed, which is lucky since he didn't want to use up any more of his PTO so early in the year.

But he was getting nowhere. He may have been physically in the office, but he was using all of his energy trying to ward off the pain. Maybe being at home would be better. In fact, as another bout of nausea rolled over him, he was sure it would be. At least he could try to sleep this bug away.

John closed his laptop and slid it into his bag. Turning to Ajay and Anna, he told them that he would be going home, but didn't think he would get much more work done today. They bid him farewell, and he made his way over to David's office. David was on the phone, so he leaned up against the glass, and the empty desk in front of the office caught his eye.

It was too much, he was going to blow. He lurched over to the trash can beside the support column in the middle of the room, but only about half of his morning coffee made it in by the time he got there. David saw John's mad dash to the trashcan and hurriedly put the vendor on hold to run over to John.

"Oh Jesus, I'm sorry," John said between dry heaves.

“Naw man, it’s okay,” David replied, “I thought you looked down, but I didn’t realize you were this sick.”

“I didn’t think so either,” John said, the dry heaves finally subsiding.

“I think you should go home and get some rest,” David said, watching John as he rose up from the trash can, “do you think you can make it home?”

“Yeah, you know how it is, I feel better now.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” David said skeptically, “I’ll call you a cab, my treat.”

John flashed back to those countless nights in the early days when David and him had gone out drinking with the company, such as it was back then, and all the times when they had drunk too much and ended up in this exact situation.

“I thought I was too old for this,” John said.

David laughed. “I’m afraid the gastrointestinal issues are just starting. Enjoy eating dairy before bed now, if you still can.”

David walked John back to his office, John’s face burning with embarrassment, and dialed through a new line to the taxi service, the vendor’s line still flashing on hold.

After getting off the call, David turned to John. “They’ll be here in a couple minutes. Let’s go out to the street.”

“That sounds good to me,” John replied.

As they made their way out the front glass door, Anna waved to John, and John waved back before entering the elevator.

“Have you been this sick all weekend?” David asked on the way down.

“Off and on,” John replied, “since getting back from my hike.”

“Maybe you ate a bad cliff bar,” David joked.

“Yeah, maybe,” John smiled, but he hadn’t eaten anything on the trail. That morning he had made... eggs. Yes, that was it, he

made eggs that morning, and then drove out to West Virginia. He had been planning the trip for a few days before, it had seemed like such an interesting trip at the time, but now it seemed like the last place he wanted to go. He certainly had paid the price for venturing out of his homebody comfort zone.

They exited the building and stepped out onto the street. The sunlight now seemed incredibly bright to John, reminding him of his post-hangover mornings. Shoppers had started to fill out the street, walking from store to store in light jackets, and the air smelled like wet asphalt. They were standing at the curb when a black-and-white checkered taxi pulled up. It wasn't a yellow cab, a local variant, but it would get the job done. David held the door open for John as he got in.

"Call me if you need anything," David said through the open door.

"I will," John replied, not really planning to. What John planned instead was to just crawl back into bed until the world stopped feeling so awful.

"Alright, feel better," David said, and shut the door gently, which John's headache was grateful for.

A three minute ride down the street in the dusty smelling cab later and they were at John's house. He had started to feel like maybe the cab was all overblown, but when he looked at the house he was hit with another wave of nausea which nearly doubled him over.

He stretched out his leg in the back seat, attempting to access his wallet with the least jostling that he could. It wasn't easy, his jeans were tight, but after some fumbling in the dry hot air of the cab he yanked it free.

"How much," he grunted towards the driver.

"Already paid," the driver responded in a thick middle eastern

accent. David must have pre-paid the ride during the call.

John fished around in his wallet, trying to dive into the action to cut out the beating headache. One dollar, two dollars, he thought, trying to focus only on that. He extracted the two dollars and crumpled up his billfold.

“Tip,” John grunted, handing the cash between the seats.

“Thank you very much,” the driver recited with the sound of a customer service agent. But when he looked back at John in the rear view mirror he did a double take.

“Hey buddy, are you alright?” the driver asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” John hoped, and responded.

Stepping out onto the damp paving stone, John tried to straighten up, and got about three quarters of the way up. His mouth was filling up with saliva again, he thought he might hurl, so he hurried to the door. The concrete path looked a million miles long, but the air had replaced it’s asphalt tinge with a wet-leaf smell which was much more palatable, and the nausea was at least holding steady.

John got to the porch. Three wet wooden steps up, and he would be inside and ready to sleep this all away. He took the steps one at a time, each footfall splashing in the little clear puddles on the weathered wood. Finally at the front door, the inlaid cut glass flashing back green, black, and white from the street at him, he reached into his pocket for the keys. The keyring he pulled out only had a couple keys, for his bike, the back shed, and the front door. He slid the front door key home in the deadbolt and opened the handle at the same time. The front door gave way and he stumbled into the house just as a fresh wave of nausea started gurgling in his stomach. He made a beeline for the kitchen trash can as he slammed the door behind him. The taxi driver saw the door shut, put his car back into drive and left.

In John's fever dream, he was suspended in space, the planets and the sun whirling around him. He felt a pressure in his head and feet, and realized that he was the one spinning, not the planets. He threw out his arms, encased in a chunky white fabric space suit, and started waving them around. Little by little the stars slowed down, passing double in the reflection of his helmet, once up, once down. In his readout it said he was about to touch down on Earth, John spared no thought as to how a lone astronaut without a ship would accomplish this entry.

After a while of wiggling his arms and legs to beat sixty, the universe had largely stilled. He could see the sun through his visor, not a small disc of light but a giant ball of fire. Around it was a red ring, and he saw the tiny planet Mercury, like you would see in a child's solar system exhibit. Each of the planets was outsized, and the distances drastically reduced, but the kind of model that would get the idea across.

He saw Jupiter in the distance, fully a quarter of the size of the sun, a few rings back. He looked around, there was Venus, there was Mars. The asteroid belt was represented by thousands of tumbling boulders each neary the size of Mercury. He looked down, as far as his stiff suit would let him, and saw a red ring intersecting his midsection. He turned to the left, then to the right. Where was Earth? He couldn't see it anywhere.

John woke up with a gasp, his eyes shooting open. He was lying on his bed, the covers half off. Sunlight lit up the inside of the house through the front, south facing windows. He so rarely saw the house lit up during the day, or at least felt like it was too rare for how much he was spending on it's mortgage. A rancid smell of bile reached his nose and he looked over the

side of the bed. On the floor was a bowl filled with frothy white liquid that stunk to high heaven, but luckily the nausea wasn't there anymore. It seemed like the worst of it had passed.

He slowly sat up, experimentally turning his head this way and that. No headache anymore either. Was he finally free of whatever food poisoning he had subjected himself to? Hopefully so, because now came the really nasty part. He breathed through his mouth as he bent over and picked up the bowl of bile from the floor. It sloshed around sickeningly as he walked it over to the bathroom, where he considered for a moment throwing it down the sink, but then opened up the toilet and poured it in.

After flushing the toilet, he used water from the sink to wash it out by hand as best he could, though he knew that it would require a washing machine run before he would consider putting brussels sprouts in it again. He maneuvered around in the tight bathroom and walked out bowl first onto the second story hallway. To his left was the bedroom, a guest bedroom was further up the hall, and the stairs down were to his right. The floor was hardwood but with that same dusty look that spoke of unnameable ages spent beneath a carpet pad.

He took the bowl down the unfinished steps, trying to keep any drips inside of it, to the kitchen, which was in a real state of construction. The sink was disconnected and laying on the tile, the countertop was completely missing, and the stove had its gas disconnected for the renovation. Luckily the dishwasher was still hooked in, although he had little use for it with so much of the kitchen dismantled. With the counter gone, you could see the dusty black painted metal top of the dishwasher, which somehow made it seem cheaper, like it was some sort of standalone appliance instead of an integrated part of the kitchen. Instead of a part of the counterspace, it was just a black metal

cube, and John opened up the front of it and put the bowl into the empty bottom rack.

John had ripped up the kitchen like a tornado in an inspired moment when he thought it would look so much better with a butcher block countertop, like there wasn't *already* enough work to do around the house for one person. He still hadn't picked out the countertop he wanted to replace it with, that would require a trip to either the hardware reclamation center or the home improvement store, a trip which he now found draining to think about. He wished now for an intact kitchen, one that he could at least get a glass of water in, or God forbid a small snack.

Someone knocked at the door three times. John wasn't expecting anyone, the only thing he could think of was that maybe David was checking in on him. He crossed the kitchen, out into the front hallway and looked through the carved glass front of the door. Two men in brown speed suits, or they had brown shirts and brown pants, he couldn't tell with all the refraction. Definitely not David then. John walked up to the door and opened it.

"Hiya, Brian from appliance central," the man standing in front said. He had a five o'clock shadow when, at John's best guess, it was closer to three, and did have on a brown shirt and brown pants. It looked like some sort of work dress code. "I've got a delivery here for Christie."

John scrunched up his brow. "No, no Christie here."

The man chewed his gum and looked back down at the clipboard he was carrying. "Then are you... John?" he asked, and looked back up.

"Yes, I'm John," he replied, becoming much more confused.

"See," the front man leaned back to the other, showing him the clipboard, "this is why you always get an alternate recipient.

And what do we need now?"

The second man replied, "Signature and receipt."

"Yep," the first man said, and turned the clipboard around to John. "Here's the delivery confirmation, if I could get you to sign here..." he scratched an X beside an empty box halfway down the page while he was holding it out, and offered the clipboard and pen to John.

"I'm sorry, what's being delivered?" John asked.

The man in front turned the clipboard back around, "Looks like we got... two pieces: a countertop, 6 by 2 with precuts for appliances, and 3 by 2, both with a 45 degree edge."

