

TRANSVERSION

All of this has come before. And since.

Ten years, two months, twelve days since Emily's disappearance; last seen on a security vid entering her building. Emily appears as she always has in my memory, a soul finally at peace with herself. Career, a respectable boyfriend (finally!), a home to call her own. She reaches her apartment entrance, keys in the code.

Then the half-figure emerges, masked in shadow, coming into view just to her right and behind her, hands shoved deep into front pockets, head tilted down, face frustratingly hidden behind a hoodie. The figure waits, worn boots tapping back and forth, allowing Emily to pass through first; slips in after her before the doors close.

My insides turn over. My head screams.

Sis, goddammit! Look up! Just this once!

But just like all the times before, she doesn't. The intruder follows her in. And in that moment, the future is frozen once again. And I still deny that future to myself. Again, and again and again.

#

A long-ago memory pops free – Emily and I stretched out on the beach, one of our many treks along the Outer Banks, before they were lost forever to the rising Atlantic. We're sharing a tamarind rum smoothie, something we discovered on a trip to St. Lucia with our parents. I'm a feisty twenty-three; Sis has just turned a still naïve nineteen. We're between semi-significant others – neither one of us had much luck there once they realized we did everything together.

We're camping out under the full moon of early spring, waiting for the nesting sea turtles' eggs we're pretending to baby-sit to hatch out and make their interminable way to the sea.

Sis turns to me, head resting sideways on her bowed knees, feet sunk deep in the sand, toes wiggling to get free. She is so very young, unspoiled by what remains of her future.

What should I do with my life?

What life? You're wasted.

Be serious, Galen!

You'll do what you always do.

Which is?

Sleep off the day, come out swingin' in the 'morrow

That's you, ass! You're already out there, doing your thing. Physics stuff. Punching holes in reality. Me, I'm just punching air. Getting sore shoulders doing it, too.

Sis, you're still a squirt. Sky's the limit. Me, I was always going to be a phys. Remember those kits Dad was always ordering me?

Yeah, damn you. I never got any mail. Pissed me off to no end.

Really?

Really.

Then tell you what? When I get back, I'll start mailing you stuff. You know: ballet tutus, gymnastic chalk, My Little Pony shit-

FU! You're no help.

We spot the first hatchlings then, emerging from their protected nests. We run down alongside them. And though we're not supposed to be doing this, we turn them one-eighty from

the waves at high tide and back to the shore, only to watch them double back between our legs. We laugh together – real laughs, the ones from the gut. When we’re exhausted from the chase, we flop down on the wet sand, and I know then what I know now: this time together, it won’t last; nothing this good ever does. The turtles march on to the sea, their shells glistening, tiny dots under the moon’s amber light. They go to survive or be eaten, swallowed up in the vastness either way.

I survived.

All these thoughts occur in a moment’s moment, as the feeling of being outside oneself subsides, the trillion-plus qt wave packets settling into their new location, the exchange transition completing its final furious computations before arriving at rest state.

I explore the apartment but already know everything is in its proper place; I know I am when I’m supposed to be. I’ve been here so many times before.

I lock my gaze on the front door. I imagine it opening, Emily flowing through the entrance like life itself. *Well, hello there, bro bro!* She laughs, squeaking her joy. I rise to meet her—

The door has never opened. Not once.

#

Memory is not always the best guarantee for remembering.

Against the primary wall of the apartment the white leather sofa reigns - the center point of her existence - rumpled on the left side cushion and armrest from overuse. I imagine Emily there, perpetually tanned legs curled under her, engrossed in her tablet, surgically munching on an apple (Honeycrisp most likely). Her nose is narrow and pronounced (a Hurst family trait), her

high cheekbones a pair of gauzy ghosts reflecting an ethereal glow from the fading dusk of that fateful day. A few strands of auburn hair protrude from her glodana, the only p-mod I ever remember her allowing herself. I'm certain there is music playing in the background; Emily always reminded me every book needed a soundtrack.

I dream a tear as the image fades.

As always there are pictures behind the sofa, six in total: three stacked on three, mounted in antique-y frames (Sis shied away from v-walls, convinced they were all 2ways). They are always hard to look at for very long because she's in all of them. Emily was about family, favoring us over friends and acquaintances, even romantic interests. And she favored big brother over everyone; in every image she is always tilted ever so slightly towards me, whether posing with our parents or a rotating menagerie of grandparents, uncles, aunts and pets. We shared everything: every thought, every success, even the downers, regardless of distance.

