

I should have been happy. Everything I'd ever hoped for accomplished, but I still felt just as empty as I had 4 years ago, as though nothing had changed.

Had anything changed?

Clara was still gone. That much had remained the same. All I had now to remember her by was our son, and the library of course--the dark and empty halls I now wandered.

We'd shut our doors 3 hours ago, the last few stragglers cramming what little they could before tomorrow, having left 2 and a half hours ago, and even our most diligent janitors having gone home to their families a little under an hour ago.

I was the only breathing soul still within these walls for the night.

I should be heading home now. Jacob will be waiting.

I considered what was left to do before truly closing shop for the night, looking for any excuse I could find to not leave just yet, to not have to go home and face my son whose face it was a miracle I still remembered.

I need to go home.

I cast aside the ideas I'd manifested on the spot of taking inventory, weeding out the decaying books, anything that could keep me here longer and headed to my office to grab my coat and keys and begin the drive of shame back home.

I fumbled with the keychain to find the one for my office only to realize I'd left it unlocked anyway as I tried the door. *Bumbling idiot*, I reprimanded myself.

The office was a dump. A human being better collected than myself would have assumed that it had been broken into judging by the unlocked door, the papers scattered across the floor, and the presence of nothing valuable, well, **almost** nothing valuable.

I found my car keys beneath a stack of papers that lay in disarray atop the expensive mahogany desk that Clara had bought for me as a birthday gift when this library still presented itself as a colorful dream rather than a far more muted reality. The desk had been monstrous in size, the plan having been to seat the two of us as we worked side by side, or across from one another, whichever worked best, there being more than enough room to share either way. It'd matter little, however, as the plan had been for us to spend as little time in the office as possible, and as much of it walking around the library, helping our guests wherever and whenever it was needed.

The simple digital alarm clock atop the desk read, "11:23 PM."

I wonder if Jacob is still up. He shouldn't be. School starts in...God Damn it. When does school start for him? Is it 7 or 8?

I shook the questions away, not that they mattered, *point being that he shouldn't be up at this time anyway, and I should probably head home to put him to sleep if he is.*

I struggled in the search for my coat, immediately checking the coat hanger on the door where any sane individual would keep it, but knowing myself, to find what I was looking for, I'd have to think more outside the box.

I searched under my bed, in the drawers of my desk, and hanging from the ceiling fan until I eventually found it draped over the minifridge, as though it was attempting to shroud its existence from me.

Pulling it from the minifridge, a number of other items that had been concealed beneath it scattered around the room, the most notable of which was a day by day calendar which still rested on February 19th, myself surprised at first that I'd diligently flipped that thing daily for that much of the year, until I recalled quickly enough that I had just flipped through those first 40 days of the year when that day came, a sudden spout of guilt washing over me for having put Jacob's Christmas gift to waste like that.

That same sensation of guilt tore at me again, myself thankful that I had no way of gauging to what extent I'd feel guilty as, fortunately enough, I'd happened to forget what date it was anyway. *Is it August? September perhaps?* I knew it was no longer Summer as students had once again begun flocking into the premises, though how longer ago, I had no way of remembering, until, that is, I remembered the day that was approaching.

Tomorrow is my wife's anniversary.

It's September 22nd today then.

My coat hanging lazily from one arm, having failed to completely dress myself, I stumbled over to my desk, whisking aside the useless ledgers, inventories, bills, and pink slips that lined the top, finding the portrait underneath.

She wore her white mermaid wedding dress, her auburn red hair tied in a beautiful braid that, fortunately for all who were present, no longer had its magnificence shrouded by the veil, letting her face in all its beauty flow free as she stood there in that photo, clutching me in an enthusiastic embrace. I stood there as well, not even noticing the camera, my eyes focused on her, well-trimmed ginger hair, clean-shaven face, fancy two-piece suit with a red tie as red had always been her favorite color, not a care in the world save for the woman in front of me. Just two lovebirds caught in the gazes of one another, nothing else in the world mattering. Not the cameraman, not the beautiful Spring Day, not even our families gathered to witness that union, only the two of us finally rendered inseparable in the eyes of the law and God.

I blew on the portrait, dispersing the dust mites that'd settled on that perfect memory and flipped it over, revealing the text on the back that read as it always had for the last 17 years:

Clara and Brennan Doyle

April 12th, 2002

I was a handsome man then, I thought with a smile, becoming acutely aware then of my unkempt beard, shaggy hair, withered skin, a shadow of the man who had married my wife. Where age had proved itself far from my ally, it'd accompanied her with grace up until the day she'd died, 4 years ago tomorrow.

I groaned, setting the portrait back on the desk, face down, not wanting any more a reminder of how far I'd fallen, and, worse than anything else, everything I'd lost.

Every year since, on that same day, I'd drink 'till I woke up the day after with the anniversary long behind me. If I managed to wake with no memory of the day before, all the better.

Jacob will be asleep by now. He's a good kid.

I looked around the room, my eyes settling one more on the black minifridge in the corner that my stained wool coat had been attempting to dutifully hide from me, knowing what may transpire.

Tradition's tradition after all.

I opened the minifridge, that padlock on the handle that would normally give me a second chance to reconsider already undone, likely from my last binge.

Dear God, please tell me I still have some left.

Inside, it's beautiful glow welcoming me like a siren's song while stranded at sea, sat a half-full bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey.

Jackpot, I chuckled to myself as I thought it, my already tipsying mind finding the pun hilarious as I grabbed the bottle by the head and pulled it out of that sad black box that by no means was a fitting home for it, not when a new one far more welcoming awaited it.

I fished through my drawers, finding the shot glasses easily enough, all the while thanking my past self for having the temperance to not finish the other bottle, for being willing to share with his future self.

I poured two shots, one for myself, naturally, and the other for, well, I wasn't sure quite who, Clara, Jacob, any other invisible compatriot who'd opt to be my drinking buddy right now. I suppose it didn't matter as I'd end up drinking theirs anyway when it came down to it.

"Bottom's up," I stated as I clanked glasses with a fictitious companion, downing the first shot, reveling in the warmth as it slid down my gullet.

I couldn't remember the last time I drank. That wasn't to say it was a long time ago, but moreso to say that last time I'd gone drinking, it'd clearly worked as intended.

The familiar taste worked its way through me, catching me in a warm embrace that I had oh-so missed.