Those familiar numbers went back to a night when he was measuring out the old counter for replacement, back when he still had a working sink and his kitchen didn't look like a construction site. He had those measurements still written down somewhere around here, but he had never used them to buy a countertop.

Against his better judgement, he saw his hand reach out for the offered clipboard. His other hand grabbed the pen. He looked at the delivery sheet, there were the specs for the countertop, total weight, and address for delivery. It did list "Christie" as the recipient, maybe a previous owner that they pulled from some address database? He didn't think the woman he bought the house from was named Christie.

But there was his name, in the box marked "alternate delivery recipient". Was this some sort of strangely expensive and labor intensive gift? He didn't think his parents knew what kind of countertop he wanted or the dimensions of the space. But somewhere between his name on the sheet and the specific dimensions of the wood, it was clear that this countertop was made for this house.

John signed the form and gave it back to the man in brown. "Yeah, it'll go in the kitchen there." He stepped back from the door and pointed through the arch, past the dining room and into the gutted kitchen.

"Gotcha," the man said, tucking the pen back into a loop on his shirt. "Won't be a minute." The two men in brown walked back down the path to their truck. For a moment John wondered if the sink cutout in the countertop would be in the right place. It didn't seem possible, since you needed to have the exact measurements to make that cutout, and he hadn't ordered anything, but that sure would be nice.

The men came up the path again with two slabs of wood held between them, one on top of the other, both with 45 degree cuts on one side. With some deft maneuvering at the porch stairs, they entered the house and John pointed them the way into the kitchen.

"How long you been living here?" Brian asked, after placing the slabs on the tile.

"Not long, just a year I think," John replied.

"Did you buy it like this, or did you do this?"

John chuckled. "I did this, I couldn't live a year without a kitchen."

"I hear you," Brian replied as he and his associate made their way to the door.

"Well good luck with your renovation," Brian said and held out his hand.

"Thanks," John said as he shook first Brian's hand, then his trainee's.

When he had the door closed, John walked back to the kitchen to investigate the two new irregular slabs of wood. Each one was wrapped in a sheet of crinkly milky plastic, and John had

to hold up one side of the top slab in order to slide the edge of its wrapping out from under it. Tossing back the wrapping, the crinkling very loud in the dead quiet house, he was staring at a slab of dark butcher block two inches thick with a forty five degree angle on the left, and a square end on the right. The sink and faucet cutouts, John looked up to check with the freestanding pipe mounts which came up just past the previous formica counter, were in exactly the right place. Maybe some shifting would have to be done at the end, nothing seemed to get done around here without some type of tighter-than-necessary fit, but these blocks looked like they would work out.

“Good God,” John said out loud, “now who the hell do I thank for these?”

He looked at the invoice carbon copy he had been holding in his hand and went down the sheet again. As far as he could tell, the wood had been bought at the store, not online, the delivery paid up front, with a credit card belonging to “Christie”. But he didn’t have any friends named Christie. And besides, he didn’t know anyone who would spend this much money on a gift for him; even for David with his lavish company events, this would be too much.

He let the plastic wrapping go and watched it float back down to half cover the slab on the ground. This was all feeling a little too much like Brad over again. He hadn’t bought into the hype espoused by some of his coworkers that Brad could be some sort of otherworldly force, first said in jest but taken more seriously with every uncomfortable revelation. To him Brad was just the result of a computer hack, a beneficially placed account which allowed someone to make a lot of changes to the company’s online resources in a relatively small amount of time. But now, there was something very “Brad” going on.

As he was perusing the receipt a second time, he realized that his address was on this form multiple times, both as the delivery location and also as the billing address. But that's weird, he thought, didn't credit card companies use the billing address to detect fraud, or was that not how they worked? It seemed logical that the reason you put your billing address in every online order was to weed out fraud, but he was feeling much more unsure of that than he was a second ago. Because this transaction had gone through, it must have, since it was bought days ago, which would mean that whatever credit card was used was associated with this house.

John looked up, sweeping his eyes left and right. No one was here, the house was still completely silent, one of the reasons he bought this specific property, but now he thought he wouldn't mind if the house let in a little more sound from the outside than it did. He walked quietly to the edge of the kitchen and tried to nonchalantly look down the hall. No one was there. He had the worst feeling like something was going on though, that "the call was coming from inside the house", so to say. He had gotten a little used to seeing commits from a person that didn't exist at work, but somehow weird things at home were a completely different matter.

He walked out of the entrance to the kitchen, through the dining room, and into the living room. There was an Ikea couch sitting in the middle of the room with an antique coffee table in front of it. A laptop with a shiny metallic case was on the couch, sitting beside the cushion. Plastic sheeting was set up around the entire outside of the room in preparation for a paint job that he didn't really want to do, but which the room desperately needed. The floorboards were that dusty unfinished color, and a rug was rolled up next to the couch; he planned to put it under

the couch and coffee table combo once the walls were done, but with both of them moved up against one of the walls.

Wait. Laptop? He walked over, keeping his eye on the device. It had GradeRite stickers on the front panel, a lot of people did that, but not John. His laptop was still as unmarked as the day he got it, he even saved the high density foam box it arrived in, in case he needed it in the future. He reached down and picked up the suspect device. The aluminum casing felt cold in his hands; at this time of the year the slight chill in the air confused the house's thermostat, the heater never knowing quite when to turn on. He turned it over in his hands, nothing on the underside of the laptop, no stickers anyway.

Who had left this here? And when? He hadn't had anyone over to the house since he started renovations a couple months ago. Was this the secret person's laptop who had measured his countertop and ordered the butcher block? A thought came to him, and John smiled as he opened up the laptop. Probably David's computer, left in the aftermath of a practical joke. He might have roped Ajay into it even, John wouldn't have doubted it. That was one expensive way to trick someone, but if he got a free counter top out of it, it was worth it. He had been ready to buy one, but the price tag kept holding him back, but he was also unable to settle for a less beautiful counter, which is why the space above the drawers stayed naked for so long.

The laptop turned on with that iconic Mac chime, the background lit up with a picture of green leaves with dew, and John's half smile melted away. "Christie" it said, below a circular profile picture of a woman with straight blonde hair waving. "Christie," John said, looking at the profile picture. As he stared at it, the bottom dropped out of his stomach. He was afraid. Someone he didn't know had been in his house, had left this

laptop here. He looked closer at the picture, leaning forward towards the screen, the pixels resolving themselves into a grainy image the more he searched. Suddenly his tortured stomach took a turn, and he tossed the laptop onto the couch and ran upstairs. There couldn't possibly be anything left to vomit in his stomach, but by God his body was going to find out.

\* \* \*

After that first bout of nausea, John was able to look at the laptop without much else stirring in his gut. In the bathroom, bent over the sink, he resolved to look into the laptop. He didn't know what was going on here, but maybe the laptop would hold some kind of clue. It was the most he had to go on anyway.

The account was bootable just by clicking into the profile, no password. Not very good OpSec, John thought, but he was relieved all the same. The default mountain background greeted him, followed by a desktop with a million items popping into view. John groaned, this desktop was a mess, and it irked him on a personal level for something to be this disorganized.

He noticed an icon in the tab bar for their company chat program. That would make sense, if this laptop was set up to be some sort of prop in this ongoing mystery, of course it would have the chat program on it too. Brad had posted in a lot of the rooms, they had found out, maybe they would find posts inserted from Christie as well.

Turning on the program, he was greeted with a large unread message count. It looked like this account was subscribed to a lot of the rooms, so it was always alerted to new messages being posted in them. But they also had several ongoing direct messages with current employees, apparently, that had

unread items. John clicked on the top entry, which read “David, Christie”. The unread message read:

David: Paula called me from Educating, Testing, Inc. on Saturday about our booth. I told her that you would give her a call back on Monday.

That checked out to John, the company Educating, Testing, Inc. put on a conference every year regarding the testing space, and GradeRite had had a booth there last year. He wondered if David really did get a call this weekend from Paula. Or was this laptop just a convenient plant in his house to make him think... something. But what would that something be?

He was scrolling down to select the next unread conversation, when he saw an entry labelled “John, Christie”. A text with me, this oughta be rich, he thought to himself, but he selected it with trepidation. The last few messages read:

John: I don't see why we have to start so far back, we could drive into Marienville and backtrace each of the trails that ends there.

Christie: We'll lose the perspective of walking into town though, there could be something important coming in that way, we don't know.

John: But I don't like hiking...

It was true, John didn't like hiking. Walking was just fine, biking even more so, but hiking was just so... extra. You have your fancy boots, fancy backpack, and all you do with that is schlep it around the woods in a circle so you can come back afterwards to the same place. He didn't see the point in it.

Marienville. He didn't know any town around Pittsburgh called that. He opened up the browser on the computer and started typing it into the address bar. Immediately a browsing history entry dropped down, a Wikipedia entry on the town. He

clicked it.

The article was short, but it laid out the basics of the town and its history. Around a thousand in population, it had once been a boom town for mining a nearby seam, but only a couple decades after being established the seam ran out and the town shrank down to its current size. Currently it functioned more as a tourist town and supply hub for the trails that it got rerouted to run through one of the existing streets. Small motels and hiking/climbing supply stores seemed to dominate the main street now, a far cry from the small prospecting town it had been. This explained the mention of trails in the message, but why Marienville at all?

In the top corner of the page there was a link to coordinates of the town. He clicked them and it opened up a map of the surrounding area. State route 250 ran into town, then connected with...

John felt the strangest sense of DeJaVu looking at this configuration of state roads. His eyes traced a path on the screen. Turn right, then take the on-ramp, then travel North. He zoomed out the map, looking for where this route led. Pittsburgh swam into view, and he remembered where the directions came from. This was the route he took back from his hike on the weekend. Had this been where he hiked? He distinctly remembered turning off the state road and onto the on ramp, but 250 dead ends right after Marienville, it was the only place you *could* go on that road.

