



***SHORT
STORY
NIGHT***

MATTHEW BAKER

"LIFE SENTENCE"

FEATURING INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR!

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Life Sentence

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Home.

He recognizes the name of the street. But he doesn't remember the landscape. He recognizes the address on the mailbox. But he doesn't remember the house.

His family is waiting for him on the porch.

Everybody looks just as nervous as he is.

He gets out.

The police cruiser takes back off down the gravel drive, leaving him standing in a cloud of dust holding a baggie of possessions.

He has a wife. He has a son. He has a daughter.

A dog peers out a window.

His family takes him in.

Wash is still groggy from the procedure. He's got a plastic taste on his tongue. He's got a throbbing sensation in his skull. He's starving.

Supper is homemade pot pies. His wife says the meal is his favorite. He doesn't remember that.

The others are digging in already. Steam rises from his pie as he pierces the crust with his fork. He salivates. The smell of the pie hitting him makes him grunt with desire. Bending toward the fork, he parts his lips to take a bite, but then he stops and glances up.

Something is nagging at him worse than the hunger.

"What did I do?" he says with a sense of bewilderment.

His wife holds up a hand.

"Baby, please, let's not talk about that," his wife says.

Wash looks around. A laminate counter. A maroon toaster. Flowers growing from pots on the sill. Magnets shaped like stars on the fridge.

This is his home.

He doesn't remember anything.

He's not supposed to.

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His reintroduction supervisor comes to see him in the morning.

"How do you feel, Washington?"

"Everybody keeps calling me Wash?"

"I can call you that if you'd like."

"I guess I'm not really sure what I like."

Lindsay, the reintroduction supervisor, wears a scarlet tie with a navy suit. She's got a bubbly disposition and a dainty build. Everything that she says, she says as if revealing a wonderful secret that she just can't wait to share.

"We've found a job for you at a restaurant."

"Doing what?"

"Working in the kitchen."

"That's the best you could get me?"

"At your level of education, and considering your status as a felon, yes, it really is."

"Where did I work before?"

Lindsay smiles.

"An important part of making a successful transition back to your life is learning to let go of any worries that you might have about your past so that you can focus on enjoying your future."

Wash frowns.

"Why do I know so much about mortgages? Did I used to work at a bank?"

"To my knowledge you have never worked at a bank."

"But how can I remember that stuff if I can't remember other stuff?"

“Your semantic memories are still intact. Only your episodic memories were wiped.”

“My what?”

“You know what a restaurant is.”

“Yeah.”

“But you can’t remember ever having eaten in a restaurant before.”

“No.”

“Or celebrating a birthday at a restaurant. Or using a restroom at a restaurant. Or seeing a friend at a restaurant. You’ve eaten in restaurants before. But you have no memories of that at all. None whatsoever.” Lindsay taps her temples. “Episodic memories are personal experiences. That’s what’s gone. Semantic memories are general knowledge. Information. Names, dates, addresses. You still have all of that. You’re a functional member of society. Your diploma is just as valid as before. And your procedural memories are fine. You still know how to ride a bike, or play the guitar, or operate a vacuum. Assuming you ever learned,” Lindsay laughs.

“Did you do anything else to me?”

“Well, of course, your gun license was also revoked.”

Wash thinks.

“Did I shoot somebody?”

“All felons are prohibited from owning firearms, regardless of the nature of the crime.”

Wash turns away, folding his arms over his chest, pouting at the carpet.

“Washington, how do you feel?”

“Upset.”

“That’s perfectly normal. I’m so glad that you’re comfortable talking with me about your feelings. That’s so important.”

Lindsay nods with a solemn expression, as if waiting for him to continue sharing, and then leans in.

“But honestly though, you should feel grateful you weren’t born somewhere that still has prisons.” Lindsay reaches for her purse. “Do you know what would have happened to you a century ago for doing what you did? The judge would have locked you up and thrown away the key!” Lindsay says brightly, and then stands to leave.

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Wash gets woken that night by a craving.

An urgent need.

Was he an addict?

What is he craving?

He follows some instinct into the basement. Stands there in boxers under the light of a bare bulb. Glances around the basement, stares at the workbench, and then obeys an urge to reach up onto the shelf above. Pats around and discovers an aluminum tin.

Something shifts inside as he takes the tin down from the shelf.

He pops the lid.

In the tin: a stash of king-size candy bars.

As he chews a bite of candy bar, a tingle of satisfaction rushes through him, followed by a sense of relief.

Chocolate.

Back up the stairs, padding down the hallway, he pit-stops in the bathroom for a drink of water. Bends to sip from the faucet. Wipes his chin. Stands. A full-length mirror hangs from the back of the door. He's lit by the glow of a night-light the shape of a rainbow that's plugged into the outlet above the toilet.

Wash examines his appearance in the mirror. Wrinkles around his eyes. Creases along his mouth. A thick neck. Broad shoulders, wide hips, hefty limbs, and a round gut. Fingers nicked with scars. Soles hardened with calluses. The body of an aging athlete, or a laborer accustomed to heavy lifting who's recently gone soft from lack of work.

He can't remember being a toddler. He can't remember being a child. He can't remember being a teenager. He can't remember being an adult.

He stares at himself.

Who is he other than this person standing here in the present moment?

Is he anybody other than this person standing here in the present moment?

His wife stirs as he slips back into bed. She reaches over and startles him with a kiss. He kisses back, but then she climbs on top of him, and he pulls away.

“Too soon?” she whispers.