I remember somebody else's embrace. An embrace that had also been warm, comforting, there for me when nothing else was. And I remember the warm embrace that consumed her, the one that held onto her and never let go as of 4 years ago- I looked at the clock. 11:33. *4 years ago tomorrow*, I finished the thought, it still being today.

And right before we were about to open too.

I downed another shot before I allowed that train of thought to ferment.

The buzz was working its way to me, I could already tell, but along with it, some of the more negative effects of whiskey that left me wishing I had something even stronger to simply put me out of it all the quicker.

I still saw our youthful faces on that portrait, the unmatched joy in our juvenile eyes, all the wonders of the world ahead of us, neither of us expecting just how much a difference one spark could make. *I hardly drank back then*, I thought. When I did, I did so responsibly, enough so to the point that Clara would make it a recurring subject of her jokes about me, the euphemistic "stick up my ass" rendering me the "failed Irishman" she always painted me as.

The jokes aside, I think that, as time went by, especially after Jacob was born, she came to become more content with it. While so many of our friends went on to lead that involved alcohol abuse as part of the disaster recipe in one way or another, we found ourselves spared from that.

As much as she may have found relief in that however, I knew a part of her always had still wished for me to have a "wild" side.

I chuckled, my head turning to the portrait on the desk. "Proud of me, Clara?" There was no response. Obviously. What had I been expecting? She couldn't see after all as the portrait had been laid facing the mahogany, Clara's eyes, I imagined, scanning it for any cracks, stains, splinters, or another other faults the same way that she had in those hours that felt like days at the Havertys, myself never thinking we'd leave as she meticulously gauged every detail in her head, deciding whether or not it was a "worthy" gift for me. I never thought we'd leave the store but, eventually of course, we had, myself suggesting on the car ride home that perhaps next time she wanted to get me a gift, she exclude me from the shopping side of it.

Another shot, this one even better than the last. *Damn*, I thought, savoring the taste, or perhaps it was the slow departure of my consciousness that I was celebrating. Hard to say, really. *I might just finish the bottle after all.*

I reached for the bottle, the act of doing so a bit too quick for my current state of mind, sent me into a daze that required a firm grasp on my desk and reality to snap me out of, or rather, back into reality.

I chuckled, pulling myself back up, the desk nearly tipping over in the process, papers falling off, an old mug rolling down onto the carpeted floor, the bottle threatening to meet a similar demise had I not secured a desperate grasp around it at the last moment, the small quantity of liquid still splashing around within.

The quantity still within the bottle remained in something of a gray area of my decision-making process, not helped by the muddled state it found itself in. The quantity of liquid was above the mark at which one could non-hesitantly drink the rest and obtain a feeling of satisfaction, but it was still below an amount that could reasonably get me drunk on a future occasion when a day such as today next rolled around. *It's enough to get me a head start next time, sure. On the other hand, it would be a darned shame to leave a job half-finished.* My mind was locked in a state of civil strife, two factions arguing for different outcomes of this current predicament while my body simply sat in the center of my office, both hands on my desk for support, eyes locked on the bottle.

I know what I want. Isn't that all that matters. A hand left the desk and I nearly fell forward as a result of it, just barely catching myself with my elbow as my hand securely clasped the bottle before me. I suppose, 'securely' would be giving myself too much credit. Between the bottle's dew and my hand's sweat, my grip on it felt questionable at best.

It didn't matter. I'd made up my mind. I looked to the shot glass for where I'd left it on the desk. It wasn't there any longer, likely having fallen to the floor along with many other of my workstation's contents. *Whatever.* I was frankly relieved by the elimination of the middleman standing between me and sweet relief.

I brought the opening of the bottle to my lip, a haphazard seal created between the two entities as more liquid, I'm pretty sure, ran down my mouth and neck, sliding down into my shirt, than actually entered down my throat. It made little different. It'd been enough. The last thing I remember seeing before my vision went black was the ring of dew on the desk left by the bottle, thinking to myself, *Damnit. Clara's gonna be pissed.*

I wish I could say that waking up had been a more pleasurable experience than knocking out, but the truth was that such was rarely the case. For anybody, I imagined, especially as the misery of the morning after was normally possessed an inverse relationship with the degree to which one enjoyed themselves the night prior. And I...I had enjoyed myself.

It was only natural then that my enjoyment forbid itself to extend until after my period of consciousness, the duration of which was unknown to me until the red LED

lights of my alarm clock shone in stark contrast to the otherwise pitch black of my surroundings, threatening to blind me.

1:34 AM

I hadn't been out long. The fact that I was still drunk further reinforced that fact.

The effort of getting up, attempting to lift myself by my hands in knees, proved insurmountable and obstacle that I pondered the possibility of letting myself sink back down to the soggy carpet in a puddle of what seemed to be a grotesque blend of whiskey, salvia, and potentially and insubstantial quantity of puke.

The smell verified the latter.

Humorously enough, it was precisely the realization that I was in a puddle of my own puke that brought images of home to mind.

I need to get back, I realized, far later than a likely should have. *A drink and a period of unconsciousness late.*

I need to be home. I should at least be there by the time Jacob wakes up in the morning.

I worked myself to try and reach a stand, but was met with the same degree of success, or rather, lack thereof as I fell to the ground for a second time.

I could already see it now, him waking up without me, nowhere in the house, his probable disappointment that'd ensue, mixed with a lack of begrudged expectance.

He hates me. Doesn't he?

Would I blame him if he did?

I managed to maneuver my body into some odd midway state between a crawl and a kneel, reaching up to the top of the desk as my hands scanned across the surface for my keys, rummaging through all else they came across, sending them down to the floor below, among them papers, pens, and a coaster until they finally drifted over the metallic objects I knew to be mine.

I clutched them, pulling them down to the floor atop me where I lay. *Gotcha!*

A small victorious chuckle emerged from my lips, pathetic, but still proud of my meager accomplishment.

I gave myself a few minutes longer to eyes on the ceiling, a foolish effort on my part being made to count the full extent of bumps and other imperfections lining it.

God Damnit, Brennan.

Get up!

The second voice in my head, while mine, didn't feel as though it belonged to me. It sounded, different, if that made any sense. *No, of course it doesn't make any sense. I'm drunk. It's no supposed to make sense.* And so I made nothing of Clara's voice as the echo of her order still reverberated across the interior of my skull, but I did heed her command.

As one might expect a hulking beast such as an elephant or rhinoceros to emerge from a deep slumber, the effort of me doing so was prime time television quality for any local nature channels interested in examples of some of the slow deaths that certain animals face, unable to acclimatize to their environments, unable to move on.