What was more disturbing, he didn't remember *where* he had planned to hike originally. He didn't know that he didn't know it before, he just assumed he did know it. Of course you would know where you went to hike, of course you would go *somewhere*. He remembered driving down, he remembered hiking, and he remembered driving back, but where did he set the GPS to?

The GPS! He used his phone to get there, it should have the route saved. And maybe the timeline view had a map of where he hiked after that. He took his phone out of his pocket and turned on the map app. He clicked down on the previously entered addresses and saw that the most recent one was home, the next one down was one of those nonsense addresses you get if you pick an arbitrary destination point on a road with no houses. The street listed was state route 250.

He tapped the address and watched it populate in the map lower down on the screen. Zooming out with his fingers, he saw Marienville close by, but closer by he saw a dotted line, which he knew represented a trail, right beside the destination point. He switched to timeline view and set the time spread to be Saturday. A route drew itself from Pittsburgh down to near Marienville, then the transportation method changed to walking, and the route traced a line halfway down the trail to Marienville, before it circled around, got to the parking location, and drove home. John didn't even remember hiking on a trail, which made him feel very skeptical about what he was seeing, but he couldn't deny the existing hole in his memory. He realized that he had been assuming it, filling in the missing parts. He had on boots, started driving away from the woods, so he must have been hiking, but he didn't remember any of the actual hike. He had gone somewhere that weekend, but where he didn't know, and that scared him.

\* \* \*

Two hours later John was pacing nervously back and forth down the hallway of his house. Had someone been in here, broken into his house and then *done* things to it? It seemed less and

less likely that that was the case. The urge to chalk it all up to mysterious third parties was so strong, but his incomplete recollection of that weekend kept pulling him back to a much more uncomfortable solution, one he didn't want to believe with every fiber of his being. The house that he loved, was remodeling, was paying for, now felt much too empty for just one person.

He nodded his head to the empty hall, making the hard decision. He took out his phone and scrolled down his contacts, eyeing the entry "Christie" with a different picture of the same woman as he scrolled by, and landed on David. He put the phone up to his ear and waited for two rings.

"Hey John, what's up?" David asked. John felt like he could see David in a tiny boat, in the calm eye of a hurricane, and briefly wanted that solace of five hours ago back, but also felt trepidation at closing that eye off and engulfing David in the storm as well. He pushed on.

"David, I need you to come to my house." John's tone caught David off guard, there was nothing of his normal joviality in there.

"Do you need help? Should I call an ambulance?"

"No, I don't need an ambulance. But I really need you to come over, as soon as you can."

"Ok, ok I'll be over in five minutes," David said, flipping open his appointment book. He could cancel these remaining calls in the car ride over.

"Thank you. But also, do you know where the company portrait from last year is?"

David felt confused. "Yeah, the one at El Patron? It's in the back room."

"Could you bring that too?"

"Really? The portrait?"

“Yes,” John said.

“Okay, do you need anything else?”

“No, just hurry please.”

“Alright buddy, I’ll be there in a second.”

David took a picture of his agenda for the day with his phone to snag the numbers he would have to postpone until tomorrow, and briskly walked out of the office. John was acting weird, but his voice had scared David, something did seem wrong. He reached the door to the back storage room and tried the handle. Locked. He fished around in his pocket for the big tagged key he normally carried to unlock the front door. It wouldn’t work on that door anymore, not after the locksmith had reset it, but it still fit this lock. He opened the door and flicked on the light.

There it was, lying against the wall. David grabbed it and edged out the door sideways, closing it behind him, and made for the elevator. Ajay and Anna were discussing the finer points of DAL implementation when they saw David shuffling across the office with a three by four foot framed portrait in his hands, stopping them in mid sentence. Ajay half raised his hand in a wave as David hit the elevator button and stepped in.

“I wonder what he wants with the office portrait,” Ajay asked. Anna shrugged.

\* \* \*

David parked his car on the curb beside John’s front walk.

“Yep, ten thirty tomorrow, I’ll be there.” David said into his speakerphone, and then cancelled the call and stuffed the phone back in his pocket. It was surprising how accommodating someone could be, David thought, when they were trying to get you to buy their product.

David got out of the front seat and circled around to the rear passenger door. He opened it and pulled out the portrait from the back seat, where it had been leaning precariously between the seat and the front headrests, closing the door with his shoe as he turned around. He made his way up the walk with the portrait held out awkwardly before him, like a large platter, the light breeze blowing it this way and that. As he set foot on the first wooden step of the porch, the front door opened and John was in the doorway.

“Thanks a lot for coming,” he said, as David negotiated the doorway with the portrait.

“Where should I put this?” David asked. He had been worried about what he would find when he got to John’s house, but John looked a lot better than he did when he left this morning. At least he didn’t have the face melting look of a person with a stroke, which was the worry that had consumed him on the drive over.

“Actually, can you just keep holding it?” John asked.

“Um okay,” David looked at John’s face closer. He just looked like normal John, but about twice as hyped up. “What’s going on, man?”

“I’m trying to figure that out myself,” John said, and looked over towards the dining room, “come over here, the light’s better.”

They walked into the dining room and John asked “Could you lay the portrait out, but keep your hands on it. I want to get a good look at it in the light.”

“Yeah, sure,” David said. Maybe John was in some kind of an obsession. Was it possible that John had been manic depressive this whole time and he had never known? David had some friends that were, but he never noticed it in John before.

John looked over the portrait. “Okay, okay,” he said, “this

matches up with the portrait online.”

“Yeah,” David said skeptically, “I printed it off myself. What are you getting at?”

“Does it look alright to you? Normal?”

David looked down at the awkwardly held portrait. Everyone in the company was there, in two rows, in the lobby of the El Patron Mexican restaurant. It had been taken by their waiter on the company’s third anniversary, just under three months ago. They were all quite sloshed at the time of the picture, which showed in some of the faces. But nothing looked out of place, that he could see anyway.

“Yeah, it looks normal to me. What is this about?”

“Then who is that?” John pointed down at the front row of kneeling people, to a smiling woman with blonde hair beside a very drunk John.

David furrowed his brow and leaned closer to the picture. The woman looked to be in her mid twenties and had straight blonde hair that went down seemingly to the middle of her back, and curtained out in front of her in her kneeling pose. Her shirt was hidden by her hair and her pose, but she was the only one in the picture wearing cargo pants. She was smiling at the camera and seemed to be leaning against John to keep her balance.

“I... don’t recognize her.” David said, softly putting the picture on the table. “Could this be photoshop...”

John cut David off, “I don’t think this is photoshop at all, and this framed picture makes me sure of it. Even if someone had gone to the trouble of photoshopping the online picture, would they head over to a Kinkos and print out this ridiculous portrait and frame it up the same as you did? How would they even know you had this framed in that back room?”

“But it has to be. John, what are you talking about? This

person doesn't work at our company. Do you know who she is? Because I don't know who she is!"

"Christie," John said softly.

David was brought up short. "*This is Christie?*"

"You know who she is?" John asked, and the look of hope on his face as he snapped his head sideways to look at David full on disturbed him.

"No, I just said I didn't. But when the locksmith came this morning he asked for a Christie who scheduled the service."

"Scheduled the locksmith... that makes sense." John said.

"How does this make sense at all?"

"Because Christie's computer was on my couch this morning." John said.

"Her... computer?"

"Yes, her work laptop," John continued, "and she has a chat history on it, and in this chat history last week she said to you that she was scheduling a locksmith to come."

"That's bullshit, I scheduled that locksmith," David said, but his surety trailed off at the end of the sentence.

Sensing David's rising doubt, John doubled down. "Did you though? What company did you call, and why did you choose that one? Were they the highest rated, the cheapest?" David seemed to be staring a million miles off lost in thought, reviewing his own memories.

"Don't space out on me now, this isn't even half the shit I've gone through this morning," John said, and shook David by the shoulder. He turned back to the picture on the table and pointed, "look back here, tell me who this is."

John was pointing to a tall smiling man in the back row with short cut hair and a long face. David looked at the picture, worked for a minute, and then groaned.

“Don’t tell me this is...”

“This is Brad Gutenberg,” John said, finishing off David’s fear.

“How? How would you know that? Do you have his laptop around here too?”

“No,” John said, feeling a stabbing sadness at David’s doubt. He knew it would be hard to convince him, it was hard to *be* convinced himself, but all the same it hurt to be disbelieved. “Last week I found his LinkedIn profile, and it’s the same guy, although the profile picture is a bit younger.”

“Bullshit,” David said, reasserting himself, “Brad isn’t real, Brad is just a name on a commit. Brad is a phantom.”

John sighed. “I can’t speak for Brad, I don’t know much about him. And I won’t even go into the delivery I received today, ordered by Christie, but I want to show you something upstairs.”

“Okay...” David responded, and began following John to the hallway. Underneath his flat out rejection of everything he had seen just now, doubt was brewing. It all seemed so easy to explain when it was online, and then harder but not impossible when the break-in happened. But his mind was replaying an incident from this morning, when he creased the tag on the office door key in half to put it in his pocket. A key that he should have been taking in to unlock the door every day, being creased for the first time.

They reached the top of the stairs and John turned left into a room. David thought this must be the bedroom, it certainly looked the most lived in of the rooms on the second floor, the others were still empty hardwood. John walked into the middle of the room, past a pile of clothes, stopped and turned around. David followed him in.

“Look around, do you see anything wrong?” John asked.

“I haven’t been in your house since you bought it,” David said, “how would I know...”

“Just in general,” John said, “like a ‘what’s wrong with this picture’ drawing. What’s wrong with this picture?” John held out his arms and swept them around the room.