I had memorized each picture down to the last detail, even the order in which they were placed.

When the real tears come, they always come unabated.

#

I was so very patient, cajoling my PhD advisors Drs. Carla DuPone and Franklin Huerta, especially Huerta. He knew what the limits were or was at least more confident of them than DuPone: the theoretical vs. the hypothetical, what Huerta derisively categorized as “mental masturbation”. DuPone was adamant quantum teleportation was not temporal in and of itself; it wasn't even teleportation per se. Qt-ing was too big a leap to mass-quantity superposition for

Huerta and it was preposterous to suggest there was so-called “time-traveling” mixed up in the equations.

DuPone, on the other hand, conjured up schematics and built an apparatus she claimed might fit the physics, sending Huerta into one of his famous, hand-waving huffs. When I finally screwed up the courage to approach her with my half-baked thesis idea, she babbled on about “don’t go fiddling with the goodies or you’ll end up in braneworld” or some such shit.

But she wouldn’t stop me. In the end, nothing would.

I knew what I had been sent to was something special, unique, a peek into spacetime. A temporal bubble.

I didn’t care. I had to know.

Sis, I can still save you.

#

Something’s wrong.

The pictures; they’re not in the same order. And there’s different faces in each, even subtle shifts in perspective. Unsteady, I fall forward onto the sofa, knocking the pictures loose from the wall. I reach behind the sofa to retrieve them, growing queasier still. Frantically, I shuffle through each frame.

I am missing from them all.

I imagine the wall taunting me: *of course, you’re not there. This is not your place, your time, your reality.*

There is a creaking to my right. I turn, fall, float, dissolve, decay—

Out of the corner of my fading sight—

The door opens—

#

When Detective Santos arrived at Antique Emporium, there were already two squad cars facing the entrance, parked diagonally so their opposing fenders almost touched. Squeezing through, he saw one officer standing to either side of an elderly male in obvious distress: knees scrunched up against his chest, rocking back and forth, head bowed.

“What’ve we got? Call was a bit all over the place.”

Both officers turned at once, sniffed, shrugged their shoulders in unison. “Owner here locked us out, won’t give us the keys. And he’s not talking. Well, at least nothing that makes any sense.”

Santos ignored their sleight. “Paramedics?”

“On their way.”

Santos waved the officers over, turned away from the owner. “Tried the back?”

“Yep. Locked up tight.”

Santos motioned for the officers to step back then kneeled in front of the owner.

“Sir, what’s your name?”

No reply.

“Sir, we can’t help you unless you help us.”

The owner slowly raised his head. Santos could tell he had been crying, dual puddles on the cracked concrete. He gently placed one hand on the owner’s knee.

“I promise we’ll get you through this. Just let us go in, get to work.”

The owner let out a ragged laugh. “You will see the impossible.”

Very thick accent. Santos leaned back on his heels “What’s impossible?”

There was a tap on Santos’ right shoulder. Glancing up, he saw one paramedic tilting her head, silently asking him to step away. Santos stood up and backed off, allowing both their space.

One of the officers waved Santos over. “Progress?”

Santos shook his head. “Think we can jigger the backdoor?”

“Worth a try.”

“Go ahead. It’s on me if anyone asks.”

Santos watched the paramedics go through their routine, the owner offering no resistance but still insisting he couldn’t in good conscience let anyone in. Santos leaned over the nearest paramedic’s shoulder. “Name?” he whispered.

She shook her head. “Vitals a bit elevated, but otherwise ok.”

One of the officers appeared over his left shoulder. “Back door’s open. Ready to go in?”

Santos nodded, following around to a back alley. The door was propped open but there was something blocking the way.

One of the officers piped up. “Maybe an armoire? Granny’s got one. Heavy sucker.”

Santos smiled. “Well, let’s put our backs into this fire code violation.”

“FYI. Caught a whiff of something I can’t even describe after I popped the door. Definitely something going on in there.”

“Good to know. Now push.”

After much shimmying back and forth, the legs' screeching noise making the effort even more unpleasant, they finally managed to scoot the blockage far enough to squeeze through one at a time. Santos let the officers go first, hands now reflectively resting on their holsters.

“Shit! What the fuck?”

Santos pushed past the two officers to get a better view.