Eventually though, with a solid grip on the leg of the desk, I did manage, as a matter of fact, to pull myself up. By no means a scenic endeavor, it accomplished what it was meant to do, and I found myself, with the assistance of the desktop, balancing myself atop my own two feet.

Then came the test of letting go.

Letting go. I chuckled. *Never was quite good at that.*

I released my hand from the desk, and sure enough, I wasn't good at it. I threatened to fall back down to the ground until I just barely stopped myself against the wall. *Or maybe I can just stay here for a while.*

I had to wait a while for my confidence in myself to rebuild. Fortunately, in my drunken state, it was doing so at a far quicker rate than it would have for any sober man, and I found my stumbling against the wall, using it for support and balance as I made a b-line for the door, reaching it, and throwing all of my weight against it only to bounce back and recall that I had locked it upon entering before.

Now leaning against it, my breath creating a screen of fog on the small window of my office door that obscured my sight of what was beyond, I fumbled through my keys, even giving myself a small cut in the process before finally inserting the correct one into the door knob, twisting it to the side in a motion that for some reason or other, chose to conscript by entire body in doing so, and now saw the weight of my body against it achieve the desired effect as it flung open. I was thankful, then, for the unreasonably tight grip I had had on the doorknob as it was the one thing that prevented me from immediately falling to the wooden floor beyond as it flung wide open, daring to take me with it. And while it was successful in dragging me out into the hall, my hold on the door kept me upright, still above the floor, and I considered that as close to a sense of accomplishment that I'd be coming to any time soon.

There was a sharp pain, I noticed then, coming from my right leg, and I looked down to see that indeed, at the pocket, was a splotch of blood where the dress pant had torn, the metal of the key glistening through. "Damn it," I cursed to myself at the sight of it. They were good pants.

I readjusted the key in my pocket only for it to fall back down onto the ground. Using the doorknob for support once again, I did in fact manage to recover it after nearly tumbling to over, the process of rising once again proving rather difficult. I transferred the key to my other pocket, considering now the realism of the possibility of me driving myself home. It was perhaps the only rational direction my mind had taken in the last few hours, and I suppose it was a good thing that it was on a subject as important as determining whether I'd dare attempting to bring myself home in the state I was in.

Maybe it's better I stay the night. I can tell Jacob I was working. I must have considered myself a genius as my mind thought through the reason of it. Getting home late, the evidence of my activity would be clear. The car would likely be parked haphazardly, the hedge bound to take another beating, the front door would be left unlocked, or hell, possibly even slightly ajar, my clothes would be scattered across the floor, and a hung-over wreck who stank of alcohol would be collapsed on the bed, drool flowing out of his mouth, only half-undressed. Maybe this way, I could try and stay some face, spend a night on one of the couches, go home while Jacob was at school, try and sell the illusion that his father wasn't the drunken mess we both knew him to be.

Shit.

I had settled on my decision, and a pang of guilt managed to bypass my half-conscious state, just enough to render the state of mind I was in all the worse.

Just get some sleep, damnit. You'll feel better tomorrow.

I then realized it already was tomorrow, but decided not to chase that thought, the fact that it was nearly 2 in the morning, and I was still stumbling around the halls of my library. *What am I doing with my life?*

The thought of sleeping had never seemed so appealing to me before. My drunkenness was fading, replaced now by the feeling that were always best left for the morning after, which, now that I thought about it, it technically was. It was a union of regret and self-hate, one that pursued me relentlessly no matter how many twists and turns I took down the winding halls of the library, intent on keeping up the chase until I found I solid surface to pass out on.

I imagine navigating the building would have been rather difficult for anybody aside from the person who'd built this place. I knew where the fiction ended, and nonfiction began. I knew the subcategories I passed by of 'history', 'biographies', etc. I knew that this alleyway of bookcases I strolled past would lead me to the conference rooms you could rent by the half-hour, and how the next would lead you to the computer labs still sporting now-antiquated Dell desktops that just barely managed to run Windows 10. 'Barely' was good enough for me, but I doubted it would have been good enough for Clara. She'd spend every last dime she made from this place to make it all the better. It had never been about the profit this place would turn, no, it had always been about giving people the library one could only dream about. The kind only **she** could dream about.

And I knew where the proper library ended, and her wing began.

I wanted to think that the cement wall that had been erected did a good enough job of not appearing 'out of place.' I'm sure it had for a while for the investors who had seen the building when it was still whole, for family who had been given the honors of the first tour across our, or, rather, Clara's grand estate. It always had seemed more her passion than mine, at least from the beginning. Somewhere along the way, it had become mine too, and today, it was only mine. The relationship went both ways. I was all this poor building had, and it was all I had. There was a bond there, both of us left halves of a whole after she passed.

I wondered if maybe I'd overcompensated when decorating the wall. I'd managed to paint it the same 6185-31 "Chanterelle Beige" as the rest of the building. Even then, it hadn't quite felt like enough, so I lined it with shelves, going out of my way to request more book donations that would fit the genre of whichever categories they were nearest. It hadn't been easy to find more donations of science textbooks, and I'd even had to fish into my own pockets for what was needed to fill those shelves. Then it had been posters, the type you'd find in a closing school's rummage sale: decorated periodic tables, smiling vials and test tubes for the kids, and no shortage of puns reading, "A moment of science, please" or "Think like a proton and stay positive."

I'd received no complaints. Nobody else noticed the flaws, the cracks, the hollowness of it. Nobody except for me. I imagine no small part of it was that I knew what was beyond, an entire wing of the library reduced to rubble that had been too costly to repair, especially as we had been so close to opening day.

There hadn't been the time or money to restore what had been lost. There was no money in the world to replace **who** had been lost. And so a wall had been erected where the Aberdeen Fire Department had managed to halt the flames' advance, locking the past behind an impenetrable barrier.

Little good it did.

I looked at the walls again now, decorated as they were, they still felt empty. I had to be sure that today was different. Clara would never forgive me otherwise.

My eyes scanning the wall as they were, I felt as though, even in the pitch black, I could notice every detail, see the faults, the cracks, knowing what was past there: emptiness, ash, the past.