David started looking. To the right of the door there was a dresser with various nick knacks on top, some jewelry, glasses, a cup. The wall the bed was pushed up against had two windows in it, one on either side of the bed. The bed was unmade, and there was a stale sick smell in the room. David guessed that John had gone here after getting home from the office. The walls were painted with some kind of paint that gave the impression that if you touched it, your hand would come away dusty.

“You moved into this room before you finished the floor.” David half-guessed.

John chuckled, “No, that’s just bad decision making.”

To the left of the door there was an integrated closet with mirrored sliding doors. In front of it was a pile of mismatched clothes that David could only assume were dirty. He was starting to turn away for modesty, when a lacy bra cup caught his eye. He looked back at the pile, here was a second bra, and he was pretty sure that *these* weren’t a pair of black boxer briefs.

“I don’t want to pry into your private life,” David began, still staring down into the pile, “but you brought this on yourself, remember that as I ask this question. You wouldn’t happen to be a crossdresser, would you?”

John, who had been looking at the top of the dresser, looked at David, and then to the pile of clothes on the floor. “No, I’m not a crossdresser. I didn’t even notice these until I started searching in the house for something wrong, or, something I thought was wrong.”

“But why are there...” David began, but the answer came to him halfway through.

“Because she was living here,” John said, looking back at David with a desperate anger in his eyes, “we were living here together.”

“What... what do you mean?”

“I mean look at this!” John stormed over to the dresser and pointed to the top, where there were assorted pieces of jewelry. “And this,” he threw open the second drawer from the top, full of women’s underwear. “Half the clothes in this closet aren’t even mine, but it isn’t any fuller than I remember it being, and nothing is missing. There’s contacts in the bathroom and glasses in here, but I don’t wear them. We had a life together! A life here in this house, and now she’s gone and I don’t even know who she is!”

“John,” David began, he was shocked at this outburst of emotion, and even more at the hint of longing in his voice. It was all very unlike John. “Listen, I’m sure there is a rational explanation for this.”

“Yeah, it’s that a whole half of my life was taken from me for no reason at all. Why did I have to be the one left? Where is she, David?”

John’s shoulders slumped and he sat on the foot of the bed, hanging his head toward the floor, toward the pile of discarded clothes. David had to look away, he was intensely uncomfortable, and started looking at the pieces on the top of the dresser, but not seeing them. How could this have happened, was there a different explanation, he asked himself. Every time he’d moved in his life, there had always been some trace of the movers afterwards, broken items, floor scuffs, banged corners. What kind of group could move this amount of stuff into a house

without leaving a trace. And why? Why replace the company portrait in a rapidly yellowing polycarbonate frame printed on a drunken whim when they had so many bigger changes to make?

It all came back to the same question, for what purpose? The calls with Github and Google had rapidly been losing steam, they refused to take responsibility for the changed data. According to their logs, the user had been added manually by his account years before. This was strictly an internal problem now. Were there other pictures with Brad in the company? If so, why go to all that trouble? But maybe the real question now, after all of this, was why didn't he remember? The idea disturbed him in a way that he didn't expect, it caused a deep uncertainty of his sanity, and of reality.

"Hey man," David said. John was still sitting on the foot of the bed. "Let's go downstairs and try to figure this out. Maybe I've got something on my system about this missing girl. Let's set up the laptop on the table." What David was hoping for was to be able to find some mistake their tormentors had made, some overlooked detail, to be able to punch a hole in all this and rescue his friend from this insanity. But increasingly, he now needed to see how deep the rabbit hole went.

They set up their laptops on a heavy rectangular oak table in the dining room, which John couldn't remember where or when he had bought, and started searching in their own separate systems. David normally wouldn't have opened up the personnel system in front of another employee, but at this point he was throwing caution to the wind. Conversely, John was registering Christie's face for an image search through his personal albums and the internet's images.

David found Christie's paperwork right away, it was what the system was made for after all. Joined two years ago, office

manager. Office manager? This wasn't even a position they had, he thought, David took care of the office supplies, but recently he had been thinking that maybe they should get one. How normal was it for the CEO to still pick up paper at the office supply store? Or was it abnormal that he did it? What pile did this detail fall into? Was it a hacker's mistake, or a mistake in his memory? Here's salary and address, no surprise that it's listed as John's house. But was it John's house, or their house together?

"You wouldn't happen to have your mortgage paperwork, would you?" David asked.

"I do, it's in a cabinet in the basement."

"Could you check the owner and mortgage signers? I do have here that Christie lives in this house."

John got up and went to the back of the house, where there was a door and staircase down into the basement. David took the opportunity to click over one tab, he wanted to be alone at least, to see what was waiting for him on this tab. The tab contained Christie's personnel file picture, and it was definitely the same woman in this picture as was in the portrait of the company still on the table. He stood up and bent over the portrait, searching each face individually, putting a name to each one. He wanted to know if anyone else was going to pop into this picture. At the end though, it was just Brad and Christie who he couldn't name. Would the picture change again, or would he forget? And why had they disappeared together?

John came back into the dining room, David still had the personnel picture up on his screen. "I found her personnel picture, from onboarding," David said.

John walked over and looked at David's screen. "I've got pictures too, this one matches her in mine. But I found this." John handed a document over to David.

It was the mortgage agreement to the house, and flipping through it David discovered that the property and the mortgage were both solely owned by Christie.

“You don’t own this house?” David asked.

“Apparently not, and at this point I would expect the county’s registrar to agree with this document. It looks like *I’m* the one who moved in.”

“Or it was her project,” David said, still looking at the document for any incriminating marks.

“What?” John asked.

“The house, the renovation,” David couldn’t believe he was about to say this, “it’s not exactly your cup of tea, is it?”

“No... it’s not,” John said thoughtfully, “neither is hiking.”

Now it was David’s turn. “What?”

\* \* \*

John told David what he had discovered from his phone, and the history on Christie’s computer: a trip and a hike, supposedly planned out by both of them, to a town called Marienville to try to piece together what, if anything, they could find of Brad.

“Now it feels like a terrible mistake,” John said, “It’s hard to understand what happened there, to even piece it together, because everything inside me feels like Christie never existed. But seeing all this,” John motioned around, “I had a life here with her, we had a life together in this house, and now it feels more and more like something was taken away from me. Something I can’t even remember, but that makes it all the worse. Just look at how happy I was.”

David was sitting at the table with John. His laptop had a picture of Christie and John at the axe throwing event last week

that the search had been able to find with facial recognition. It was just one of many pictures like that. John had a million too, but of more personal events; hikes, and images from daily life.

John was paging through them, past a picture of Christie measuring the hallway from floorboard to floorboard, to a selfie of them reclining on the couch. "It looks like a wonderful life, if you can get it."

"If you can get it?" David asked.

"Yeah, I wanted to make sure I wasn't crazy, I halfway thought I wasn't before you came over, but I wanted to make sure I wasn't having some sort of schizophrenic break. I'm going, tomorrow, I'm going on this same drive, stopping at the same place on the road. I remember that much, coming back to my car, but not a lot between leaving and returning. But I have the map timeline, so I know roughly where... where we walked. So I'm going there first thing in the morning and I'm going to find her."

David watched John as he made this declaration. John looked as if this knowledge had only added to his weariness, rather than setting him free. But he looked strangely determined, and he made the statement calmly, as a matter of fact. That scared David.

"What if it's still there," David asked, "whatever it is that... that did this?" He almost said 'got Christie', but he didn't want to put that kind of imagery out there. He couldn't help but feel, though, that something *had* eaten her, or consumed her. Consumed her so completely that not even memory was left. The ultimate disappearance.

"I'll be smart," John said, tapping his temple with his finger with a slight smile on his lips. "Christie was quite the active gal, or she was a kleptomaniac," John said, smiling, "I found a coil of climbing rope in the downstairs closet, and I've still got the

cotton lines from moving the furniture in somewhere around here. I figured I could tie them all together, tie them to the car, to get a bit of reach, you know, in case something pulls me in.”

“Pulls you in,” David mused. “Jesus, what are we talking about?” David said, as he tried to reassert himself to a world that existed not two hours ago, “What is going on?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” John said, “but she’s not here, she didn’t come back with me, which means she’s there. And I left her there. It’s only been two days for chrissakes, what if she’s still there wandering around, as confused as I am here. I’m going to find her tomorrow, I can only hope she’s still there.” He didn’t say “still alive,” he didn’t want to think of that.

David saw a determination in John’s face, had he seen such a look on the man outside of arguing for some technical decision before? So much of their interaction had to do with the company, even going out always happened with everyone else. Three years seemed like such a short time, but he had seen John mature in that time from when he started as a new grad. He remembered so many times they had spent together, had someone else been there the last two years? Had John stopped coming out with everyone else during that time, settling down to a home life with Christie? All this work on the house, it had to happen sometime, right? Had John been building a home and a family while David was out dicking around, drinking with college kids every night? At least someone else is happy... was happy.

“I still don’t know much about Christie, from what’s in my chat it seems like we weren’t much more than colleagues, but I can’t deny what you’ve found here. I won’t stop you from looking for her, but I won’t let you throw yourself to the wolves, not alone anyway. If you’re going tomorrow, I’m coming with you.”

John smiled, relieved. “I was hoping... hoping that you would say that. I won’t kid you, I’m scared shitless of what could be there, but I can’t leave her there. I feel drawn to it, like it’s a void that’s sucking me in, but I have to go. If there’s any chance of getting *this* back,” he gestured to a picture on the screen of the two of them laying back on the couch in the living room, Christie’s hair cascading down the back, both of them smiling for the selfie, John holding her in his arms. “I have to go.”