Owner's right. Impossible.”

Suspended upside down and diagonally from the ceiling were two nude males wrapped in an embrace, except only their upper torsos were visible, the rest seamlessly merging into the shop's ceiling.

Impossible.

Santos moved closer, covering his nose and mouth with one hand, the officers remaining frozen where they stood.

Can't place the smell. Not death.

Circling underneath, Santos glanced down at the floor. Where there should have been blood or other bodily fluids, there was nothing. The bodies appeared ...

Off.

Santos palmed his phone to flashlight, waving away the officers who had finally snapped out of it and were approaching. The “embrace” Santos had first observed now resembled more of a struggle, one male's hands clenched around the other's neck, the face of the one being choked displaying a bloated grimace, the other a gleeful grin. Except the features of both seemed to be smoothed out.

Like manikins.

Still, there were observable differences between the two: the one doing the choking had stringy auburn hair tightly combed, the other sported a curlier do. The stringy-hair male was gaunt, his lower ribcage pressing against stretched skin. The curly male was much better built everywhere. Yet it was the gaunt male with his hands on the neck of the buff one.

Santos surveyed the backroom, spotted a ladder. “Can one of your gentlemen fetch me that?” The officers darted about, nearly tripping over one another. “And tape off the alley!”

Scaling the ladder, Santos found himself automatically placing two fingers on the neck of the nearest male. He jerked back, almost slipping off his foothold.

Was that a pulse I just felt? Instinctively he checked the other male. *Jesus, they’ve alive!*

Santos plucked his two-way from his belt. “Get Benny on the horn! And don’t breathe a word of this.”

#

When Ben Hill, the chief pathologist, arrived, Santos was already poking at the entangled bodies with a chewed-on stylus. Hill shook his head, wordless, as he circled the bodies. “First time I’ve had to examine a corpse – excuse me, corpses - glued to a ceiling.”

“Not corpses, Benny. Swear. Thought it best you be the first to scope this out. Trying to remain analytical here, but seriously, Jesus.” He briskly rubbed his nose, blew. “And the smell--“

Hill shushed him, donning gloves and then opening his kit. “Ionized air, like right after a lightning strike.” Santos deferentially stepped back and watched, arms folded, as Hill ran his stethoscope methodically across both not-corpses. Hill turned to Santos, trying not to look stunned. “Faint, but there.”

“How the hell? Not breathing as far as I can tell.” Santos paused, struggling to gather his wits. “Want me to fetch the paramedics?”

Hill shook his head. “Doubt they’d know which end was up with this.” Pulling out a pair of surgical tweezers, Hill waved Santos over. “What do you make of this?” Santos leaned in and watched as Hill pinched the skin of the buff male. Instead of returning to its original shape, the skin seemed to dissolve into itself. The pockmark left showed no signs of distress, just a small, bloodless depression.

Hill focused his attention on the ceiling “What’s above this shop?”

“No clue, but that’s where I’ll be heading next.”

“I’ll take a few pics then join you.”

The stairwell to the next floor was unlit. Santos guessed the owner used it for storage, but it was essentially empty. Shining his phone’s light in the direction of where he thought the non-corpses might be, Santos jerked back. There were the same entangled nude males, now neatly emerging from the floor, the legs of each splayed out like they were falling.

Insane!

Stooping down, Santos examined the area where the non-corpses merged into the floor, looking for any gap but finding none. *Gonna need a saw to cut these boys out*, and found himself laughing hysterically at the absurdity of that image.

Hill appeared at the top of the stairwell, paused a long moment to take in the scene, shook his head once more.

“We’ll need a –“

“Saw. I know,” Santos sighed. “Not your usual request when retrieving a corpse?”

“Not corpses, yet” touching each male’s ankles. The pathologist chuckled despite himself. “I’ll take care of it. Have a tech who’ll keep quiet.” Hill radioed for a saw from maintenance and a very long extension cord and, no, he wouldn’t be entertaining questions.

Hill’s two-way crackled back. “Boss, got another call. Freezer at Pik-n-Pak. Weird deal. Will drop off what you need on the way there.”

Santos stopped circling the bodies “Weird how?”

Hill’s two-way popped. “Detective Santos. That you? Cap just barged in, said needs you at Pic-n-Pak, stat.”

Santos covered the mike, staring at Hill. Hill shrugged. “Busy day got busier.”