I found a gap in the wall, in the negative space between the compensating posters and paintings, allowing a hand to drift to it, lying there as it rested, feeling what I was surprised to be warmth, one possibly capable of being fooled into believing that the fires still raged beyond the cement. Warmth was not all the wall possessed for me, however, delivering in addition to it, a soft thump as though my hand were resting on a chest, her chest, feeling the beating heart beneath it. *Her heart. It is her heart beyond this wall.*

The library, it had been her priority since she'd first conceived of the notion. Even in Cancun on our honeymoon, shore on either side of us, a cool breeze the only thing to ward off the sun, the rings on our fingers still feeling out of place yet right at the same time, her mind couldn't seem to escape home. It was not out of desperate desire to return, but merely a grand plan unfolding before her very eyes, obscuring the white sand, and rolling waves ahead. The beach, for all its beauty, held little value for her in those halcyon days as she found herself getting lost in a grand image she unveiled to me that one night as she prodded me out of my slumber only to whisper into my right ear, "Let's open a library."

She didn't wait for me to speak before saying, "I won't take 'no' for an answer."

I think I'd been too exhausted to have even processed just what it was she was asking and do not deny that I had likely answered with something along the lines of "sure, honey" as I pulled the sheets up to my chin in a desperate endeavor to return to my slumber. By the next morning, however, I remembered not a thing, understandably caught by surprise when the content of morning's breakfast of hashed browns, eggs, and bacon was an all-encompassing plan of just **what** this library would be.

I asked her if she'd slept the night before.

And through bloodshot eyes that somehow possessed within them all the energy of a girl half her age, she shot a beaming smile at me and shook her head, and just like that, she had plotted out the entire rest of her life.

Indeed, she had had it all planned out. Not a day ahead of her proved to be without purpose. She had done at such a young age what few were capable of doing even later into their lives. She'd figured out her purpose, what she wanted to dedicate the rest of her life to. The 'rest of her life', however, would prove not to be very long as she'd die at the age of 38, pieces of her, I was sure, still left behind this wall.

Died surrounded by her dream.

Maybe it was a mercy, I considered for the briefest of moments before immediately sending myself into a self-inflicted emotional beatdown as I considered the horror of what I'd just pondered.

My hand still against the wall, I leaned forward, letting my forehead come in contact with the barrier, the thump rocking my head back and forth in what I was now realizing to likely be the effect of the alcohol more than the actual movements of the wall, the warmth of it likely no different either.

So then why do I see a light?

A crack in the wall, a hole, a splint torn away, whatever it was, an imperfection, an imperfect gap in the otherwise flawless armor, and beyond it, a night.

My first thought was that of a vengeful inferno, come to finish the job, or at the very least, that of a persistent one, still burning itself out to this day, locked behind these walls, dying, but clinging on to life.

The light, however, as I noticed, was still, not dancing around the room, grasping for air as a flame might, but still in place, and with hesitation, I forced myself to lower my eye to this breach in the wall, to try and discern just what it was that lay beyond.

The light, by all accounts, was blinding, in stark contrast with the rest of my surroundings that had been shrouded in darkness, the only light source available being the waning crescent of a moon that still sat high in the sky. So I knew beyond all shadow of a doubt that the light was real, acting almost as a laser pointer the way it shone through that pixel-perfect gap in the wall, intensified into creating such a solid stream.

It was an effort both line up my eye perfectly with the gap and force it to remain open against the outflow of illumination. Shapes merged with one another as my eyes labored to adjust to the new surroundings, eventually managing to do so. I could have been confident then that what I was looking into was a mirror. It wasn't that I found myself face to face with myself or something along those lines as I had no doubt that such a revelation would send me into a maddened frenzy, but rather I was met with an image of my own surroundings within the library, but now transposed to the other side of the wall, well-lit, alive, whole. Shelves, books lining them, matched the placement of how they stood on my own end, perfectly aligned to match with only some few minor adjustments, one of which, as I could just barely make out to read, was the genre category, being far more specifically labelled as "Organic Chemistry" rather than simply "Science."

I now found myself in the midst of questioning just what in God's name I was looking at, if, unbeknownst to me, a rival library had set up shop within the ruins of what had once been part of my own, somehow securing a deed to that section of the structure, renovating it, and insisting upon modeling themselves after me. The stupidity of the possibility had no effect on convincing me otherwise as I was now determined that such was the case. At least, I was for the next few moments as I considered a number of curses and shouts to deliver through the pea-sized passageway until rationality took hold once again and convinced me otherwise and alter even managed to make me realize just how stupid of an idea it was that I was bearing witness to another library.

You're drunk, I told myself, but admitting to being drunk didn't extinguish the light that was very much still shining through.

You're dreaming. But the pinch I promptly delivered myself did not, in fact, wake me up from the supposed slumber, but only achieved the effect of leaving a red mark on my right forearm.

So what the hell is happening to me?

And what the hell am I looking at?

“Hello?” I called through, placing my mouth to the whole, desperate enough for an answer to quite literally be placing my mouth to a random hole in the wall, not at all considering what could be waiting on the other side. “Hello?” I called again, now being reminded of the security cameras watching the premises at night, affirming that it would probably be in my best interests that I delete any footage of tonight because my security staff arrives tomorrow, *no*, this morning.

I consider the most logical solution, simply leaving right now, going to sleep right now, deal with this in the morning, ask somebody else to verify what I’m seeing, but the prospect of just leaving that that gap sitting there, an open eye slit into another world on the other side, how can I just be expected to fall asleep with that chief on my mind. *I can’t*, I answer myself.

It is thus out of the question to simply let this stand, and so as I pull away from the hole, marching through the twisting and turning halls, now with a purpose, a man with a mission.

I find the custodian’s closet easy enough, testing the doorknob to find it, as expected, locked, before reaching into my pocket once again in search of the key chain, ignoring the vague moisture of blood, removing the essential item.

It takes me a number of attempts to discern the correct key, a number of them finding themselves jammed in the lock, prompting me to perform a number of “unusual” methods to remove them not excluding planting my feet against the door to unjam them, not the slightest bit concerned in my drunken state of stripping the key or irrevocably damaging the lock itself.

In time, however, the proper key was found, and the knob twisted open, allowing the door to turn outwards, nearly hitting me square in the forehead as it did so, myself just narrowly avoiding it.

The thought of exiting the building, circling around to try and find any other entrance into new wing of my own library, never occurred to me. I knew where my question lay, and I intended on reaching it by the most direct means available to me. While I found myself sorely lacking in heavy equipment such as a sledgehammer, I had somehow managed to convince myself that a normal hammer would do just fine, finding my arm reaching for the toolkit I knew to contain one within, making the return journey now to the site in question, foolishly believing I possessed all the tools necessary in my disposal to get to the bottom of this great mystery.