Mia, that’s her name, he remembers. She has a flat face, skinny arms, thick legs, and frizzy hair cut off at her jawline, which he can just make out in the dark. Her nails are painted bright red. She sleeps in a plaid nightgown.

“I barely know you,” he says.

Mia snorts. “Didn’t stop you the first time.” She shuffles backward on her knees, tugging his boxers down his legs as she goes, and then chuckles. “I mean our other first time.”

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The restaurant is a diner down by the highway, a chrome trailer with checkered linoleum and pleather booths and ceiling fans that spin out of sync, featuring a glass case of pastries next to the register and a jukebox with fluorescent tubing over by the restrooms. The diner serves breakfast and lunch only. Wash arrives each morning around dawn. The kitchen has swinging doors. He does the dishes, sweeps the floors, mops the floors, and hauls the trash out when the bags get full. Mainly he does the dishes. Dumps soda from cups. Pours coffee from mugs. Scrapes onion rings and pineapple rinds and soggy napkins and buttered slices of toast and empty jam containers and crumpled straw wrappers into the garbage. Sprays ketchup from plates. Rinses broth from bowls. Racks the tableware and sends the racks through the dishwasher. Stacks spotless dishes back onto the shelves alongside the stove. Scours at crusted yolk and dried syrup with the bristly side of sponges. Scrubs skillet with stainless steel pads for so long and with such force that the pads fall apart and still there’s a scorched residue stuck to the pans. Burns his hands with scalding water. Splashes stinging suds into his eyes. His shoes are always damp as he drives home in the afternoon. He shaves, he showers, and he feeds the dog, a moody mutt whose name is Biscuit. Then he sits on the porch step waiting for the rest of his family to get home. His house is modest, with small rooms and a low ceiling, and has no garage. The gutters sag. Shingles have been blown clear off the roof. The sun has bleached the blue of the siding almost to gray. Across the road stands a field of corn. Beyond that there’s woods. The corn stalks sway in the breeze. The dog waits with him, curled up on the grass around his shoes, panting whenever a car drives past. He lives in Kansas.

Sophie, his daughter, a ninth grader, is the next to arrive home, shuffling off the bus while jabbing at the buttons of a game. Jaden, his son, a third grader, arrives home on the later bus, shouting taunts back at friends hanging out the windows. His wife works at a hospital, the same hours that he does, but she gets home last since the hospital is all the way over in Independence.

Wash tries to cook once, tries to make meatloaf. He knows what a meatloaf is. He understands how an oven functions. He gets the mechanics of a whisk. He can read the recipe no problem. But still the attempt is a disaster. He pulls the pan out when the timer

goes off, and the bottom of the meatloaf is already charred, and the top of the meatloaf is still raw. He hadn't been able to find bread crumbs, so he had torn up a slice of bread instead, which doesn't seem to have worked. He samples a bite from the center of the meatloaf, that in-between part neither charred nor raw, and finds some slivers of onion skin in among what he's chewing. When his wife arrives home, she surveys the mess with a look of amusement and then assures him that this isn't a skill he's forgotten. She does the cooking. At home, the same as at the diner, he does the dishes.

Other items that his wife assures him were not accidentally erased during his procedure: the date of her birthday (all he knows is the month, August); the date of their anniversary (all he knows is the month, May).

"Here's a clue. My birthday was exactly a week before you came home. Borrow a calculator from one of your delightful children if you need help with the math," Mia says, dumping a box of spaghetti into a pot of roiling water while simultaneously stirring a can of mushrooms into a pan of bubbling marinara. "If you'd like to know how long you've been married, your marriage license is in the filing cabinet in the basement. In fact, if you're really feeling ambitious, your children have some birth certificates in there, too. Heck, check your immunization record while you're down there, you're probably due for a tetanus shot."

There are moments so intimate that he can almost forget he's living with strangers. His daughter falls asleep on him one night while watching a show about zombies on the couch, her head lolling against his shoulder. His son leans into him one night waiting for the microwave to heat a mug of cider, his arm wrapping around his waist. Late one night after the kids are asleep, his wife hands him a rubber syringe and a plastic bowl and asks him to flush a buildup of wax from her ears, an act that to him seems far more intimate than intercourse.

But then there are the moments that remind him how much he must have lost. One night, during a supper of baked potatoes loaded with chives and bacon and sour cream, his family suddenly cracks up over an in-joke, a shared memory that's somehow related to mini-golf and bikinis. His wife is laughing so hard that she's crying, but sobers up when she realizes how confused he looks.

"Sorry, it's impossible to explain if you weren't there," Mia says, thumbing away tears.

"But he was there, he was the one who noticed," Jaden protests.

"He can't remember anymore, you ninny," Sophie scowls.

And then the subject gets changed.

Wash does know certain information about himself.

He knows his ancestry is part Potawatomi. He knows his parents were named Lawrence and Beverly. He knows his birthplace is near Wichita.

But taking inventory of what he knows isn't as simple as thinking, "What do you know, Wash?"

He has to ask a specific question.

He must know other facts about himself.

He just hasn't asked the right questions yet.

"Wash, were you ever in a fight before?"

"Wash, did you like your parents?"

"Wash, have you seen a tornado?"

He doesn't remember.

He tries asking Sophie about his past one afternoon. Wash is driving her to practice. Sophie runs cross.

"What was my life like before the wipe?" Wash says.

Sophie is a plump kid with crooked teeth, a pet lover, and has a grave demeanor, as if constantly haunted by the fact that not all kittens have homes. She's doing history homework, flipping back and forth between a textbook and a worksheet, scribbling in information. She's got her sneakers propped on the dashboard with her ankles crossed.

"Huh?" Sophie says.