## Tuesday, March 20

John's alarm clock rang at 5:30 am, but he was already awake. After David had left the night before, he had pattered around the house, discovering anything and everything anywhere he bothered to look, like an archaeologist in babylon. Everything that was hers had a fogginess around it, a sense of not-quite-remembering, which he now associated as a sort of secondary memory to sniff her out. A few mugs in the kitchen had the feel, these must have been hers or bought by her. Tools in the closet were the same, the car at least was his, he remembered it from college. But permeating everything inside was the fog, maybe it was the house itself, since apparently that wasn't his.

It was two in the morning before he felt tired enough to get into bed, but he couldn't seem to get to sleep. His mind was racing a mile a minute, but seemed to be swimming through molasses, he kept imagining a woman's voice calling out, lost in the woods. Where was she now, where was she sleeping now? Did she make it to Marienville, down the trail? Or was she still in the woods? Did *it* let you go, or were you really gone when you disappeared from memory? These were the quandaries that went through John's head while he was trying to sleep.

He threw the tangled covers over to the other side of the bed as he got up, looking over to the empty half of the mattress on

his right. He knew that what they were planning to do today was dangerous, maybe the most dangerous part was how much they didn't know about the danger, but he couldn't keep forgetting her. He had the sense that some large part of his life had been excised, cleanly separated with a scalpel, that there were entire parts of his personality missing because they were too connected to her, and he couldn't go on with the knowledge of that loss.

How much could you prepare for a trip like this? He had thought long and hard on this last night, and decided that in the way of preparation there wasn't much. The rope had been their original idea, and to him it was still their best. As long as they had it, they would be able to make it back to the car. Maybe. And then what? What kind of life could he return to, if finding Christie was impossible? Did her own parents remember her, or was she now completely disconnected from reality?

John brushed his teeth and splashed water on his face in the small bathroom at the top of the stairs. The house was of an older vintage, so no master bath. The sink was some kind of light stone or ceramic, he wasn't sure. Maybe she knew. But he knew that behind the mirror was a bottle of contact solution and a box of replacement contacts, individually wrapped for each eye.

He walked back to the bedroom and got his usual assortment of pocket materials from the top of the dresser; his wallet, keys, and his eyes stopped on the glasses. He opened the top drawer, for various assorted items, and rummaged around until he found what he thought might be inside but had no memory of: a clamshell glasses case. He picked the glasses up and put them in the case, snapping it shut, and slid it into his front pocket. Maybe it wouldn't help at all, but at this point he could afford to be a little superstitious.

He went down the stairs and spied the large coil of mismatched rope in front of the door. Last night he and David had gathered up all the rope and line in the house and tied them end to end. John had coiled it up and, after David left, put it in front of the door, so that he would be sure to take it with him the next morning. John turned left at the door, walked through the dining room and into the kitchen. His nausea had lasted through the middle of the day yesterday, but he hadn't gotten hungry again until this morning, and he was starving. He opened the cabinet where he kept the cereal. There were four boxes, two he recognized, and two he knew he wouldn't have bought. He picked up his breakfast of champions, gathered a bowl and spoon, and took them over to the dining room table. The counter still lay, forlorn, on the tile of the kitchen. It was a project that John couldn't imagine doing by himself, especially if he failed. The two countertops were like a jigsaw puzzle you got for Christmas from a well-meaning distant relation, something you feel like you should complete but don't have the drive to do.

At 6:15 am David knocked on John's door. They had agreed to start out at 6:30, but seeing the silhouette of John eating at his dinner table in the window, David thought that John was probably feeling just as antsy as he was. John let David in, dropping the coil of rope back in front of the door after closing it, and returned to the dinner table. David followed, pulled up a chair, and sat down. Long moments passed in silence while John shoveled soggy cereal into his mouth.

"Are you all ready," David asked John finally.

"Yes, everything's ready," John replied, "you got your phone?"

"I do," David replied. After a likewise restless night, he had managed to half-convince himself that either this was all a wild

goose chase, or they wouldn't find anything, or somehow both of those. He knew something weird was going on, there was no doubt about that, but things weren't so bad now. Sure there were pieces to pick up, but David felt like he could live with things the way they were. John on the other hand, David knew couldn't live like this. Maybe it was some kind of mass hysteria, maybe they wouldn't be able to find anything, but David would be there with John when they found whatever they would. Perhaps it was just how things shook out when, or if, this Christie disappeared, but David felt, knew, that he was always close with John, had been with him nearly since the beginning of the company, and would support him now.

John had gotten halfway through his bowl of Wheaties before the nausea came creeping back. He got up, went over to the trash can and dumped out the bowl. Looking over to the sink fixture standing straight up out of the place where a countertop would be, he made his way upstairs to wash out the bowl in the sink. He silently came back down the stairs and put the bowl back up in the cabinet where he found it, dropping the spoon through the exposed counter support into the drawer underneath full of silverware. David was watching him when he walked back to the entryway of the dining room.

"It's probably time to go," John said. David thought that he didn't look so well again.

"I think so," David replied. He got up from the table and went over to the door. John followed him and opened the front closet, pulling out a set of stiff hiking boots from the bottom. He had found these last night, and even though they were covered in that faint mistiness he associated with Christie, they were in his size. He couldn't remember buying them, but he thought that maybe he was wearing them when he came back home on

Saturday. He sat on the first step of the staircase and pulled them on.

“Do you have everything?” David asked.

“Just this,” John walked over, kicking his heels into the backs of the shoes, and reached down to pull up the coil of mismatched rope, “that’s all.”

“Okay,” David opened the door and walked out. John turned off the lights with the panel by the door and looked back at the dark interior of the half-renovated house. He could almost hear the ghost of happiness inside, or maybe he was just imagining it. There might have been a woman with long blonde hair here not three days ago.

David stopped walking down the front path, and John could tell that he was watching him. He closed the front door, locked it, and checked the handle again. He hoped that when he came back, he would understand why it was like this. He hoped that he would understand anything at all. He hoped, beyond survival, that he wouldn’t come back alone.

\* \* \*

The drive down to their destination on the trailside was only a couple of hours. Marienville was at the end of state route 250, which was connected through various other state routes all the way back to Pittsburgh. No interstates though, that would make travel south too easy, apparently. To go south in any hurry, you had to drive all the way over to Washington D.C. and even then you only had access to I-95, which took you straight down the coast. States like West Virginia and Pennsylvania never had a chance for fast travel.

After spending the last couple of days cooped up in the empty

house, it felt good to John to be driving down with David. They were taking his old manual transmission Yaris, which was a snug fit, it wasn't a big car after all. He felt like he should be finding the drive familiar in a way, but he kept coming up blank. He only remembered the drive back up to Pittsburgh, not even that very well.

The first twenty minutes of the trip was mostly in silence, the small bits of conversation that David struck up from his passenger seat drifted away like the strip malls they passed on the side of the road. Finally he asked if John wanted to listen to music, and after an affirmative he found some noncommittal pop and turned it low.

Driving the Yaris down the worsening roads, David was thinking about two things. The first was to keep John safe in whatever capacity he could while he went out on his search. The second was to find some kind of closure to the weirdnesses they had collectively been experiencing for the last week. After getting told over and over again about how there was nothing wrong with their corporate accounts, "maybe you misplaced some paperwork", by the big tech companies they subscribed to, David was ready to accept just about anything if it would end this situation. While he had been completely against an unnatural explanation before, he felt like he was ready to believe in anything, even computer ghosts, if it would bring everything back to normal, or some version of normal anyway.

The mini malls on the sides of the highway yielded to more and more dislocated communities as they made their way south. The relative flatness around the big city turned into waves larger and further apart, waves that were beginning to look like submerged mountains. Whereas when they had begun, nature seemed to be poking out from in between the buildings of the century mall,

now the buildings appeared to be the thin veneer of mankind spread a few feet into the wilderness, a staggered reminder that people can infect anywhere.

By the time they crossed the West Virginia state line, buildings were scarce on the highway. The foothills of the Appalachian mountains rose up around them, and in the distance they could see overlapping blue ridges, like a frozen sea. They stopped for gas once, David getting a mountain dew and hot peanuts from inside the store while John stayed by the car and pumped the gas. Then they were on their way again, closer and closer to their turnoff.

Thirty minutes later they turned off onto state route 250 and proceeded to follow it for seven miles. Now they were really in the boonies, John thought, as the trees closed in around them, cutting them off from the sight of the mountains in the distance. In every direction was a mix of bare-boned skeleton trees waiting for the new spring, and evergreens letting the centuries pass regardless of the season. Staring out the side window, John wondered what lay through the trees. Who owned the land, and what do you do with a million acres of pine? With all his time on the internet as an adult, he had never answered this childhood fancy.

His phone announced they were arriving, and John eyed it as they slowed to a stop, pulling off the side of the road, trying to get as close as possible to wherever he might have parked the last time. After he pulled the parking brake and shut the car down, they spent a silent minute scanning the woods on either side from the relative safety of the car. Nothing David could see differentiated this from any other stretch of woods before or after this point. He could only see a hundred feet into the forest before the tree trunks crowded him out, but there was

nothing distinguishing about what he saw. John tried to think back, did this seem right? Was this where he came back to his car? The spot two hundred feet ahead looked just as good as this spot, he didn't remember any features around the car, he just remembered taking off once he got inside.

He looked to David, who was still looking out the window at the woods on the passenger side of the car.

"Are you ready?" John asked.

David turned around and looked at John, searching his eyes. He looked determined now, almost back to normal. That was good, David thought.

"Yeah," David said, and John opened the driver's side door.

As he stepped out, David's head swiveled, scanning the forest around the car. "Which direction is Marienville?"

"On the right when facing the direction we were driving," John responded, not having to look at his phone. The GPS said that the trail went from one side of the road somewhere around here to the other, but he couldn't immediately see a trail from where they were standing.

"I can't see the trail," he said to David, "let's walk down and see if we can spot it, then we'll turn back and go behind if we can't find it in front."

"What if we find the wrong trail?" asked David. "Didn't you say there were a lot around Marienville?"

"There are, but this is the only one that crosses the road in this area," John responded.

David opened the trunk, grabbed the rope, and went around to the passenger side of the car, where John had already moved. They set their eyes on the treeline as they started to walk down the road, away from the car.

It didn't take them long to spot the denuded ground that

signaled the continuation of a trail. About one hundred feet up from the car, on the right side of the road, they could see a thinning of the grass below a steep bank beside the road eventually narrow into a hard dirt path that led into the woods. Turning around, they were able to spot the continuation on the left side of the road. They both went back to the car and David drove it up the last 100 feet, parking it as close as he could to the trailhead as he could without tipping the car on the embankment.

When they got out again, David took one end of the rope and tied it fast to the door handle of the passenger side. He let the rest of the rope fall to the ground and fished out the other end. John walked up to David and David motioned for him to turn around. After wrapping the rope around him once, David cinched it down in a snug loop around John's waist.

Looking down at the rope tying John to the car, David sighed. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," John replied, he had been staring into the woods.

With a quick look back at David, John jogged down the embankment and proceeded to walk into the woods, with David close behind. There weren't any traffic sounds to mute out, but as they went further into the woods a silence seemed to lay over them. As far as they could tell, it looked like any other woods. Pine trees rose up every ten feet, giving a shifting rotoscope effect as they moved in front of and behind each other with perspective. Similarly, the treetops made the sun flash in morse code as they walked. The path was littered with the same brown pine needles that carpeted the floor just a few feet in every direction. It wasn't even very creepy, you could see for a fair bit in every direction due to the thinness of the trees, but nevertheless David and John were on edge. This wasn't an exploratory mission, they knew

something was here, and John would go to any length to find it.

In mid-step, John was jerked back by the rope and he let out an involuntary scream from his wired nerves. Turning around, he immediately realized that he had just run out of slack, and felt embarrassed. David didn't laugh, John's scream had nearly given him a heart attack. There was something about the utter mundanity of this forest that made him think that if something terrible were to happen, it would be much worse than what could possibly happen to you in the depths of the forest at night. Whatever was here, it lived in the day.

"It's not enough rope," John sighed. He looked all around again, nothing jumped out at him. They had followed the trail this far into the forest, and the shifting trees looked nearly the same as when they came in.

"What do you think?" David asked John, who was hungrily scouring the forest with his eyes for any sign of anything.

"I think we should go back, and come at this ice climber style, with the rope between us." John said.

The daylight had a strange effect on David's fear of the previous night. He was almost more embarrassed at being seen walking through the woods trussed up like a mountain climber than he was of whatever might be here. Some mundane alchemy had moved him back into the land of disbelief during the night. John, however, was desperate for answers, and at this point unsatisfied with what the forest had given up.

They walked back to the car, John gathering up the rope in his hands as they reversed progress. David untied the knot from the door handle, worrying at it for a minute as his own knot worked against him, but finally got it off and tied it around his waist, tightening it down in a matching knot to John.

Once David was finished with his knot, John said "second

verse, same as the first,” gave the bundle of rope to him, and started back towards the forest. David let the rope play out between them, and then started walking, a little more disturbed now at their disconnection from the car. He felt a strange sense of floating off into space, and having made the decision to unhook from the shuttle. Let’s hope we don’t float too far, he thought.

They made their way into the woods again, David hanging around twenty feet back from John. The pine trunks darted into and out of view again, and it was quickly evident that every part of this trail looked the same. The trail might curve to the right, or to the left, but the vista around would always be thin tree trunks going in and out of sight. David was trying to keep an eye out at the limits of the trees, but John was pushing forward, and the line played out between them to thirty feet.

Ten minutes into the hike, David didn’t notice at first that John had slowed down. Then John came to a full stop, looking around, and David walked up to him.

“What’s up?” David asked. John was peering through the trees.

“I don’t know, can you feel that?” John asked.

“Feel what?”

“It’s like a static, like TV static, can you hear it?”

David stood still and listened. The wind whispered through the tops of the trees, and they made little creaking sounds as they swayed. There were no birds, and he couldn’t hear a static sound.

“I can’t hear it,” David replied.

John shook his head, “Maybe I’m just imagining.”

John started off again, but stopped after ten feet. David, who was going to let him play out to twenty feet, hadn’t started

walking yet when John said “Okay, I know I’m not imagining it now.”

David walked up to where John was, and could sense something too. It wasn’t so much like a high pitched television static as it was like the low rumble of a waterfall beating on rocks, grinding them away to nothing over the years of eternity. He turned his head to the left, then to the right, trying to see where the sound was coming from. The volume stayed the same, it was like it was either way far off, or right on top of them. David looked up, but saw nothing except for the swaying tops of the pine trees. He half expected to feel drops of spray on his face.

“What is it?” David asked.

“I don’t know, could there be a river...? No, I don’t think so, I didn’t see any on the map.”

“Maybe it’s a small stream, something too small for the map.” David offered.

“I’ve never heard a stream sound like that before.”

David and John both swiveled their heads around, looking all the more like two oversized birds. After some deliberation, John said “Let’s continue, I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.”

“Right,” David replied, but gripped the bundle of rope in his hands tighter.

John again set out down the trail, David continuing behind when the rope unwound to an appropriate length. The trail was taking on an overgrown look, a few plants and tree sprouts were growing up out of the middle of the hardpack, where they could see it; the pine needles were nearly covering it up now. The further they went into the forest, the louder the sound got, until it was nearly a deafening roar, coming from all around. John stopped and David walked back up to him again, reeling in some of the rope.

“How do you feel?” John yelled to David.

“Not great,” David yelled back, “a little nauseous.”

“Me too, I’m about sick of it.” John yelled, and turned around to continue advancing. David didn’t feel so sure that this was an entirely safe idea anymore. John might have been sick all weekend, but David wasn’t usually an acquaintance to stomach flus, and the feeling was putting him off.

As John rounded a corner in the trail, the rope playing out behind him against the ground, he saw a corner of white on the trail ahead. Pine needles were mostly covering up whatever it was, but it was disconcerting to see such bright white in nature. John immediately thought of bleached bones, but he staved off the idea by telling himself that this wouldn’t be the case for how long Christie had been missing. It had only been a few days.

As he approached closer, he saw that the corner of white was really a “corner” of white, it was a sheaf of papers buried under the pine needles. He felt the slack go out of the line behind him, and turned around to see David leaning against a tree.

“What’s up?” John shouted through the roaring to David.

“Don’t feel good,” David said, nearly under his breath, “feel sick.”

John was surprised he could hear David without him shouting. He turned around to the papers at his feet, he would at least get this before going back to check on David, and hope he could convince him to go further. John reached down, worming his fingers through the sharp needles around the stack. He brought the sheets up, and was transfixed as the needles fell off.

The bright white paper had a black and white picture of Brad on it, under a black bold heading of “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?”. Under the portrait was Brad’s name, and a contact listing for Christie’s cell phone...

Christie's cell phone, he could see the object so clearly in his mind. Yes, that was Christie's cell number, and Brad's face. He could remember Brad in the office, Brad at lunch, Brad at the bar, Brad helping him implement projects. Brad *had* worked with them at the office, that strange desk wasn't a strange desk at all, by God it was Brad's desk! John remembered going to it a million times to chat or ask for help.

But there was something else coming up now. A terrible despair gripped him. The memories were bubbling up in the shape of a woman with long blonde hair. In the shape of an interview, a desk by the front door, a small smile, a first kiss, a house they lived in together, a house that was theirs. John looked up at the trail ahead, twisting into the pine trees, and the flyers slipped from his hand, swaying to the ground like so many leaves.

"Christie," he whispered, and he remembered everything.

## Three Days Ago

The alarm clock on John's phone went off with that infernal factory default jingle, and he reached over the side of the bed to snooze it. He pressed on the dismiss button, and only a second later his sleep-addled brain realized that he would have to reset the alarm for ten minutes in the future if he hoped to get up on time. He let out a groan and turned over in the bed to Christie.

He shook her shoulder, "It's time to get up". Christie groaned and turned towards him. Her sweater was all turned and displaced, the mornings were cold this time of year, even in the house.

"Hmm?" she sighed, trying to keep her eyes open by lifting her eyebrows up as far as they could go.

"We've got to get up, it's time for our trip," John said, and threw back the covers. He was also dressed in a sweatshirt and a pair of plaid pajama pants, and he slowly rotated his legs out of bed, and onto the cold wood floor. Christie was still in bed, in the same position, seemingly gone back to sleep in the last couple of seconds. John stumbled past the pile of dirty clothes at the foot of the bed, over to the light switch, and turned it on.

Christie groaned, but finally threw her own covers off. She was wearing a matching set of pajama bottoms, part of a couples gift set bought by John last Christmas. She settled her feet on

top of the bundled up covers at the foot of the bed, and seemed to go right back to sleep. John opened the bedroom door and walked over to the small single bathroom at the top of the stairs to brush his teeth.

When he finished brushing, finally more awake, he went back into the bedroom to pull Christie out of bed, since she was still missing in action. Christie was still in bed, sleeping in the same position with her legs propped up on the bundled comforter. John grabbed her shoulders and sat her up on the bed.

“Christie, we have to get up,” John said. Christie groaned, but opened her eyes.

“We have to get ready for the trip,” John reminded her.

Christie hummed in acknowledgement, and swung her legs off the bed. Grunting, she leaned forward and got to her feet, still barely opening her eyes to survey the too bright bedroom. John went back to the bathroom, where Christie followed, and they got into the shower together.