I returned to find that same nuisance of a gap just where it’d been before, the light still shining through, exposing some great new world on the other side, some pesky and unwanted roommate that had chosen to make themselves at home within my own domain. *The vanity of it.*

A light shining where no light belonged, where the only light that had once made the wing whole now extinguished from the world, that light’s name having been Clara.

And so I swung the hammer into wall, finding that it ended up having the effect that it by no means should have, the paint peeling, plaster flying, concrete shattering in the wake of the tool I possessed.

The conflict between logic and reality, a possible indication that something was awry, fell weightless onto that blind mind of mine, and I sent another swing.

The light of the invader grew, dousing me in its brilliance, something I sincerely detested as anger now drove those continuing swings. Anger not of the far-away thought of some unrealistic competitor dwelling beneath my very nose, by an anger of not knowing what I was looking at, of not knowing what was right in front of me, of confusion, of being left in the dark when that which I understood shone so bright.

I swung again now, the clang of hammer on concrete reverberating through my establishment only to be replaced by the following swing, the gap growing wider and wider, myself unable to see what lay beyond through a mist of debris and dust, my lungs begging me to stop, but my mind muted, heart the only thing driving me now.

I swung more, going higher, going lower, going wider. I was creating an entryway for myself, I now realized, my brain taking only a temporary hiatus from its vacation to realize that much. The minutes passed by as I continued to wage my war against the wall before me, engulfed in a cloud of my own making, and finally, my swinging came to an end. *Why?* I couldn't be sure, but as the smoke cleared, the fog of war retreating to unveil what was left of my opponent, I realized what my heart understood that I hadn't: a gap now big enough to fit me through, an entryway, so to speak, now existed where only a small peephole had reigned once before.

Though burning eyes, screaming lungs, and racing heart dominated my being, I still found myself calm enough to take the assessment of what lay before me, in fact, quite as I'd expected, a near mirror copy of my own domain, yet somehow still vaguely different, the sign labelling the shelves only one of them, but something still about it, beyond the contrast of light against dark, proving to be a far different establishment than my own.

I heard the hammer clatter to the floor, unaware that I had even dropped it, my brain now playing catch-up with its owner, still trying to make heads or tails of the brutal destruction that had just passed

I stood motionless for a small while before the destruction I had wrought, panting for breath, choking on dust, nothing about what I was witnessing making sense, mind pleading for me to stay still, to not take another step, but my brain had long ago lost the war with my body. The rebellion was no feat of tonight alone, but the result of a civil war that had passed long ago, one that had sent me spiraling into drunkenness and depression along so many other things.

My leg moved forward, carrying me ahead, and I followed suit, placing the next ahead of me, closing the gap between me and the passageway, ducking my head to enter

through, a small piece of debris landing on my shoulders as I shrugged through, finally entering onto the other side, bathed by a welcoming light, and I was within.

It was the library, nearly the exact same as mine, not a reflection, I noticed now, but a continuation.

I turned back around, half expecting some grand cliché of the entrance I had used to entered now being removed from the world, sentencing me to remain here, but it still stood strong, the darkness on the other end now appearing a black hole, a hell from which there was no escape. *That's my home, so what is this, so full of light?*

My mind followed the walls, now noticing that they didn't adorn the same 6185-31 "Chanterelle Beige", the cheap alternative I now remembered to Clara's original plans of thematic wallpapers decorating each section appropriately, something, I was now realizing, this place had pulled off, and quite well at that. Around the hole I had created, such a wallpaper prevailed, decorated by chemical formulas, Lewis Diagrams, and other miscellaneous scientific topics that I had long since forgotten since my university days.

I looked back to the shelves now, not by any means demonstrating the same shameful shortages that brought my own library down beneath the rest of the fold, never quite able to secure the donations I needed, having none of Clara's diligence or charisma when approaching such issues. This establishment here, however, it possessed all that was needed, the concept of negative space moot as the books rested on one another alone for support, no need of bookends to keep them standing, kept standing in solidarity with one another.

My eyes looked around, falling on everything else, on the stairway that led to a second story, one leading deeper underground as well.

Looking around now, the memories began to flood back, of these halls when they'd been flocking with investors and inspectors alike, the former scanning for profitability, the latter for destructibility, coming to the mutual agreement between the two of them that the building they stood was worthy of high praise.

Clara and I had celebrated that night with a \$450 bottle of Dom Pérignon Rosé Vintage Champagne. She had managed to dull my straight edge that night and had caught me on the precipice of tipsiness, a discovery she never let go of and continued to hold over my head jokingly for the remainder of her days, which, I suppose, had proven rather limited by the end of it all.

The temperature of my surroundings had either dropped a stark 20 degrees or I had finally come to understand just where it was that I was standing, the shiver running down my spine indeed indicative that it was the latter as I found myself in the halls of how this place had stood just, whole and alive, just over 4 years ago.

The shelves may have been fuller now, the wallpaper finally spanning across the entire length of the walls, the lighting system fully operational, but the essence was the

same. I was standing in the wing of the library that had burned down, no sign of ruin around me however, finding it whole, untouched, as though I'd stepped 4 years back in time, back to when things were simpler, easier, yet untouched by the pain and cruelty of the real world, the two of us still locked in a dreamlike bliss that wouldn't subside, everything turning up our way, the world ours for the taking, no sign here of the sobering event that had taken that youthful vigor away from me, and the life away from her.

I was motionless, I realized, my mind and body suddenly in agreement as neither had any idea of how to proceed. It was now a matter of which would awaken first and drive me forward. It proved to be the body as my brain protested against the sudden continuation of my movements as I stepped forward, deeper into the world that shouldn't have existed, *not any longer*.

Viewing my surroundings, nothing spoke against her touch, her influence. There were no posters filling the otherwise blank beige walls, her having been relying on the wallpaper alone to make everything fit just perfectly, and so it had, not resorting to my cost-effective and simplistic means of overly relying on decorations to fill the void. The shelves had been spaced and labeled far more appropriately and diligently by category, as first indicated by the existence of "Organic Chemistry" and now being seen as well through the presence of other such domains as "Astronomy", "Biology", etc.

There was no security system either, I could see now, and my mind once again found itself being pulled into the folds of time as she'd protested my consideration of purchasing a SimpliSafe security system. I'd attempted to argue her out of her naivete, citing how the average loss rate of libraries due to theft is 5.3%. She'd only countered me in stating that if somebody ran off with some book, document, map, etc., it'd only meant that we'd done our jobs and they found what they'd been looking for.

At the end of that argument, as I normally had done with so many others, I conceded, her beaming joy at me having given in to her proposed 'honor' system carrying her on weightless feet throughout the day until an investor meeting 2 weeks later had sobered her prospects of such, and a security system was indeed purchased.

I ended up realizing that I'd come out on top by the end of it all. I'd gotten my way, and still managed to be the hero who stood by her and her ideals. That wasn't to say I didn't feel some small bit guilty at the end of the day for my two-facedness, however, but her way of 'thanking me' later that night was sufficient to have me come to the assessment that the guilt had been worth it.

I took the stairs leading upwards to the second story, finding, just as she'd planned, the history section, separated by ways of time period and nationality, decorated as such by flags, paintings, and a few mementos she planned to procure, by no means enough to rival that of a history museum, but just enough to give the premises that extra 'flair.'

What the hell is this all? I was forced to ask myself. *What am I seeing?*

I had been positive I'd been dreaming, and just as I'd done before, I pinched myself again, still being met with no awakening.

This can't be real. None of this can be real.

But the sight of the scene before me, the sound of the smooth piano playing in the distance, the scent of fresh and polished wood in the air, the touch of the handrail as I descended back down, it was more real than the majority of the 'real' world was to me anymore anyway.

What I think startled me the most, however, it felt alive around me. Despite being empty, nobody to wander the halls, the soft jazz continued to play over the speakers, the lack of dust spoke of no sense of disuse, the light still shone brightly, and I felt as though hundreds of beings were moving around me, myself just unable to see them, the fault being my own, as it so often was.

I wondered if it was memory, but there was no such memory to match. The day that family had visited, it'd still felt empty, Clara nearly jumping in her shoes as she told me excitedly about how much she hoped people would like it all, myself assuring her every time she expressed such a concern, so, every 5 minutes, that her fears were misplaced, that people would, in fact, love it, just as our families were doing right now.

Ever her in-laws, my own parents, had to admit, albeit begrudgingly, that it was quite a sight. They'd been, and there was no misunderstanding it, reluctant to accept the idea of a library. I'd graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a master's in business, and a non-profit library wasn't quite the direction my parents had believed I'd go down, imagining me instead at the head of some entrepreneurial enterprise, or at the very least, in a leadership position of some globe-spanning mega-corporation. Instead, however, I was opening a library.

They'd detested the idea when I first told them, the news having been given to them far away from Clara to be sure as I had partially expected the reaction they'd have. They made a number of clauses to support their claims, stating that there was no money to be had, that this was her idea, her vision, that it wasn't what I had planned, and that it wouldn't make me happy. I said 'yes' to all of their statements save for the last. I was happy then, as I was happy years later when our families were visiting. And they were happy too. The years had softened their views of endeavor, and they gladly presented a wide array of 'housewarming' gifts as they called them for Clara and me to ornament our shared office with.

But no, it wasn't that memory that I was recalling, the life of the library felt now far exceeding what it had been that day, despite that day having been real and this, this, this I had no idea about.

I had forgotten just how much of the library had been lost to time. Now looking around, I was beginning to remember.

It had been quite a sizeable portion of the library that had been burned to the ground that night. Nearly half of it.

I'd been home looking after Jacob.

She stayed after hours.

I'd gotten an alert on my phone from my security system that there had been strange activity near the door. I figured that it had just been that Clara was leaving, but I decided to check the footage anyway.

Instead of it having been Clara leaving, I was met with the stuttering footage of fully equipped firefighters barging in through the door, breaking it down in the process, desperate to reach their target. That target ended up proving to be the generator room in the basement which had been labelled the source of the electrical fire as per the library's post-mortem analysis.

I got the call while already racing to the library, leaving Jacob to hold down the fort, already asleep, that night, unbeknownst to me, setting a trend that would come to dominate our relationship for the years to come.

They wouldn't let me enter the building when I arrived, for obvious reasons, instead being forced back into the crowd of onlookers, first responders paying no mind to the fact that it was my building lit ablaze, my wife still inside of there as I sure as hell didn't find her in the crowd nor by the ambulances the first time I had managed to break through only to be restrained by police once again.

I prayed that she wasn't in there. That perhaps, by some miracle, she'd already left to go home, the fire, whatever the cause, conveniently having only started once she was outside of the premises, but I had my doubts, something telling me she was in there, praying with every part of my being to whatever god was listening that she was alright.

After an hour, the fire had been successfully contained, and after another hour, extinguished. At no point in those two hours had anybody come out of the building except to call on additional firefighters to enter the fray and/or rotate out.

By the end of it still, all those who had entered the building once the fire began were those who would emerge. A chorus of cheers emerged from the crowd as they witnessed the same number of heroes to enter the building proceed to emerge, battle-scarred, panting, wheezing, but still alive, leaving the battlefield behind them victorious, the crowd unaware that there had, in fact, been somebody who didn't emerge from there.

On normal occasion, I doubted there'd have been a wait, but looking back on it from an objective standpoint, I could see why it did. It made sense for them to have waited for the crowd to disperse before removing the body, seeing no need to disturb the rounds of applause they'd be receiving, kill the positive mood at having seen the AFD successfully douse yet another raging inferno.

While everybody else dispersed to go back home, return to their vehicles, the excitement having ended, I was the only one left as the EMTs were called into the building, waiting there still when they brought the stretchers inside, knowing what was happening, who they were rushing in there for, but the benefit of ignorance still allowing me to pray, to plead, to beg to however was listening that it wasn't what I thought.

When they brought her out, I actually had thought that my prayers had been answered. I had been overjoyed, as sick as it sounded, to see the body that was hauled out of her.

That's not Clara, I remember thinking to myself when I saw the ashen black body contorted into a hideous pose, so disturbing, so inhuman that I was positive it wasn't her. I remember laughing out in relief when the body was carried on the stretcher to the ambulance and promptly hauled away. Prior to leaving, one of the EMTs had approached me and asked if I knew who the victim was.

I'd stated that I hadn't, and they asked what I was still doing hanging around here.

When I told them I was waiting for my wife who was still in the building, they asked me if I was fine to drive and when I answered confused that I was, they told me to follow them to the hospital.

It was a surprise to myself that I had been in a clear enough mental state to drive when I hadn't yet even pieced together that I was following the ambulance hauling my dead wife, her body so destroyed that not even her own husband could recognize her.