“Cap, in the middle of figuring out what I’ve got at the antique shop. Benny’s with me.”

“Benny can stay. Need you at Pik-n-Pak. Officer on scene is mumbling gibberish.”

Santos threw up his hands. Hill just nodded, waved him on.

“Got this covered. Send your two officers up. They can help with this. Gonna take all three of us handle this.”

Santos wavered for a moment then reluctantly let his superior know he was on his way.

#

The scene was more chaotic at Pik-n-Pak: customers milling around outside, a few complaining that ‘couldn’t they just pay for their groceries and leave – they’re right there, see?’ randomly pointing inside. Santos waved his badge at the officers stationed there as he passed the gathering crowd.

The reporting officer was waiting at the rear.

“Freezer?” Santos barked.

The officer pointed to the partially opened, silvered door to the left. “Fair warning. Not gonna believe what’s in there.”

Santos swung the heavy door aside and was immediately swatted with a fist of chilled air bursting from the freezer, disguising its contents. When the fog dispersed, there were the same two bodies from the antique store, in the same deathly embrace, displaying the same expressions as their counterparts. Only they weren’t suspended as he first thought; they were right side up: a foot of one of the males embedded in a box containing snap peas, a foot from the other male merged with a shelf stacked with frozen fruit.

Santos turned towards the freezer exit, eyes squeezed shut as if that would banish the image. The reporting officer called out to him once, twice. When he finally entered, Santos snapped out of his momentary trance, pushing him aside.

Shivering now, he radioed Hill. “Benny, texting pics. Don’t fall down when you see them.” Santos snapped a few, hit SEND.

There was the briefest of pauses followed by an audible choking cough. “Are you sure this ... this is the same---“

“Afraid so, as ridiculous as that sounds.”

“Ah, ok. My tech dropped off the saw so should arrive in the next few minutes. Had to tell him something so he’s prepared. Well, as prepared as anyone can be.”

Santos hesitated for a moment before replying. “Benny, you know, DNA will be the kicker here.”

“Jesus, don’t I ever.”

“Hold on. Cap’s buzzing in. Go ahead, Cap.”

“Benny briefed me. What the hell?”

“Ditto here. Head-shaking shit.”

“Well, to add to your already fun day, just got another call in. Behind Dot’s Laundry Mat.”

“That’s only a few blocks from here.”

“Tape Pik-n-Pak off. Hook up with Dot’s officer. Crosstalk sounds like the same deal.”

Santos willed himself to calm down. “Where’s Grego?”

“Pulled double past two weeks so probably in a gin-induced coma---”

“Ring his ass please. Maybe have him relieve me here?”

Hill’s trusted tech arrived and started his work after an initial stutter-step backwards to take in the scene. Santos cursed under his breath. “Alright, I’m off.”

#

The laundry mat scene was even more crowded, with passers-by gathering at both ends of the taped-off block, plus apartment tenants leaning out virtually every window. Santos grabbed the first officer he saw.

“Where?”

The officer gave him a look of horror, pointing up. Hanging from a string of telephone lines some thirty feet over and nearly directly above his head were the same two intertwined males. The wires pierced their bodies as if they were shot through with arrows. Santos dropped to his knees, exhausted.

The officer crouched down beside him, patting him on the shoulder. “Detective, have hook and ladder on the way.”

Santos nodded, head bowed. Composing himself, he radioed Hill.

“Don’t say a word.”

“Yeah.” Santos heard the whir of the saw in the background. “Got them loose yet?”

“Getting there. Gimme another—”

The transmission broke. Santos radioed again, heard what sounded like shouting.

Multiple voices yelling, nothing he could make out.

“Benny! Hey, Benny! What---“

Over the background clamor, Hill’s came back, his voice chattering. “The fuck!”

“What? What, dammit!” Santos heard himself go hoarse.

“They’re gone. Just effing gone.”

Santos let those words sink in. *I know Benny. Would never crack on a job.*

Before Santos could think of what to say, Hill broke the silence. “D-don’t know. It was like, like before, when I pinched the skin ... except they just came apart, dissolved, disappeared into ...” He trailed off.

“Detective! Look up! Shit!”

Santos had just enough time to glance upwards before the bodies on the wires dislodged, falling towards him. There was no time to react. He covered his head.

Nothing.

When Santos looked up again, the bodies were gone.

#