After their shower and morning routine, they settled into the half-made kitchen for breakfast. John poured them both bowls of cereal on the kitchen table, and they began to eat. John asked “Is everything ready for the hike?”

“Yes, I have our water bottles filled up in the pack along with bars.”

“Mmm, bars,” John sarcastically said. They weren’t great tasting, but with the kitchen in the state it was, they weren’t exactly going to cook up some nice trail food to pack beforehand.

“The flyers are in my pack,” Christie said. She had designed them herself last night and had printed around thirty of them on their printer in the closet. The thought was that maybe they wouldn’t be able to spot anyone in town that had seen Brad on their walkthrough, but if they left flyers they would get called

about it eventually, hopefully.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’s just wandering around in town, like those people who forget everything and start a new life,” John postulated.

“What people?” Christie asked.

“You know, it’s called a... um... a fugue. Sometimes people just forget their whole life, and start a new life somewhere else in the country, only to be found years later by their long lost families.”

“Well that’s disturbing,” Christie said. “Maybe it’s us who have had the fugue, since no one remembers him.”

“Nah, that’s like brain damage,” John waved his spoon around, “we’re all brain damaged now that Brad is gone, apparently he was the only thing holding all of us together.”

“Uh huh,” Christie didn’t appreciate how close that joke hit home to her current worries. It was a terrible thing, to doubt your own sanity, and she felt like she was walking a thin line between reality and fantasy.

John finished his bowl with a slurp and said “I’ll do the dishes.” Christie upended her bowl and handed it to him. While he went upstairs to wash the bowls out, Christie went over to the side closet and got out her and John’s jackets. It wasn’t freezing outside anymore, but it was still probably too cold for them to acclimate during the hike.

John came back down and Christie was already putting her hiking shoes on. She motioned to the banister draped with cloth, “I got your coat.”

“Thanks,” John said, and put it on before starting on his hiking boots. They were nearly new, John had bought them a year ago but hadn’t gone on many hikes, and they were difficult to cinch down. He quickly regretted putting his jacket on first,

feeling the fabric pull tight against his back as he leaned over to tie the boots. He had already ripped the inner lining once somehow, and was trying to prevent a second incident.

When John finished knocking his heels into the back of his boots, Christie held out his pack to him, he took it, and she opened the front door. As he went out the door after her, John did a double check inside the house for any lights on, and satisfied, closed the door, locked it, and checked the handle after.

\* \* \*

The drive was two hours and some change down to West Virginia on the state roads, which meant plenty of stop lights and traffic which never got faster than fifty five. Christie didn't mind so much though, while the constant stopping meant she had to put more attention on driving, there were nicer things to look at on this road than the side of an interstate. She always enjoyed driving past her favorite burger or doughnut chains, and thought that maybe they would stop by on their way home for dinner, if they were hungry enough.

John's phone's GPS had a fairly simple series of instructions on it, most of the drive consisted of two turns, and it's display mounted above the dashboard showed a seemingly impossibly wiggly line going off into the distance. All the roads around here were between hills and mountains, and there seemingly wasn't a straight section for the whole trip.

Over the last two years they had spent a lot of time together in the car on trips, driving to New York to see the city, down to a cabin in Kentucky, hiking in central Pennsylvania, and conversation came easy in the car. Some people in the office swore on audiobooks for trips, and she had previously enjoyed

the radio, but something about driving made talking so natural, there wasn't a tendency anymore to get stuck on any one thought, and the hours melted away into minutes.

Midway through they sang "Country Roads" when they passed into West Virginia, then a while later came the turn onto SR250, then they got the "feet" announcement.

"Destination ahead in 250 feet," the GPS said in a synthesized voice. Christie slowed the car down and started looking out across the car for any signs of the intersecting trail, but it didn't look like there was a marker for it like you might see on some of the larger trails.

"Destination ahead in 50 feet," it said again. Christie slowed way down, looking ahead and to the right to no avail, it didn't seem like there was even a worn section of embankment to show the passing of hiking boots.

"You have arrived at your destination." Christie stopped the car. John, who had been looking out the window too, said "I don't see any markers."

"Well, we're not in the city anymore," she said, "maybe they don't have the resources for that kind of thing down here. We'll have to search."

She turned off the car and opened the driver's side door to get out, John did the same. While she was making her way around the car to the trunk, with their packs inside, John stood by his open door and looked around. They had parked on the grassy side of the road, which luckily was flat and lacked a ditch on this side. The pine tree tops swayed with the wind, and the air smelled cold and damp, like a dreary drizzle might be coming. While the sky in Pittsburgh had been bright and blue, it was overcast down here in the mountains.

John looked down the state route, trying to see Marienville,

but the curve cut off any visibility only two hundred feet ahead. Behind, the road did the same thing, giving the impression that they were alone in the world. It was strangely quiet here, John had gotten too used to the city noises, and it was giving him an eerie feeling to only hear the soft creaking of the pine trees.

Christie came back around with her pack on her shoulders and held out his pack to him. John took it and slung it around his back, snapping shut the buckle on the front for less hassle. "Let's go up first, I don't think we passed it on the way."

"Alright," John replied. They started off, Christie in front, John behind, and their footfalls made a soft swishing in the short patchy grass on the side of the road. Only a hundred feet up, John was gripped with a terrible sense of wrongness, something was missing from this scene. He slowed down as he tried to crunch the numbers and come up with what was off.

"Ah!" He said, and Christie turned around. He slapped his left pocket and said, "I forgot my phone in the car."

Christie smiled, feeling glad for this mundane problem in a very non-mundane excursion. She fished the keys out of her pocket and threw them over, he barely caught them out of the air. She watched him run back to the car and open the passenger door, reaching across to the dashboard. That would have been a mistake, she thought, to forget the cell phone. It wouldn't take much to get turned around in these trees.

John jogged back, stuffing the keys into his right pocket, and said "Alright, now we're ready to rock."

Christie rolled her eyes at his poor pun and turned back around, continuing to walk down the side of the road with an eye on the edge of the trees. Twenty feet further, Christie pointed to the treeline and said "I think it's here."

John could see a break in the trees, and the barest hint of a

hardpack dirt trail between them. "It's not much of a trail," he remarked.

Christie looked to her left and pointed, "No, but it's our trail, there's the connecting bit." John looked left too and saw another too-wide break in the trees, and from his height on the shoulder of the road, the barest indication of worn tracks in the tufted grass.

Christie took a hard right and jogged down the incline at the edge of the shoulder to the forest floor, and John followed. The pine trees were smooth up to around ten feet, and they were able to enter the forest without having to duck. For around fifty feet they could see indications of the forest floor in all directions, but it was quickly swallowed up by the sheer number of pines, even though each one was only a couple feet wide.

"And then how long on this until we reach the town limits," John asked. Christie continued walking ahead, but called back "A couple of miles as the crow flies, so it could be three or five in the worst case on the trail. It looked pretty curvy, following the hills."

It was difficult to remember that they were in hills now, the trees blocked sight of anything far off enough to give a sense of terrain. John had the strangest sense that he was walking in a forest on a flat plain, even though he clearly saw the low mountains as they came in. The acidic smell of the damp pine needles permeated the air on the breeze blowing from ahead.

The hike went by mostly in silence, John had found that it was difficult to make himself heard clearly when talking from behind during hikes with Christie, and the scenery stayed mostly the same as well. There were a couple of turns in the trail, a section where they weren't sure where it continued, but all in all it was remarkably boring for a hike. Even the gratification of seeing

new sights unseen was taken from them due to the pressing closeness of the pines. Twenty minutes in, Christie turned back to him and said, "I think I hear water."

John listened, he could barely hear a low rumble, not of a babbling brook, but maybe of a waterfall or something like that. "Me too," he said back, "I don't remember seeing anything on the map."

"Half the stuff out here is unlisted, like in Kentucky," she responded. John remembered when they went on that weekend trip, staying in a B&B in a small town on the tail end of the coal industry. They had gone hiking twice then, and more than once they had to hop over creeks that weren't indicated on any map. But those were of the babbling variety, this sounded much bigger.

"Could there be a waterfall," he asked, raising his voice. The sound had gotten louder as they continued on, but he couldn't figure out what direction it was coming from, it seemed to be all over. He could only imagine it was way out in front, and deafening.

"Not, like, a big one, I don't think," Christie said, suddenly unsure.

"Maybe we took the wrong path back there," John said, "let's check."

Christie stopped and John walked up, pulling his phone out of his pocket. A couple of taps brought up the GPS application, and he zoomed into their location. The low fidelity trail line was a little off to their right, but that wasn't surprising given that the accuracy of this application for hiking trails was never supposed to be very high. They looked to be halfway between the road where they parked and Marienville town limits, or at least the polygon drawn around it showing an estimation. He couldn't

see any blue lines on the screen indicating a stream, or a river, that would produce such a waterfall.

“It looks like we’re still on-trail,” John said in a raised voice next to Christie’s ear.

“Let’s keep going,” Christie shouted, “but watch out for sharp drops.”

John couldn’t imagine the kind of cliff hidden nearby that would produce a waterfall, but then again, they were technically in the mountains, even though it didn’t seem like it from what he could see. Christie turned around and walked off down the trail, and John followed closely behind.

Christie couldn’t smell the ozone scent of a waterfall nearby, but the roaring sound was very much like a very large one. The only time she had felt so enshrouded in the sound was when she went on a trip to Niagara falls as a schoolchild and they had gone on the boat that went right up to the falls. But then, the sound had been accompanied by a heavy rain of splashing, and she couldn’t see any of the expected moss growth on the trees that you would find near something that big.