"What do you know about my life?"

"Um."

"Like tell me something I told you about myself before I got taken away."

She sneers at the textbook. Bends over the worksheet, forcefully erases something, and blows off the peels of rubber left behind. Then turns to look at him.

"You never really talked about yourself," Sophie says.

He tries asking Jaden about his past one afternoon. Wash is driving him to practice. Jaden plays soccer.

"What was I like before I went away?" Wash says.

Jaden is a stringy kid with a nose that dominates his other features, a soda junkie, and constantly hyper, regardless of caffeine intake. He's sitting in an upside-down position with his legs pointed at the roof, his back on the seat, and his head lolled over the edge, with his hands thrown across the floor of the truck. He's spent most of the ride listing off the powers of supervillains.

"I dunno," Jaden says.

"You must remember something about me."

"I guess."

"So what type of person was I?"

Jaden plucks at the seatbelt. Frowns in thought. Then turns to look at him.

"A grown-up?" Jaden says.

Wash tries asking his wife, but her taste in conversation is strictly practical, and she doesn't seem interested in reminiscing about his life before the wipe at all. No photos are framed on the counter. No snapshots are pinned to the fridge. If pictures of his family ever hung on the walls, the pictures have long since disappeared.

But other artifacts of his past are scattered throughout the house. In his closet hang flannel button-ups, worn tees, plain sweatshirts, a zip-up fishing vest with mesh pouches, a hooded hunting jacket with a camouflage pattern, a fleece, a parka, faded jeans on wire hangers, and a suit in a plastic garment bag. Who was that person who chose these clothes? In his dresser mingle polished turquoise, pennies smashed smooth by trains, a hotel matchbook lined with the stumps of torn-out matches, an assortment of acorns, ticket stubs from raffles, a pocket knife whose blades are rusted shut, and the marbled feather of a bald eagle. Who was that person who kept these trinkets? There's a safe in the basement where his guns were stored before being sold. He knows a combination, spins the numbers in, and the handle gives. But aside from a bungee, the safe is empty. No rifles, no shotguns, no pistols. Even the ammunition was sold.

Who owned those guns?

And then there are the artifacts of his past that he sees in his family. Sometimes in the driveway, he'll glance up from the car he's washing or the mower he's fueling and see his daughter watching him from the door with an expression of spite. Was he ever cruel to Sophie? Sometimes as he drops his boots in the entryway with a thud or tosses his wallet onto the counter with a snap, he'll see his son flinch over on the couch. Was he ever rough with Jaden? When he sets his cup down empty, his wife leaps up to fetch the carton of milk from the fridge, as if there might be some repercussion for failing to pour him another glass.

He has a beat-up flip phone with nobody saved in the contacts except for his wife and his kids. Were there other contacts in there that were deleted after he got arrested?

At cross meets and soccer matches, the other parents never talk to him. Was that always the case, or only now that he's a felon?

How does he know that trains have cupolas? Where did he learn that comets aren't asteroids? Who taught him that vinegar kills lice?

Wash is at the homecoming football game, coming back from the concession stand with striped boxes of popcorn for his family, when he stops at the fence to watch a field goal attempt. A referee jogs by with a whistle bouncing on a lanyard. Cheerleaders in gloves and earmuffs rush past with pompoms and megaphones. Jayhawkers chant in the bleachers. Wash glazes over, he's not sure for how long, but he's still standing at the fence when his trance is interrupted by a stranger standing next to him.

"You did time, didn't you, friend?"

The stranger wears a pullover with the logo of the rival team. His hair is slicked crisp with mousse. He's got ironed khakis and shiny loafers.

"Do I know you?" Wash says.

"Ha. No. You just had that look. We all get the look. Searching for something that isn't there," the stranger says.

Wash cracks a smile.

The stranger grumbles, "I don't know why people even say that anymore. Doing time. That's not what happens at all. Losing time. That's what happens. Poof. Gone." The stranger glances down and gives the ice in his cup a shake. "I lost a year. Let's just say, hadn't been totally candid on my tax forms. Couldn't have been worse timing though. I'd gotten married that year. No joke, I can't even remember my own honeymoon. Spent a fortune on that trip, too. Fucking blows." The stranger turns away to watch a punt return, sucks a gurgle of soda through his straw, and then turns back. "How long did you do?"

"Life."

The stranger whistles.

"No kidding? You lost everything? From start to finish? How old were you when you got wiped?"

"Forty-one."

"What'd you do to get life? Kill a cop? Rob a bank? Run a scam or something?"

“I don’t know,” Wash admits.

The stranger squints.

“You aren’t curious?”

“Nobody will tell me.”

The stranger laughs.

“To get a sentence like that, whatever you did, it must have made the news.”

Wash stares at the stranger in shock. He could know who he was after all. All he’d have to do is get online.

“We don’t have a computer though,” Wash frowns.

The stranger passes behind him, giving him a pat on the shoulder, and then calls back before drifting off into the crowd.

“Going to let you in on a secret, friend. At the library, you can use a computer for free.”

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Lindsay, his reintroduction supervisor, is waiting for him at the house when he gets off work the next afternoon. She’s wearing the same outfit as before, a scarlet tie, a navy suit. She’s sitting on the hood of her car next to a box of donuts.

“Time to check in,” Lindsay says through a bite of cruller.

Biscuit stands on the couch, peering out of the house, paws propped against the window.

“Have a seat,” Lindsay says brightly.

Wash takes a fritter.

“How are you getting along with your family, Washington?”

Wash thinks.

“Fine,” Wash says.

Lindsay leans in with a conspiratorial look. “Oh, come on, give me the gossip.”

Wash chews, swallows, and frowns.

“Why’d you have to give me life? You couldn’t just give me twenty years or something? Why’d you have to take everything?” Wash says.

“The length of your sentence was determined by the judge.”

“Just doesn’t seem fair.”

Lindsay nods, smiling sympathetically, and then abruptly stops.

“Well, what you did was pretty bad, Washington.”

“But my whole life?”

“Do you know anything about the history of prisons in this country?” Lindsay reaches for a napkin, licks some glaze from her fingers, and wipes her hands. “Prisons here were originally intended to be a house of corrections. The theory was that when put into isolation criminals might be taught how to be functional citizens. In practice, however, the system proved to be ineffective at reforming offenders. The rate of recidivism was staggering. Honestly, upon release, most felons were arrested on new charges within the year. And over time the conditions in the prisons became awful. I mean, imagine what your situation would have been, being sentenced to life. You would have spent the next half a century locked in a cage like an animal, sleeping on an uncomfortable cot, wearing an ill-fitting jumpsuit, making license plates all day for far less than minimum wage, cleaning yourself with commercial soaps whose lists of ingredients included a variety of carcinogens, eating mashed potatoes made from a powder and meatloaf barely fit for human consumption, getting raped occasionally by other prisoners. Instead, you get to be here, with your family. Pretty cool, right? Like, super cool? You have to admit. And the wipe isn’t simply a punishment. Yes, the possibility of getting wiped is meant to deter people from committing crimes. Totally. But wipes are also highly effective at preventing criminals from becoming repeat offenders. Although there is some biological basis for things like rage and greed and so forth, those types of issues tend to be the psychological byproducts of memories. And a life sentence is especially effective. Given a clean slate, felons often are much calmer, are much happier than before, are burdened with no misconceptions that crimes like embezzlement or poaching might be somehow justified, and of course possess no grudges against institutions like the government or law enforcement or former employers.” Lindsay glances over, then turns back toward the road. “For example.”

“So I’m supposed to feel grateful?”

Wash didn’t mean to speak with that much force.

“Do you even know how much a wipe like yours costs?” Lindsay says, her eyes growing wide. “A fortune. Honestly, most people around here would need a payment plan for a simple vanity wipe. You know, you do something embarrassing at a party, you overhear somebody saying something mean about you that rings a bit too true, so you just have the memory erased. And then there are survivors of truly traumatic incidents, who often have to save up for years after the incident if insurance won’t cover the cost of having it wiped. And alcoholics

and crackheads and the like have no choice but to shell out, as a selective memory wipe is the only possible cure for addiction. Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder are generally treated with wipes as well, although those wipes, as was the case with yours, are covered by taxpayers.” Lindsay leans back on the hood of the car, propped up on her elbows, and squints into the sun. “It’s a better deal for taxpayers anyway. Wiping your memory may have been costly, but was still nowhere near as expensive as paying to feed and shelter you for half a century would have been. That’s the problem with prisons. They’re overpriced, they underperform.”

Wash scowls at the driveway.

“How are you feeling, Washington?”

“Frustrated.”

“Tell me more.”

“I don’t even know what I did to get wiped.”

Lindsay smiles. “The less you know about who you were before, the greater your chances of making a successful transition to your new life.” Beneath her cheery tone there’s a hint of uncertainty. “I would particularly recommend in your case that you avoid asking people about the details of your arrest.”

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Wash has to drive by the local library, a squat brick building with a flag hanging from a pole, whenever he drops off the kids at practice, and he tries to avoid wondering whether whatever he did to get arrested made the news. He notices that other parents stick around during practice, so occasionally he stays, watching Sophie stretching out at the track between intervals, knee braces on, or Jaden dribbling balls through a course of cones, shin guards crooked. Wash likes his kids. He doesn’t mind being their parent, but he wants to be their friend, too. To be trusted. To be liked. The desire is so powerful that sometimes the thick fingers of his hands curl tight around the links of the fence out of a sense of longing as he watches the kids practice. Becoming friends with the dog was simple. Biscuit sniffed him and licked him and that was that. He’s the same person he’s always been as far as the dog is concerned. The kids are distant, though. He doesn’t know how to jump-start the relationships.

On other days he drives home during practice. The wallpaper in the kitchen is dingy, there are gouges in the walls of the hallway, the ceiling fan in the living room is broken, there are cracks in the light fixture in the laundry room, but not until the constant drip from the sink in the bathroom has turned to a steady leak does he actually stop, think, and realize that the

house must be in such shabby condition because of how long he was gone, in detention during the trial, when his wife would have been living on a single income. That faucet is leaking because of him.

He knows how to fix a leak. Leaving the light in the bathroom on, he fetches the toolbox from the basement. He's emptying the cupboard under the sink, stacking toiletries on the linoleum, preparing to shut off the water, when his wife passes the doorway.

"What exactly are you doing?" Mia says.

"I'm gonna fix some stuff," Wash says.

She stares at him.

"Oh," she says finally, and then carries on down the hallway, followed by the dog.

By the time the corn in the field across the road has been harvested and the trees in the woods beyond the field are nearly bare, he's got the gutters hanging straight and the shingles patched up again. He takes a day off from the diner to tear out the stained carpeting in the hallway, wearing a dust mask over his face with the cuffs of his flannel rolled. Afterward he's rummaging around the shelf under the workbench in the basement, looking for a pry bar to rip up the staples in the floor, when he notices a quiver of arrows.

Wash tugs the mask down to his neck and touches the arrows. Carbon shafts. Turkey fletching. He glances over at the safe.

Did he have a bow once?

Was the bow sold with the guns?

Turning back to the shelf under the workbench he sees that there's an unmarked case clasped shut next to the quiver.

Wash pops the lid.

Though he doesn't recognize the bow itself, he recognizes that it's a bow, even in pieces. A takedown. A recurve. And before he even has a chance to wonder whether he knows how to assemble a bow, he's got the case up on the workbench and he's putting the bow together, moving on impulse. Bolts the limbs to the riser, strings the bow, and then heads up the stairs with the quiver. Drags a roll of carpet out the back door and props the carpet against a fence post to use as a target. Backs up toward the house. Tosses the quiver into the grass. Nocks an arrow. Raises the bow. Draws the string back toward the center of his chin until the string is pressing into the tip of his nose. Holds. Breathes.

Leaves are falling.

He lets go.

The arrow hits the carpet with a thump.

The sense of release that washes over him is incredible.

Wash is already exhausted from tearing the carpet out of the hallway, but he stands out in the backyard firing arrow after arrow until the muscles in his arms are burning and his flannel is damp with sweat, and arrow after arrow buries deep into the carpet. Fixing leaks, hanging gutters, patching shingles, he can do stuff like that, but the work is a struggle, a long and frustrating series of bent nails and fumbled wrenches. But this is different. Something he's good at. He can't remember ever feeling like this before. The pride, the satisfaction, of having and using a talent. Biscuit watches from the door, panting happily, tail wagging, as if sensing his euphoria.

Wash is scrubbing dishes after supper that night while Mia clips coupons from a brochure at the table.

"I want to go hunting," Wash announces.

"With the bow?" Mia says.

Wash thinks.

"Do you hunt?" Wash says.

"No," Mia snorts.

She sets down the scissors, folds her arms on the table, and furrows her eyebrows together, looking up at him with an inscrutable expression.

"Why don't you ask your children?" Mia says.

Jaden and Sophie are in the living room.

Jaden responds to the invitation by jumping on the ottoman, pretending to fire arrows at the lamp.

Even Sophie, busy working on a poster for a fundraiser to save stray cats from getting euthanized, wants to come along.

"You're okay with killing animals?"

"I only care about cute animals."

"Deer aren't cute?"

“Deer are snobs.”

Last weekend of bow season. Hiking off-trail on public land. The dawn is cloudy. Frost crusts the mud. Wash leads the way through a stretch of cedars, touching the rubs in the bark of the trunks, explaining to the kids about glands without knowing where he learned that’s why deer make the rubs. Finds a clearing. Sets up behind a fallen log at the edge of the trees, Jaden to this side with a thermos of cocoa, Sophie to that side with a thermos of coffee, whispering insults back and forth to each other. Waits. Snow begins falling. The breeze dies. The kids go quiet as a deer slips into the clearing. A buck with a crown of antlers. A fourteen-pointer. The trophy of a lifetime. The arrow hits the buck so hard that the buck gets knocked to the ground, but just as fast it staggers back up, and then it bounds off into the woods, vanishing. With Jaden and Sophie close behind, he hurries over to where the deer fell. Blood on the snow. Tracks in the mud. Wash and the kids follow the trail through the pines, past a ditch full of brambles, down a slope thick with birches, until the trail disappears just shy of a creek. By then the sun has broken through the clouds. And no matter where he searches from there, the buck can’t be found.

He’s just about given up looking when he notices some trampled underbrush.

Beyond, on a bed of ferns, the buck lies dead.

Jaden and Sophie dance around the kill, doing fist-pumps and cheering, and that feeling before, shooting arrows into the carpet in the backyard, is nothing compared to the feeling now.

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Driveway.

Weekend.

Icicles hanging from the flag on the mailbox.

Jaden, in pajamas, boots, and a parka, is sucking on a lozenge, occasionally pushing the lozenge out with his tongue, just far enough for the lozenge to peek through his lips, then slurping the lozenge back into his mouth, while helping him shovel snow.

Wash chips at some ice.

Jaden starts to wheeze.

Wash glances over.

“What’s wrong?” Wash says.

Jaden shakes his head, reaches for his throat, and falls to his knees.

Both shovels hit the ground. Wash grabs him by the shoulders and thumps his back. Jaden still can't breathe. Wash spins him and forces his mouth open in a panic. Sticks a finger in. Feels teeth, a tongue, saliva, an uvula. Finds the lozenge. Claws the lozenge. Scoops the lozenge out with a flick.

The lozenge lands in the snow.

Jaden coughs, sways, blinks some, then looks at the lozenge.

"That was awesome," Jaden grins.

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Backyard.

Weekend.

Buds sprouting on the stems of the tree beyond the fence, where a crow is perched on a branch, not cawing, not preening, silent and still.

Sophie, in leggings, slippers, and a hoodie, is helping him to clean rugs.

Wash holds a rug up over the grass.

Sophie beats the rug with a broom.

Dust flies into the air. Coils of hair. Clumps of soil. Eventually nothing. Sophie drapes the rug over the fence, being careful to make sure that the tassels aren't touching the ground, as he reaches for the next rug. Just then the crow falls out of the tree.

The crow hits the ground with a thud.

Wash looks at the crow in shock.

The crow lies there. Doesn't move. Twitches. Struggles up again. Hops around. Then flaps back into the tree.

"Was it asleep?" Wash squints.

Sophie stares at the crow, and then bursts out laughing.

"Nobody's gonna believe us," Sophie says.

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Ballpark.

Minor league.

Chaperones on a field trip for the school.

His wife comes back from a vendor with some concessions.

She hands him a frankfurter.

Wash inspects the toppings with suspicion. Rancid sauerkraut. Gummy mustard. What might be cheese.

The meat looks greasy.

“You used to love those,” Mia frowns.

She trades him a pretzel.

“Guess that was the nostalgia you were tasting,” Mia says.

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Basement.

Jaden is hunched in the safe.

Sophie is crouched under the workbench.

Biscuit is leashed to a pipe on the boiler.

Tornado sirens howl in the distance.

“This is taking forever,” Sophie says.

“I want to play a game,” Jaden whines.

“We should have brought down some cards,” Sophie says.

“There’s nothing worse than just sitting,” Jaden grumbles.

Wash presses his hands into the floor to stand.

“Don’t you dare,” Mia says.

Wash freezes.

“I’ll be fast,” Wash says.

And then, after glancing back at his wife at the foot of the stairs, goes up.

Noon, but with the lights off the house is dim, like today dusk came early. Wash hurries down the hallway toward the living room. There's a pressure in the air. In the living room he pinches his jeans to tug the legs up, then crouches over the basket of games, digging for a deck of cards.

Rising back up, tucking the cards into the pocket of his flannel, he glances over toward the doorway.

He can see the door lying in the yard next to a can of paint, where he had been painting the door when the sirens had begun to wail. The windows in the door reflect the clouds above. Through the glass is flattened grass.

The screen door, still attached to the doorframe, is rattling.

Wash crosses the living room.

He stands at the door.

He touches the screen.

Sky a mix of gold and green.

Leaves tearing across the yard in a rush of wind.

He can feel his heart beat.

The screen door opens with a creak.

Wash steps out onto the porch. His jeans snap against his legs. His flannel whips against his chest. Beyond the corn across the road, past the woods beyond the field, a tornado twists in the sky.

• • • •

The anniversary will be their twentieth, but their first he can remember. Having to plan some type of date makes him nervous. He would just take his wife out to eat somewhere fancy, which he knows is the standard move, but aside from the diner the other restaurants in town are all chains: a burger joint, a burrito joint, a pizza place that doesn't even have tables or chairs. Besides, he feels like this anniversary should be special, something memorable, above and beyond a candlelight dinner. Wash agonizes for weeks, at a loss what to do, worrying that he won't think of anything in time, and then while leaving work after an especially brutal shift the week before the anniversary, he notices a brochure tacked to the corkboard by the door. Wash reaches up, fingers pruny from washing dishes, and plucks the brochure down from the corkboard. The brochure advertises cabin rentals in the state park at El Dorado Reservoir.

His wife looks shocked when he tells her what the plan is, but moments later she's jotting down a list of supplies to buy and gear to pack, which seems like a form of approval.

Sophie gets left in charge of watching Jaden, with cash for emergencies and a fridge full of food, and he and his wife clear out of town. Mia paints her nails teal over the course of the drive, her frizzy hair trembling in the breeze through the windows. Wash stresses, convinced that the cabin won't be as nice as the pictures in the brochure, afraid that his wife might secretly consider the plan too outdoorsy, but the cabin turns out to be just as perfect as promised, and his wife is beaming before the duffels have even hit the floor. He's never seen her like this. At home, she never drinks alcohol, she never plays music, she's stern and practical and tireless, emptying hampers and folding laundry and cleaning the fridge and washing the dog and checking the kids did their homework and helping the kids with their homework and scheduling appointments and reading mail and paying bills and organizing the junk drawer and lugging bags of garbage out to the bin without ever stopping to rest, as if the home, not just the house but the family and the lives contained within, would completely fall apart if she allowed herself to relax for even a moment. But at the cabin she's different, already loosening up, sipping from a can of beer, cranking up the country on the radio, dancing in place at the stove as she cooks up a feast of steak and mushrooms and roasted potatoes crusted with rosemary, giving him a glimpse of who she might have been when he met her twenty years ago, a twenty-year-old girl with a sense of humor and a lopsided smile and few if any responsibilities. He's liked his wife for as long as he can remember, but watching her dance around at the stove makes him feel something new, something powerful, tender, warm. He can tell that the feeling is strong, but even though he knows how strong the feeling is, and though he can't imagine how a feeling could possibly be any stronger, he's not sure whether or not there's still another feeling that's even stronger out there. He can't remember being in love. Has no spectrum to place the feeling on. Doesn't know what the limit for emotions is. Does he like her, or really like her, or really really like her, or really really really like her?

After the meal he leans back with his bare feet flat on the floor and his hands folded together on his gut, stuffed with starch and butter and meat and grease, buzzed from the beer. His wife usually doesn't involve him in parenting decisions, just signs the consent forms and checks the movie ratings herself. But for once she's actually consulting him about the kids, leaning across the table with her chin on the placemat, toying absentmindedly with the tab on a can.

"There are these acne pills Sophie keeps asking to try."

"She gets like a single pimple at a time."

"Should we let her or not?"

"For one zit?"

“So no.”

Then:

“Do you think Jaden is getting picked on?”

“What makes you say that?”

“He keeps coming home with ripped clothes.”

“He’s just wild.”

“You’re sure?”

Wash feels a flush of pride. He likes when his wife asks his opinion. Maybe it’s only because of the anniversary weekend, but he hopes it signals a permanent change.

“I got us something,” Mia says suddenly, pushing up off of the table to stand, looking almost giddy. She goes out to the car, pops the trunk, digs under a tarp, and comes back lugging an unmarked cardboard box topped with a silver bow. The present is nearly as long as the table.

Wash takes ahold of the flap and rips through the tape.

Lifts the lid.

A rifle.

“Whoa,” Wash says.

The gun lies on a pad of foam. Carbon barrel. Walnut stock. A repeater. A bolt-action. He reaches into the box, but then hesitates, looking to her for permission.

“Take it out,” Mia laughs.

The moment he picks up the rifle a sense of relief washes over him. Like having a severed limb suddenly reattached. A natural extension of his body. Automatically he pulls the bolt back to check whether the chamber is empty, then shuts the breech and raises the gun, butt to his shoulder, stock on his cheek, his eye at the scope, testing the sights. The smell of the oil. The feel of the trigger. He can already tell that he’s skilled with this thing.

“Are we allowed to have this?” Wash says.

“You’re not, but technically I’m the owner, I did all the research, and as long as you don’t have access, we’re in the clear, so we’ll just keep the gun in the safe and if anybody ever asks then we’ll say that you don’t know the combo. And honestly, on my honor, I did want to have a gun in the house again just in case of intruders. A pistol or a shotgun probably would

have been better for that, though. I went with this because of you. You can use it for target shooting out back, even use it for deer hunting if you want. I thought it all through. We'll just be careful. Nobody's going to know."

His chair creaks as she settles onto his lap.

He's overwhelmed.

"I love you," Wash says, without meaning to, the words just coming out.

He sets the rifle onto the table to kiss her, but an expression of alarm flashes across her face, and before he can lean closer she drops her head, with her chin to her sternum. Confused, he waits for her to look back up. Her hands rest on his shoulders. Her ass weighs on his thighs. She's trembling suddenly. No, he realizes, she's crying.

He can't remember ever seeing her cry before.

The sight scares him.

"What's wrong?" Wash frowns.

When she finally responds she speaks in a murmur.

"You're hardly you at all anymore."

"What does that mean?"

"You're just so different."

"Different how?"

Mia goes silent for a moment.

"You never did dishes before."

"Well, it wasn't my job back then, right?" Wash says.

"I mean at home," Mia explodes, shoving him in frustration, startling him.

"But after the meatloaf, you told me that's how things worked, was you doing the cooking and me doing the dishes," Wash says.

"I was kidding, I didn't think you'd actually do them, but then you got up from the table after we finished eating and you just started washing dishes, you'd never washed a dish in that house before in your life, you never used to play games with the kids, you never used to bring the kids along hunting, I always had to nag you to fix things around the house and even after you were done fixing things then you'd get on me for nagging you, I could barely get

you to give the kids a ride somewhere without you throwing a fit, all you wanted to do was work and hunt and be alone in the woods, or rant at me about political stuff that there was nothing I could do anything about, we don't even fight anymore, I tried to pretend that you're the same but you're not, you're the same body, you move the same, you smell the same, you talk the same, you taste the same, but the rest of you is gone, you don't remember the tomato juice when I was pregnant with Jaden, you don't remember the fire alarm after I gave birth to Sophie, everything that used to have a secret meaning between us now is just a thing, to you a hay bale is just a hay bale, a batting helmet is just a batting helmet, a mosquito bite is just a mosquito bite, and that's not what they are to me," Mia cries, hitting his chest with her fists, "we lost our past, we lost our history," hitting his chest with her fists, "and you deserved it," a fist, "I didn't," a fist, "not me."

Wash sits there in terror, letting her beat on him, until finally she clutches his tee in her hands and sinks her head into his chest in exhaustion. His skin tingles with pain where the blows landed. His heart pounds from the shock of being struck. Wash glances at the blotchy sunspots on his hands, the faint scars on his fingers, the bone spurs on his heels, the brittle calluses on his soles, relics of years he can't remember living. He's never felt so much like a stranger in this body.

He's almost too shaken to speak.

"Which one do you want?" Wash says.

"Which what?"

"Which me?"

Mia heaves a sigh, then lifts her head, turns her face away, and rises off of him. She shuffles toward the bathroom. "I never would've gotten a gun again if you were the way you used to be."

Midnight. He lies next to his wife in the dark. The sheets are thinner than at home. The pillows are harder than at home. He can't remember ever having spent a night away from home before. He's gotten so used to falling asleep with her nuzzled against him that trying to fall asleep with her facing away from him is intensely lonely. His feet are cold. An owl hoots down by the reservoir.

Does he love his wife?

Did he ever love his wife before?

••••

Lindsay is sitting on the chair in the living room. She's wearing the same outfit as every month. She tucks her hair behind her ears, then bends to grab a toy from the floor, a plastic bone that squeaks when squeezed.

"This is the last time we'll have to meet," Lindsay says.

"We're done?"

Lindsay looks up with a smile.

"Next month will mark a full year since your wipe. By the standards of our justice department, you've been officially reintroduced to your life. Congratulations."

Lindsay tosses the toy down the hallway.

Biscuit takes off running.

Wash thinks.

"There's something I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"What happens if you commit another crime after you've had a wipe like mine? What else could they even do to me if they've already taken everything?"

"They took the memories you had back then. You have new memories they could take."

Wash frowns.

"If you're being sentenced to a partial wipe, a shorter sentence is better than a longer sentence, of course. But for a life sentence, the numbers are meaningless. Is it worse when a sixty-year-old dies than when a six-year-old dies? Of course not. The length of a life has nothing to do with the weight of the loss."

Wash settles back into the couch, folding his arms across his chest, tucking his hands into his pits.

"That's important for you to understand," Lindsay says.

Wash glances over.

"You have another life you could lose now," Lindsay says.

Biscuit drops the bone back onto the floor.

Lindsay reaches down.

“How do you feel, Washington?”

“I feel really good,” Wash says.

••••

Mia calls him into the bathroom. She’s sitting on the lid of the toilet in drawstring sweatpants and a baggy undershirt. The pregnancy test is lying on the side of the tub.

“We’re both going to remember this one,” Mia says, smiling up at him.

His kids barge into the bathroom a moment later, already fighting about what to name the baby.

Wash goes shopping for a crib with his family, pushing a cart down the bright aisles of a department store as swing music plays over the speakers. Wash reclines on a checkered blanket at the park as fireworks burst in the sky above his family, shimmering and fading. Wash hunches over the wastebasket in the bedroom, clipping the nails on his fingers as his wife pops the battery from a watch on the dresser. Wash leans over the sink in the bathroom, tweezing a hair from his nose as his wife gathers dirty towels from the hook on the door. Wash shoots holes into a target shaped like the silhouette of a person as his kids watch from the stump of an oak tree, sipping cans of soda. And wherever he’s at, and whatever he’s doing, there’s something that’s stuck in his mind like a jingle, nagging him.

He sits on the porch with the dog. Rain drips from the awning. Silks are showing on the husks of corn across the road. Summer is already almost gone. Behind him, through the screens in the windows, sounds of his family talking drift out of the house.

Sometimes he does want to be alone. Sometimes he feels so lazy that he wants to refuse to help with chores. Sometimes he gets so tense that he has an urge to punch a wall.

But maybe all of that is trivial compared to how he used to be.

Is he a different person now?

Has he been becoming somebody new?

Or does he have some soul, an inborn nature, a congenital personality, that’s bound to express itself eventually?

The academic year hasn’t started yet, but the athletic seasons have begun. He’s on the way to pick up the kids from practice when he passes the library. His eyes flick from the road to the rearview, watching the library fade into the distance as the truck rushes on toward the school.

Knowing who he was might not even be an option. What he did might never even have made the news. And he's already running late anyway. But still his hands clench tight around the wheel.

Swearing, he hangs a u-ey, swinging the truck back around.

He parks at the library.

"I need to use a computer," Wash says.

The librarian asks him for identification, registers him for an account, and then brings him over to a computer. All that time he's thinking, what are you doing, what are you doing, what are you doing, imagining his kids waiting for him by the fence at the school. The librarian heads back to the reference desk.

His hands are trembling as he reaches for the keyboard.

He logs onto the computer, pulls up a browser, and searches his name.

The screen blinks as the results appear.

Nothing. A pop star with his name. A goalie. A beach resort with his name. A monument. He's not there.

He skims through again to be sure, and then laughs out loud in relief.

The temptation was a mirage all along.

Wash swivels on the chair to stand, then thinks of something, and hesitates.

He turns back around.

Puts his fingers on the keyboard.

Tries his name plus his town.

The screen blinks as the results change.

His heart leaps.

He's there.

The list of articles seems to scroll on forever.

The headlines alone are enough to send a beat of rage pulsing through him.

Wash runs his hands over his mouth, glancing at the daylight streaming into the library through the door beyond the computer, trying to decide whether to leave now or to keep reading, flashing through all of the memories he has from the past year that he could lose. Jaden grinning in amazement after choking on the lozenge in the driveway. Sophie cracking up laughing after the crow fell out of the tree. Mia treading water at the reservoir in a white one-piece, glancing at him with a casual expression before suddenly lunging over to dunk him. Jaden lying on the linoleum in the kitchen in cutoff shorts, gripping him by the ankle, begging to be taken to the go-kart track. Jaden whirling around the yard with a lit sparkler. Mia swinging by the diner on a day off from the hospital, hair piled into a bun, trench coat damp with rain, splitting a slice of cherry pie with him while he's on break. Sophie standing under the light in the kitchen in pajamas, holding him by the arm, upset by a dream about a ghost. Sophie singing into a lit sparkler like a microphone. Mia arranging gourds on the porch. Mia brushing icicles from the awning. Mia sweating into a damp washcloth, deliriously rambling about how much she loves him, as he crouches by the bed with the wastebasket, waiting there in case she pukes again. The dog watching a butterfly flutter down the hallway, then turning to look at him, as if waiting for an explanation. His kids dancing around the dead buck, boots tromping through snowy ferns, gloved hands raised in celebration, lit by the dazzling sunbeams spiking through the branches of the trees, and afterward driving back to the house with the deer in the bed of the truck, the mighty antlers rising into the air out the window behind the cab, the kids chattering to each other on the seat next to him, hats both off, hair all disheveled, and later eating bowls of cereal in the kitchen in thermal underwear together as the kids recount the story of the hunt with wild gestures, while his wife sits across the table in a plaid nightgown, smiling over a mug of black tea. The secret experiences that nobody else shared. The joy of discovering the chocolate stash hidden in the aluminum tin in the basement. The habit he's made of visiting the glittering display of chandeliers and pendants and lamps and sconces whenever he goes to the hardware store, marveling at the rich glow of the mingled lights, filtered through the tinted glass and the colored shades. The sense of destiny when a bottle of cola suddenly plunked into the dispenser of a vending machine at the shopping mall as he was walking out of the bathroom. The fear and the awe and the wonder of seeing a monstrous tornado churn in the sky above the town, the funnel spiraling down from the clouds, the tip just about to touch the ground.

Wash sits back in the chair, looking from the door to the computer, biting his lip as he wavers, torn between the possibility of having a future and the possibility of having a past. But only for a moment. Because when he thinks about it, he knows who he is. He already knows what he'll do.