All I could think about at the time was wondering how Clara was going to find me if I was at the hospital and not at home. I had my cellphone, sure, but notwithstanding, I didn't have time to be going to the hospital, I had to be back home for when Clara returned so we could get as much of full a night of sleep as possible before the library opened that morning.

Instead, rather, of being at home with my family as I should have been, or still at the library waiting for her to come out, I was waiting in a brightly lit hallway at the Kirk Army Health Clinic, still eagerly counting down the hours until opening, the fact that the library was a burning wreck escaping my mind, the fact that my wife was dead in the next room and I was simply waiting for the dental x-rays to be matched so they could confirm it was her still not having worked their way into my mind.

When they came out and told me that it was, in fact, my wife in there, my first reaction was to ask them if they could tell her to come out since we really needed to be heading home.

Everything between then and finally coming to face the reality that my wife was dead is a blur.

I think it was only when I had to wake Jacob up to tell him that his mother was dead that it finally made sense to me. Before then, it was obligation. The lab technician had

told me that I should go home and tell my son and be there with him when he found out. I still had no idea what he was referring to by that point, and understood less why he was keeping her belongings: her wallet, phone, myself figuring that it would make far more sense that I take it home so I could give it to her.

It was somewhere on the drive however, the sun rising to the east that I think it started to make sense to me, and it was when I could hardly turn my hand to open the knob to Jacob's room that I finally understood what had happened, and I just barely was able to get the words out as I told Jacob that morning that his mother was dead that it finally occurred to me, and while Jacob was crying for the first time in response to his mother's death, so was I.

It was a memory that didn't leave my mind easily, especially today. I'd hoped the booze would eliminate this problem in the first place, but it seemed I was being subjected to it all over again now, suddenly regretting that I'd drank the entire bottle, hopeful to think that just another drink might be enough to send me over the edge once again and take me out of here, this breeding ground for my mind to thrive in, remembering all that I'd spent the night prior trying to forget.

It had to be the day we were supposed to open.

Telling her parents had been even harder than telling Jacob. They'd been waiting with the crowd that hadn't yet heard of the fire, but were now bearing witness to its aftermath, emergency vehicles still parked outside.

Their call had been sorrowful, them thinking that they were the ones to tell me the bad news, barely getting the words out through sobbing croaks of voices that the library had burned down in the middle of the night, unaware of the news I was finding myself being forced to give.

I was drunk that morning. The first time in years. Jacob was in bed, still sobbing to himself while I myself had been passed out on the floor of the living room, drunk off of years-worth of undrunk alcohol in the fridge reserved for special occasions now suddenly having their purpose made apparent.

I'd almost forgotten Clara was on the dead, lying on the floor thinking about how she'd be pissed to find me like this, only to realize that she'd probably actually find it amusing, happy to finally see the metaphysical 'stick dislodged from my rectum.' I was laughing at the thought of her words only to be instantly sobered by the teary words of her mother, telling me 'sorry' more times than I could count that I figured she must have known only for her to be crying in grief about how our life work was gone, ash, burned to the ground.

I found myself going through everything all over again, on the verge of tears, needing to, forcing myself to hold it back just long enough to tell her parents that their daughter was dead.

They'd hung up, and I'd gone back to sleep.

We opened a month later.

I was now looking down the stairs, into the basement from which the fire had begun, something so minor as an electrical one, faulty equipment, catching her in the cement halls that acted as an oven for her from which there was no escape, and I was walking down there now.

She always talked about how ugly the basement had been, how unfitting it was for a building that, by contrast was so bright and beautiful.

Clearly the basement I was entering now had listened to her complaints. One would have been tricked into believing they were simply going to the first story rather than beneath the earth's surface with the natural transition that it was, leading into labyrinthine hallways, assortments of rooms spanning them with no shortage of purposes, myself noticing computer labs, small classrooms, labs decked out in state of the art technology such as 3D printers, high-powered computers, whatever it was one could want, all functional, on, alive, just as this place was, breathing, living.

Like her.

I don't know what it was that prompted the realization, the shiver up my spine that followed, but there was a part of me that understood then, that realized that as far as wherever the hell I found myself was concerned, she was alive.

Maybe I should have been relieved, thankful, to feel her in such a way alive around me, but instead, I felt in some vague sense, horrified, it was wrong, I realized, I wasn't supposed to be here. I was once again questioning the world around me as each step I took, disobeying my fracturing mind's desperate orders, brought me deeper into the inescapable labyrinth. *This isn't real. This can't be real. You're dead.*

Why am I speaking to her? She can't hear me. She's gone. This isn't real.

It was such the inverse of 4 years ago that it would be amusing if it wasn't horrifying to me. 4 years ago, I'd refused to believe her gone, and now, I refused to believe her here.

Why? Why tonight? I drank to get away from this, every year always the goddamned same. I drank. I drank more than enough. So why the hell was I just back here now? Or was this the end of the road for me? Was this it? The afterlife? Purgatory? I had my doubts I'd be lucky enough to straight to heaven, but I wanted to think I wasn't too far gone to be sent straight to hell.

So is this it?

The end of the road for me?

Forced to sit here in the middle of everything I'd been unable to do, with her watching me, knowing that I'd failed, knowing that I had taken 'no' for an answer.

Damnit, Brennan.

I wondered who would pray for me in purgatory. I imagined my mother may, now for both me and my father, another family to bargain with God for forgiveness.

I wondered if Jacob would. He certainly had no reason to. My mother may insist he do, and he might at first out of a sense of duty or guilty, but if he ended up having any good memory of me within a few years, I doubted any of those memories would be enough for him to speak to God on my behalf.

I know I certainly didn't deserve it.

My steps carried me deeper within, and the walls seemed to morph before me into memories, scenes of my mistakes, of every way I'd failed, of how I'd failed to fight for her to not have the security system, of how I'd failed to restore an entire half of the library out of 'economic concerns' or how I changed the opening date and kept it that way, conceding that it would be in 'bad taste' to keep the date as was originally intended by Clara, failing in that too among so other things.

If only I could change it all.

But I knew I couldn't.

If only I could forgive myself.

But I knew that was just as unlikely.

Putting one step in front of another, I knew I was following this maze to its end, wherever that may be, my head pounding, on the verge of collapsing in on itself like some black hole that would no doubt have no shortage of pertinent documents in this library, her library, her world, that could never be mine because I had failed to secure it.

I had failed to secure her life, her world, her memory, her dream.

I had failed to give her the life she had wanted. I had failed to honor her memory in the way she deserved.

What kind of man does that make me?

I knew the door in front of me at the end of the hall. *And so I followed it all the way here?* To the core, the root, the heart of it all, the generator that pumped its gas, generated its electricity, quite literally the beating heart of everything here.

I don't know what I had been expecting on the other side, but certainly not what I came face to face with, my door opening with such ease that was unsuited for how I remembered it, always a pain in the ass to open, especially from inside, finding instead that it slid open like butter on a pan, everything perfect about this place.

There was no fault, no flaw. Everything was how she'd wanted it to be, picture perfect, be it the wallpaper, the lack of any wasted space, the diligently spaced-out categories, the picturesque decorations, the whole place was a thing of beauty and there could be no denying that much.

There was but one imperfection.

At the heart of it all was a dead woman.

In that room that housed the generator, the heart of this place, so lay her as well, or what had been left of her when her world collapsed around her. The same body I'd been unable to recognize, that I'd been positive couldn't have belonged to her, that I'd laughed in relief at the sight of, only a small part of me feeling sorry for whatever poor soul it had once been, just relieved that it wasn't Clara.

And my heart went still. There was no acceleration in my chest as there should have been at such a sight, just silence.

In the world around me.

The world inside of me.

Only silence.

And then the voice behind me, "You're here."

I should have been shocked, should have jumped out of my skin, run to the far corner of the room, but her voice was never able to frighten me, no matter the context, sweet and soft as it was.

"Of course I am," was all I could think to say as I turned around to meet her face.

I was an auto pilot, my mind just along for the line, regardless of how little anything made sense.

In that moment, I didn't want anything to make sense. She was in front of me, here, and that's all that mattered. Her face with the 57 freckles that I always loved to count up to in my head whenever she'd lay sleeping next to me, her red hair in the messy bun that I adored her for, never uncomfortably conscious of its disheveled nature, simply embracing it, the green eyes that I always found myself so easily lost in, every part of her beautiful, every part of her the woman I'd fallen in love with.

"I didn't think you would be here."

"Where else would I be?"

"You **shouldn't** be here," she corrected herself, still soft, no edge to the voice, rather speaking as though she was concerned, sorry even.

"But I am," is all I could think to answer.

There was a sadness beneath her eyes where I was expecting to see joy, but I was then aware that my own face wasn't registering the emotion I was searching for in her.

I knew it wasn't real. It couldn't be real. I wanted to be happy, but I couldn't, not with the understanding that the woman in front of me wasn't truly there.

Maybe that was what held her back too. She knew the lie of her own existence. But no, it was something more than that.

"Why did you come back?"

"I never left."

Her mouth was quivering ever so slightly that one could be expected to believe she was on the verge of tears, but I knew her better than that. She didn't cry often, only having done so in my memory of when I'd proposed, when we'd married, and when my father had died. Her lip didn't quiver then, only doing so when she was frustrated, angry.

She had her own quiet way of anger. None far so petty as the silent treatment, but something reserved, defeated, and that's what I saw here, a sense of defeat that I rarely ever had seen demonstrated by her, something she had worked hard to achieve over the course of time that I'd known her, never, after all, taking 'no' for an answer.

"You can, you know."

"I know."

"Do you?"

I don't

"Look around you," she continued. "Why are you here?"

I know what she believed-that I couldn't leave. But I could. I knew the truth of where I was. I knew none of this was real. And that was all I had keeping me away. From her. Maybe, maybe if I just embraced it, let myself stay here, I could be happy, but I knew that wasn't possible. **Had** known for a long time. But was she right? That I could leave?

"I can't leave," I responded, shaking my head.

Even if I wanted to, I couldn't.

"Why can't you?"

"Because I don't want to. Because this is what I want." It was everything. It was the life we chose for ourselves, it was a world that never left bliss, that instead, made bliss reality, where we lived in it, thrived in it.

But it wasn't real.

"Brennan" she barely choked out. "Do you know where you are??"

There was a tear rolling down my face, caught by her warm hand, stopping there before it could finish its trail down the length of my head. "I know this isn't real." I admitted. "I know this is only my dream."

And then pity joined in union with sadness. Her pale hand reached up to clasp my cheek. Her hand was warm, far warmer than it had any right being, but just as soft as I always remembered it. I raised both hands to clasp her own where it still rested on my cheek, falsity or otherwise, not allowing myself to feel her again, to hold her hand in mind, the moment already fleeting, begging God for the chance to keep on holding on, to not have to let go, but I knew it wouldn't be answered.

"No," she answered in a quieted voice of soft sadness. "It's mine."

And she disappeared. Disappeared from the world, disappeared from me, as she had exactly 4 years ago, it happening all over again as it had 4 years ago, and the years that followed.

I never could let go.

But I never could hold on either.

I woke up on the carpeted floor, met with a puddle of drool of my own making, rising to find myself in the Science section of the library. The only library there was. Mine, the lights out, red light of the security camera blinking in the distance, the beige wall greeting me as I struggled to stand, numerous breaks in the paint apparent in rings of cold gray, made by the hammer that rested by my feet.

Just like every year, I had failed to hold on.

I sighed as I looked up to the ceiling, scanning its lengths, seeing just once again all the ways in which it failed, fell short, would continue to never be up to par, the failure that its owner was.

And what a failure I was, passed out on the floor of my own library. I could see the entrance from where I now stood, the sky now a dark indigo before it rather than pitch black, the sun having begun its slow ascent.

Day's coming.

I turned my eyes to the clock that rested above it. 5:43.

We'll be opening soon.

I looked around, everything as it should have been, every imperfection, every flaw, every way I had failed, and would continue to fail for a long while, I was sure.

I had been a failure in so many things over my life. I was a failed husband, a failed father, no shortage of things I'd failed to do right.

I'd lost my family. What family I still had left, I know I'd soon lose to. There was only one thing I had left, one thing I knew I couldn't let go of.

There's still time.

I picked up the hammer where it lay on the ground, remembering where the dents lined the beige wall, now knowing where I'd hang the first "September 22: Opening Day Anniversary" poster that Clara had made even before we'd first opened, one that I hadn't hung since, keeping it in a storage room, knowing that it would never hang as the date read false.

Today, however, it would hang, and it would be right.

The hours spent until opening, doing what I did best, refusing to let go.

The pounding headache reminded me of the night, of yet another failure to let it all end. Maybe next time I'd be luckier. Maybe next time, *I could hold on.*

Maybe next time, *I could finally let go.*