As she walked forward, the sound just kept getting louder, but without any directionality as she turned her head to give an indication of which direction it could be. There was no column of steam overhead, the sky was still overcast with cold, dreary late winter clouds. The sound was so loud now that she felt like she could hear it ringing back and forth inside her skull, and she felt a twinge of nausea in her stomach, turning over her bowl of cereal.

Maybe this isn’t a good idea, she tried to think through the incipient roar, this is too much, something is wrong here. We’ll take the car and drive into town, she thought, that’s much better. She stopped, feeling a fuzziness in her head. What was she

doing? Right, go back to the car, she remembered. She started to turn to her left, looking back over her shoulder for John. She saw him about twenty feet back, leaning over against a tree. He looked sick, as sick as she felt maybe.

“Joh-” she began, and a white blanket covered her vision, and she was falling.

\* \* \*

“Christie,” John shouted to the tree trunk. He couldn’t move his head up to look towards her, his head was spinning too much. We should go back, he thought, I can’t go on like this. He had shouted her name a couple of times, she would come back from up ahead when she saw he wasn’t with her anymore. “Ch-”

“-rist, my head.” But suddenly it wasn’t just John’s head anymore, his tongue had gone all floppy, halfway through, and he became violently sick all over the side of the tree he was leaning on. He heard a thud further up the trail, and his clouded imagination conjured up all sorts of bears or wildcats that could be there.

He turned away to retreat from the noise, but the ground tilted under his feet and he went down hard on his side. Something was in his eye, he wiped it clumsily with his hand, which seemed to be asleep. No, still there. He tried blinking, nothing. Jesus what’s happening, he thought, am I having a stroke? He crawled on his belly, pushing aside the sharp pine needles, on his elbows and knees, up the trail, back to his car. I need to get to an ambulance, he thought.

After what seemed like forever, the world stopped rocking from side to side, and feeling came back into his right hand. The ground in front of him was sharp again. He looked from side

to side, pine trees lined up like soldiers beside the dirt trail. He cautiously got up from the ground, and found that the whole front of his flannel shirt was stuck through with pine needles and covered with dirt. He brushed as much of it off that he could and picked the pine needles out.

He could hear the trees creaking as their tops swayed in the breeze, unfelt in the forest. He sniffed the air, what a fall, he thought, how embarrassing. He cleared his throat, which had the distinct taste of bile in it, and continued walking back to the car. Maybe, he thought, going hiking wasn't such a good idea today after all.

## Now

“Christie!” John screamed. “CHRISTIE!”

It all came back in a flash to John, whether from the flyer or the rising sound of the waterfall. Suddenly this new place he was hiking through felt familiar and dread. He had left her here, sweet Jesus, he left her here days ago. How could he forget? How could he have been so stupid?

“CHRISTIE!” John yelled again, and started running down the trail. It wasn’t nearly this loud, he thought, when I turned away, back then. She could still be there, she’s still waiting for me to come back. The pines on either side sped past without the woosh-woosh of the reflected sound.

“John!” David yelled, as the makeshift safety line pulled taut. There was a second of resistance, of David pulling with both his hands to hold John back, but a knot in the middle, between the cotton laundry line and the climbing rope, slid apart, and John was running off down the trail.

“Goddammit John!” David shouted, and took off down the trail after him. He could still see John, but up ahead there was a low-lying outcropping that the trail turned to the right around, and he didn’t know if John would take the turn in his panic. If he started running through this infinite mirror world of pines, there was no telling how they would ever get out.

Fifty feet before the outcropping, David saw John stumble, and *who the fuck is this guy?* David stopped up short on the trail, his leg sliding out from under him on the slick carpet of pine needles, his stomach doing a lurch as he fell. He put his hands out, and was able to pull out of the skid. The hobbling man ahead was trying his best to make it down the trail, but he had a limp, and it seemed to be getting worse.

“Hey!” David shouted out, as the man pulled himself up next to an outcropping. He was leaning heavily on it as he made his way down the trail, closer to a turn up ahead. He seemed to have a line of white rope tied around his waist, under his backpack, looking for all the world like another hiker, except for the crazy limp.

“Hey you!” David shouted again, as the limping man steadied himself with a hand on the outcropping. He turned and David stepped back in fear: his face looked like it was half melted off. David put his hand up to his chest, against his racing heart, and called out again.

“Sir, do you need help?” Some alarm bell was clanging in his mind, but he wasn’t sure what it was. The man with the melted face and the limp turned away and shuffled around the rock, grasping at it at every step. When the man had disappeared from view, it came to David: F.A.S.T, the acronym for a stroke. That man was having a stroke.

“Sir!” David called out, running down the path. They weren’t that far down the path, David thought, he could drag this man all the way back if he had to, especially by his handy rope. If only he could get to him in time. He was coming up on the rock outcropping, and the roaring was getting louder all the time.

In mid step, he lost his balance, and the ground tilted up to meet him face on. He barely had time to put his hands out, to

no use, as his nose smashed into the hardpack, the pine needles giving not at all. He heard a crunch in his head and felt the blood begin to gush out, tasting like hot iron in the back of his throat. He looked to the side. Trees, as far as he could see.

The blood coursed down the side of his face. He tried to turn over, but his right arm only weakly pushed against the ground. A headache was coming on, and a whiteness was snowing out his sight. Where am I, he thought, as the haze of unconsciousness blanketed him.

\* \* \*

Ajay and Anna were shutting down their computers, it was almost time to go out for lunch. David had taken the day off as PTO, and the office was likewise more relaxed than normal without their CEO's restless energy. It had been a lazy morning, people getting in a little later than normal, and without the sense of urgency with which they normally shipped patches and features.

John was also out today, Ajay assumed it was related to his quick exit from the office yesterday. Earlier in the morning he watched an engineer from a different team try to use the coffee grinder and fail after three attempts, forlornly taking his business to the Keurig machine at the end of the counter. It seemed a little funny to him that today, tea was the master.

Anna was one of those who had taken a more leisurely stroll to work that morning after reading David's email saying that he was going to be away from his computer for most of the day. She had a project that she was in the middle of that needed attention, but she decided to tackle some bugs instead that had piled up, just to keep things clean.

At noon she noticed people in the office start to file out for lunch, and just afterward Ajay had asked if she would like to get lunch with the group heading down to the Italian restaurant one floor down. She closed up her browsers and shut down her laptop, as per the new security rules from last week. A group was gathering in front of the glass door to the office, and she and Ajay got up and headed over to join them.

After they crammed into the elevator, seemingly one person too many for comfort, they rode down to the Italian restaurant and disgorged. The place had an ever-present smell of tomato sauce and the walls were laminated with dark wood paneling, which clashed with the bright noonday sun coming in through the floor to ceiling windows. Ajay wondered what the hostess at the stand thought when a group from the office all came out of the elevator at once, or if it wasn't that remarkable at all to her.

Since there were only seven of them, the larger group in the office had decided to go to the artisanal grilled cheese restaurant down the street, they were seated right away. Ajay assumed, correctly, that such prompt seating at lunchtime wasn't a good sign for the future of the restaurant.

They were led over to a long rectangular table with two sides made up of booths, and two sides with chairs. Ajay and Anna, getting there near the end, pulled out chairs, the booth seats having already been taken. Promptly, a couple of bread baskets and plates with oil and vinaigrette were placed on the table, and the waiter arrived to take their order. They had all been to the restaurant many times, unfortunately, and knew their preferred poisons. The young waiter, who was forcing a chipper attitude, took down their orders and walked away.

The table broke up into a couple of social groups, Ajay and Anna were together in one, and they discussed a television series

the office was watching together some days after hours. The air conditioning in the restaurant was cranked up too high, or the heating was too low, and Anna zipped up her light jacket. The conversation went on and on, and the waiter returned with an assistant, carrying all of their plates. As the dishes were placed, the conversation died down to occasional remarks as they began to eat.

Ajay was halfway through with his chicken parmesan and listening to a person at the group table talk about a national geographic special they were watching. He looked up politely, and nodded at times, but felt awkward as he didn't know how to contribute. He wasn't the sort of person who could talk to strangers like that in public.

The person who had been talking ended his description of octopi and their habitats, and went back to eating. Apparently that person wasn't the sort of person either. Anna felt a bit uncomfortable, she wasn't sure how to contribute, which is why she didn't like these sort of family seating restaurants where they put single eaters together at a big table of strangers. She tried to hurry up, the atmosphere was getting thick with awkwardness.

The waiter came by the table to ask if he could get anything else, and one of the people across from Anna asked for the check. The waiter asked if this was group billing, or individual. A few people said at once that it was individual. After the waiter left, no one started up a new topic of conversation, each one of them were, in their own way, trying to speed through this awkward lunch.

The waiter returned with checks for each of them, and they were all prepared with their credit cards, handing the receipts with the cards back to him. The waiter left the quiet table again.

A man across the table in a multicolored t-shirt spoke up, “So, does anyone have any plans this week?”

General negative murmurings went up around the table. Ajay had no foreseeable plans, neither did Anna. She was maybe going to take a nap after she got back to her apartment, she was starting to feel a little nauseous.

The waiter returned with their cards and receipts, to a general sigh of relief. Each one of them quickly scribbled the tip down, pocketed their cards, and got up. Ajay bumped into Anna as they tried to get out of their chairs in the same direction.

“Oh sorry,” he quickly said.

“No, sorry,” she replied.

They both nervously chuckled, and the group migrated toward the exit. Ajay and Anna got in the elevator, the other five went down the stairs behind the heavy wood double doors. Ajay pretended to examine the corner of the elevator as Anna pressed the button for the first floor.

As the elevator descended, neither one of them spoke. The doors opening with a ding was a relief, now they could go their separate ways. As they went onto the street, Ajay looked back and said “See you,” but caught himself at the end. How embarrassing, he thought, he didn’t even know that person.