

PROLOGUE

IT ALWAYS AMAZED LYLE how loud everything was in the middle of the night, thought it might have been his ears making up for his lack of sight as he opened his bedroom door, listening to the creaks and cracks that he swore weren't there in daytime. Maybe it was just guilt.

He pushed through the doorway, knowing that, caught now, he could still play off that he was just up to take a leak.

The adrenaline surged through him, making him feel like he had some sort of super power. He wished he had night vision. Or X-ray vision. The way he was vibrating, he thought he might even be able to travel through

time. The world was grainy black and white, a Super 8 film playing against his retinas. The only color: the digital clock floating in the kitchen past the end of the hallway, past the living room, an alien glowing green he thought he would never reach.

He stopped at his mother's door. Her snoring coming from inside was almost comical. He pulled her door shut slowly, painfully slowly, hoping for no creaks or groans—though he doubted any sounds could penetrate the ruckus she was creating. Finally, the door shut, and he slowly let the knob turn back. He waited a second, listening to the muffled snores before moving on. Partly because they were relaxing, especially dulled through the door, like waves or distant traffic. Partly because he was scared to keep walking.

Fear isn't allowed, he reminded himself. Then told himself to stop talking to himself.

Mother's door shut, he moved much more quickly to the end of the hall, through the living room and into the kitchen.

His brain reeled with the steps of the task that lie before him, running through them over and over, now skipping around, now dwelling, now picturing what was about to happen as if it were some fucked-up cooking show.

Step One: (he liked Step One, easily the only thing aside from this whole mess being over and behind him that he was, at this point, really willing to go through with; after Step One he hoped the rest of the steps would be much easier to get through, but was also the loudest, and, as he slid his fingers around the freezer drawer handle, he prayed it wouldn't rumble and click the way it always did), Get the vodka from the freezer and have a drink.

Such a task might not seem like much to any adult, but not only was Lyle fifteen, he was what his teachers called "a good kid." And what his friends called "boring." He wasn't much of a drinker. Neither was his dad, not that he knew anyway; he was always away on long hauls, home here and there, quick visits, then off again. His mom though, she rode the Binge Express

every night.

Lyle just hoped there was booze left over, or he really would call it off.

That first pull was always the worst, the way the magnetic strip pulled away, stuck more with spilled whatnot than magnetism. Things inside shifted, plastic bags—always the french fries—crinkled and popped. The ice maker decided that now, it's clamor unmuffled by the closed door, was a good time to drop its load.

But now the drawer was open. There was the bottle. Not full, but enough to do the trick. Lyle bent, grabbed it and set his prize on the counter. He took a glass from the cupboard, one of the two remaining pieces from the set of four that were printed with characters from *Dora The Explorer*. Why they had these he had no idea, but he liked using them. He opted for The Map at first, but in his heightened state, the fucking song came into his head and he decided to use Dora instead.

Drink poured.

Finally.

Swallowed. No coughing.

¡Gracias a Dios! Thank god.

He stood there. Eyes closed. Knew this would be a bad time for his mom to decide to come out for a midnight snack. Not the worst. Just stood there, palms planted on either side of the bottle and an unwitting Dora. Stood there and waited until his face began to tingle.

That's when he opened his eyes, the darkness even brighter now. He looked over his shoulder at the pulsating green numbers on the microwave: 3:17. Tentacles of heat stretched across his cheeks. He'd need to get started before he got sloppy. He drained the last gulp from the glass, bigger than he expected, and nearly launched into a coughing fit. Controlled himself.

Glass and bottle were moved away but kept close, clearing the counter.

Lyle bent and dug under the sink. He stood the first time with a towel that he unrolled on the counter. Inside, was another towel. This one he rolled back up and set off to the side with the booze.

The second time he stood—and this time his head swam—he held a

hacksaw. He'd bought it walking from the bus stop one day with money he'd pinched from his mother's purse—he knew better than trying to steal bills from his dad's wallet—a dollar at a time over a span of months, and coins he'd found in cushions, on the street or in his dad's pockets.

He set the hacksaw on the towel.

He felt like he was going to puke. Just the booze, he told himself, and even the voice inside his head was slurring. Could've been that, could've been the fear, the anticipation. Even the realization he really was about to do what he was about to do. Years spent thinking about it. Months spent planning.

Now. Here. About to go through with it.

He set his left hand on the towel, just to the left of the hacksaw.

He wiped his right palm across his chest and stopped with his hand over his heart. Its speed scared him.

He picked up the hacksaw.

The nausea returned. He ignored it.

He set the toothy blade against his wrist, just above the knobby bone of his arm, knew that despite the booze, despite the adrenaline, this was gonna hurt like a mother fucker.

He lightly trailed the blade back over the skin so the tip was just over the inside of his wrist and wondered if the first cut should be as he pushed the blade across and into his arm. Then slowly pushed it the other way, still not cutting, until the edge nearest the hilt sat on the inside of his wrist and wondered if pulling back and through was the better choice.

Unconsciously, he started to huff out his breaths.

Couldn't hear them over the roar blood in his head.

Didn't know he was sweating. Opted for the former.

Positioned the blade.

Pushed out.

Down.

Heat, more intense than that from the booze, exploded through him. He did his best to ignore it. Breaths now grunts. Grip loose from the sweat.

No. From the blood. He pushed and pulled the blade back and forth.

One towel, no matter how large and absorbent, wasn't enough.

He had some idea the anatomy he was grinding through, enough that he knew when to turn the blade a certain way when resistance was met, but not enough to know really how much damage he might be doing.

But finally—what seemed like forever in the process, now a flash in retrospect—it was done.

That was Step Two.

Step Three was added to make sure Step Two wasn't in vain.

He knew he was seconds from losing consciousness. He didn't want to die, and in his current state that was likely. He unrolled the second towel, set his arm inside, the stump still pumping, and wrapped it best he could. Then he took what used to be his left hand, (which it technically still was—if it ever was), lifted it by the fingers like dead tarantula and dropped it into the sink.

He doubted the garbage disposal would devour the hand completely but hoped it would render it to a state that made reattachment impossible.

The sound was deafening, even in his dulled world.

His super powers were fading. The night vision going dark. Time travel trembling ceasing.

As he went to the floor he heard his mom screaming. The light in the kitchen went on, but everything was still black and white. And less and less white.

When Lyle was carried out, the EMTs finally responding to the frantic 911 call that would later be played on the local news with a superimposed transcript, he mumbled something. His mother, trailing behind, drunk again—what was still in her system before she passed out and what she added while waiting for the ambulance to arrive—tried to hear him. The EMTs ignored him.

But the neighbors, gathered around, letting awe and speculation fuel their gossip, would later, as they told and retold what happened that morning to reporters to coworkers to the random stranger in the deli section, swear

they heard what he had said. Words so baffling that those who gathered around to hear the story like the neighbors gathered around as they brought Lyle out wouldn't question the accuracy of what they heard.

This was no lame game of telephone. No bastardization of words, no embellishment, nothing like that.

What they heard and what they said they heard were exactly what he said.