

PARK SEON WOO

AUTUMN HEATWAVE

Translated from Korean by Sunnie Chae

HAPPY SCENES made me perfectly bitter that autumn. The season dragged on instead of running its course, looping back in a closed curve. Instead of moving from spring to summer to autumn, it was autumn, autumn, and autumn again.

Would winter ever arrive?

I'd never cared for that cold season, but now I longed for it. Maybe my yearning had some kind of pull. That would explain the letter delivered one night. Those handwritten lines had wandered through the past before reaching me, bringing back memories of your face, your voice. I opened my eyes to the fact that you'd left. I suspected, vaguely, that the sense of closure would stand in for an actual end to that bleak season.

ONE NIGHT that September, a burning sting woke me up. I sat up in bed, baffled. It was two a.m., still dark. I rubbed at the back of my neck. My skin itched and smarted, covered in welts. I switched on the fluorescent light. Dizzy as I stood before the mirror, I tugged down the neck of my T-shirt and found rashes all over my shoulders. Even my lower lip and earlobes were swollen, puffed up like bee stings. I'd gotten used to overheating because I didn't sweat as much as others. But I'd never broken out in a rash before.

I panicked and grabbed my phone. I typed *itching, red blotches, swelling*, and a jumble of other words into a search engine. Once I scrolled past the cosmetics and hospital ads, I landed on an article about the spike in chronic hives due to climate change. The text came with gruesome photos of grayish blood clots—the worst-case scenario for untreated swelling. I twisted around in front of the mirror to see if my welts looked anything like the ones in those photos, then I reached for my cardigan. I had to see a doctor. I tied my hair in a ponytail, pulled on a baseball cap, and grabbed my wallet. I tiptoed out the living room so as not to wake my parents.

As soon as I swung open the front door, I caught a whiff of cool breeze. The lush, green leaves of an oak tree stirred in the wind. I followed the streetlights down the sloped street. It dawned on me that I'd

never stepped out alone at that hour. Back in senior high, I'd saved up months' worth of allowance to run away, but by sunup on that big day, I hadn't been able to go through with it.

What had I been running from?

I couldn't remember anymore. Who knows why my adolescent self—only seventeen at the time—had wilted under problems that would seem trivial in hindsight. Thirty-one. That famous slogan for ice cream flavors was now my age. My life wasn't as variety-packed, but I'd secured just enough of the stability I'd always craved. My job was more or less permanent, barring an egregious misstep on my part. My salary afforded trips to Tokyo or Bangkok without derailing my savings and insurance deposits. And my parents were still running their ox-bone soup restaurant that had opened twenty-odd years ago. If I wanted any more stability, I'd have to check into a rest home or crawl into a coffin. Maybe I was too settled. Enough to get a rush just by stepping out at dawn. Proof of a dull existence.

I turned where the slope leveled off into a two-lane street. The traffic lights were switched off. I stayed on the narrow pavement and walked five blocks until the local hospital came into view. A hospital only in name, the rundown single ward was earmarked for an upscale move to Gangnam, pending the approval of an urban renewal project. In the meantime, the hospital was operating a pantry-sized ER furnished with a rusty metal desk, a glass cabinet, and three beds partitioned by faded blue curtains. