

*eugolorP*

Now

You know that place?

That place between sleep and waking where you're tethered to your dreams but the reality you try so hard to avoid is waiting for you like a Calc. test you're not prepared to take.

You know that place.

The doctors... No, that's not right. I mean the a-holes who've poked, prodded, scraped and tunneled their way through my damaged hippocampus for the past year and a half, they call it the hypnopompic state. I call it hell.

In the hypnopompic state, I can see her face as I move between REM sleep and consciousness. In the hypnopompic state, I can hear her screams which may or may not be an auditory hallucination brought about by the nasty blow to my head – that's what they tell me anyway. In the hypnopompic state, I know her name but I forget it every morning when I wake, along with every other memory from the day before and the day before that. In the hypnopompic state, I inhale the sweet fragrant oleanders and I'm terrified.

*Wake up. Wake up, Iris. Wak–*

My eyes feel like sandpaper as I blink repeatedly, focusing on one thing to orient myself. Today it's the window. The sky is a delicate blue, covered in thin, wispy clouds that remind me of the cream in Gran's morning coffee right before she stirs it.

I know things. Basic things, like my name – Iris Shaw. I know I live in a tastefully decorated, six-bedroom Spanish Colonial in Sequoia Grove, a sleepy seaside town located two hours south of San Francisco. I know I have a sister, and parents, a Gran, and a Wheaton Terrier

named Ophelia, who devours TV remotes and doesn't shed. I also know that something terrible has happened to me.

A fact I have to keep reminding myself of everyday.

I reach for the note pad on my nightstand and scribble what little I can remember from my dream. My cell phone next to the bed dings. My eyes are still half slits as the text on the screen slowly comes into focus. I stare at the cryptic words.

*PLAY ME NOW*

Embedded in the text is a video. Feeling very much like I'm about to shrink and scurry down a rabbit hole, I press play. Staring back at me is the pale, haggard face of a girl with long strings of dishwater blond hair and eyes like shale. It's the face of girl I know – me.

My heart catapults into my throat. *Da dum da dum da dum*. I steady my hands long enough to adjust the volume on the iPhone so I can hear it clearly. My voice is icy but calm as I look directly at the camera:

“This is audio note #201. Today is Friday. Iris, it's me... you. If you don't already know you've had an accident and lost your short-term memory. If you're watching this, your memory hasn't returned yet. For the last eleven months, you've documented everything you've learned about what happened to you. It's all on the wall in your closet and in your journal in your desk drawer, you'll find the key taped to the underside of your nightstand. Listen to me very, very carefully. Don't trust anyone. No one wants you to remember. But you have to. You have to find out what really happened. You're so close, Iris. Keep searching. The truth is on the wall... uh, shit. Someone's coming –”

The screen goes dark for a few seconds and I hear muffled sounds as if the phone was

stuffed under something in a hurry.

I sit up in bed, staring at my distorted face on the frozen screen, unable to move, unable to breath. *Think, Iris. Think.*

I can't. Everything is fuzzy and jumbled.

Panic swells inside me. I have no memory of making this video, let alone sending it to myself. I check the calendar app on the phone. Saturday. A chill runs the length of my body. The video I just watched was recorded and sent yesterday.

I ignore my first instinct – to run straight to my parents, but my voice resonates in my head. *Don't trust anyone. Keep searching. Truth is on the wall.* I scan my room. the walls are blank except for a few black and white photographs, an oversized calendar, and one of my paintings.

Dragging myself out of bed, I feel around the underside of the nightstand until I locate the key exactly where I told myself it would be. I notice my floor covered with tiny bits of shredded papers that stick to soles of my feet as I walk to unlock my walk-in closet. Everything looks to be in order. My clothes are hung in perfect symmetry, not a piece out of place. I study every inch of the closet looking for anything unusual. Nothing. I turn to walk out when I notice a hot pink Post-It note stuck to the sleeve of one of my shirts that simply says: *R.G.*

R.G.? Is that supposed to mean something?

Slowly, I slide all my clothes to one side of the closet then gasp loudly. Every inch of the closet wall is covered in hundreds of Post-It notes, along with pictures, newspaper clippings, drawings, and random pieces of scrap paper with names of people and places I have no memory of. Bits of information about my missing life, arranged haphazardly, in a giant collage of nonsense.

My insides clench like a tightly-wound spring as I study the covered wall. All the notes are written in my handwriting but none of it makes any sense. My hands shake uncontrollably. What does it all mean?

My cell phone erupts again and I jump. I shut and lock the closet then glance at the screen.  
Text Message from Camilla Carson.

Camilla? Camilla. My grandmother. Gran.

*Good Morning, Sweetheart. Hope you slept well. Will is here to see you.*

*Who???* I text back.

*Will. The boy you've been seeing for the past year. Shall I send him up? Iris?*

Will. I don't know anyone by that name. Do I?

Before I could ask Gran, there's a knock on my door. Standing in the doorway is a boy wearing a faded Chicago Cubs t-shirt tucked half-way into the waist of his ripped jeans. His jet-colored hair is cropped short and matches the hint of stubble above his mouth and on his chin.

"Hi," he says, stepping into my bedroom. His eyes are the color of teal sea glass and his perfect mouth is turned up at one corner. "I just came by to see if you were okay. You were in pretty bad shape when I—"

My eyes narrow and I back away. He raises his hands in a defensive gesture as if anticipating my impending objection. "Hey, Iris, it's me... Will." His voice is smooth, almost calming. "I live next door. Open the bottom left drawer of your desk. Underneath your sketch books is a pink journal with gold lettering. Take it out and open it to page eleven. Everything you need to know about me is in that book."

Not taking my eyes off of him I follow his instructions. At the top of page eleven is a

heading: *Important People*. The first one on the list is William Pembroke with a detailed description in my handwriting next to a picture of him standing in front of Wrigley Field in Chicago. My eyes dart between the photo and the real thing. It would appear the boy standing in front of me is who he says he is:

William Anthony Pembroke (Will)

Height: 6'2

Hair: Black

Eyes: Light Green

Favorite Sports Team: Chicago Cubs

Favorite Food: Steak and potatoes, Chicago-style deep dish pizza

Favorite Movie: *The Natural*, *A River Runs Through It*, *The Notebook*

(The Notebook. Seriously?)

Favorite Pastime: Fishing, baseball, motocross

“So”, I hiss, waving the journal in front of his face. “Do you have ID or something? How do I know you are who you say you are?”

He lets out a long exhale. “Just look at the picture.”

I scowl and peel off the photo. Stuck to the back is a Post-It note with backwards handwriting – my backwards handwriting. Suddenly my blood runs cold.

*.seiL eH !miH tsurT t'noD*

Don't Trust Him! He Lies.

The words shoot out at me like a startled rattlesnake.

Then, as if someone pressed the rewind button on my frontal lobe, my mind explodes in a

cloudburst of memories, images, and feelings, like scenes from an old movie that's been spliced together with Scotch tape.

I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping it's just another bad dream. Strings of red hair...the scent of decomposing earth... heavy footsteps on dilapidated stairs...screaming... blood...her name...Langston.

*Get up, Langston! Run!*

Will reaches for me but I swat his hand away. My legs wobble beneath me as I steady myself on my bed. I remember her.

I remember everything.

Her name is Langston and I think she's dead.

*enO*

363 Days Earlier

My near-empty room at Fairway Rehabilitation Center for Brain Trauma faces west with a postcard view of the jagged Big Sur coast. I don't remember coming here. I won't remember leaving.

All but one of the charcoal figure drawings, my drawings, that once covered the sterile ecru walls, are rolled up and stuffed into two oversized plastic hospital bags, along with every other personal item I've accumulated since I got here, whenever that was.

Filly "get well" cards from distant relatives pretending to care, stuffed bears with

bandanas tied around their tiny necks, two pairs of shearling-lined slippers – the good kind from Australia, yoga pants you have to harvest an organ to pay for. Nothing but the best for the freakish daughter with the broken brain.

My father stands in front of the window, staring out at the Pacific. His reflection makes his hair look more salt than pepper, and the creases above his brow are more pronounced, as if he's aged ten years since my accident.

I sit on the edge of the bed, stripped clean of every trace of me, studying the white linoleum floor swirling with feathery veins of gray, and assign an animal to each of the tile squares. I trace an armadillo with my toe and imagine what it would be like to have leprosy. Armadillos are the only mammal, besides humans, to carry the disease (a fact I learned from somewhere, although I can't remember where). Brain trauma's kind of the same thing. People look at you funny then steer clear of you as if they'll catch something.

My father walks over to the desk and removes the plastic lid from the food tray. "You hardly touched your breakfast, Kiddo. Not hungry?"

I shake my head, staring at the grayish-yellow mound of scrambled eggs and a sad strip of bacon. It was gross when they brought it in earlier. It looks twice as bad now that rigor mortis has set in.

"I don't blame you," he says with a half-smile. "Hospital food sucks. Even in a top-notch place like this one." He drops the lid on the tray sending eggs flying everywhere. "Hey, what do you say we hit a Giants game when you get home? Just you and me, like we used to. I've got great seats, right behind home plate." He puts his hands together as if holding a bat and swats the air. I give him a weak smile and feign interest. My father's a class - A megadork but he means

well and I don't want to hurt his feelings.

"Why didn't she come with you?" I say as I continue to trace animals with my toe - a capybara, a puffer fish, a snowy egret. "The nurse told me earlier that I'm probably getting out today. Why didn't she come too?"

He opens his mouth as if to say something just as his cell phone rings. He stares at the screen and his smile quickly fades.

"Hello? Hi, no we're just waiting for the doc - I don't know how long. Would you like to talk to her, she's right here. You don't have two minutes to -". His tone is hushed as he faces the window again but I can still hear him. "No, Kate, we wouldn't want you to miss out on *The Today Show*. Give Matt Lauer my regards."

I watch my father's expression in the window as he hangs up on my mother - a combination of anger and exasperation. I haven't seen it since I finger painted the dog red and green twelve Christmases ago.

"Speak of the devil. That was Mom," he says, holding up his phone. "Apparently, the book tour is taking longer than expected so she won't be coming home today. But she sends her love..."

"She wrote a book? When?"

He sighs and sits down next to me. His face is worn, tired. Is it because of me? Because I'm in this place? I feel like I should apologize but I haven't the slightest clue what for.

My father takes a moment. I can tell he's choosing his words carefully. He's the CEO of Omnicron - a multi-billion-dollar software company in Silicon Valley. My father has a gift for making even the worst news sound like you've just won an all-expenses paid trip to Disneyland.



I envy his optimism.

“Yes,” he says. “She finally published that book she was working on. But then you got hurt and she put it on hold. But now... well she’s in New York. But the details aren’t important right now. Your recovery, that’s the priority. Let’s focus on bringing you home and getting you healthy, okay?” He pulls me close and kisses my forehead then rests his chin on the top of my head. “I love you, Iris. You’re my entire world. Don’t ever forget that.” There’s something weird about his tone, something I can’t ever recall hearing in my father’s voice – fear.

We wait for what seems like an eternity until finally a blitzkrieg of people in white lab coats descends on my room. A tall, not entirely unpleasant looking man with wire-rimmed glasses and sandy blond hair leads the pack. The ID badge clipped to his front pocket says *G. Moore M.D. Neuropsychology*. I quickly translate his name into *ygo lohcysporueN, D.M erooM*. *G.* If for no other reason than I can.

*D.M erooM. G* glances at me, then my father, then back at me before breaking into a wide, toothless smile. “Good morning, Iris. How are you feeling today?” He pulls up the desk chair and sits facing me.

He doesn’t wait for an answer, taking out his penlight from the front pocket of his coat and shining it in my eyes.

“I’m Dr. Moore, one of the neuropsychologists on staff here. Do you remember me? We’ve met several times over the duration of your stay. I have some medical students with me today on rounds. I hope you don’t mind.”

I shake my head and glance over at my father who gives me a reassuring smile. Dr. Moore raises his index finger and moves it in front of my face. “Follow my finger with just your eyes.”

My eyes move from left to right then up and down. “Good,” he says lifting both of my eyelids and shining his pen light in my eyes. “Iris Shaw, female, has sustained acute bilateral hippocampal damage from a hit and run a year ago resulting in a moderate form of anterograde amnesia. Ms. Nadal – would you be so kind as to explain to your classmates the difference between anterograde and retrograde amnesia?”

One of his minions, a pretty young blond with cat’s eye glasses and thin wrists steps forward and clears her throat.

“Anterograde amnesia, or short-term memory loss, is the partial or complete inability to recall recent events, memories, after a traumatic event such as a brain injury, shock, or acute psychological trauma. Alternately, retrograde amnesia inhibits the ability to recall long-term events or memories created prior to said traumatic event which new memories can still be created.” The groupies in the corner soak up her words like kitchen sponges and scribble furiously on their notepads.

Dr. Moore nods his head. “And what would you recommend as treatment?”

“Rehabilitation focused on compensatory techniques such as written reminders, journaling, audio reminders or texts to oneself. In some severe cases, reality orientation techniques or environmental techniques focusing on speech repetition of basic information and implicit tasks.” Cats Eyes smiles smugly as if she’s just received a gold star. I dislike her already.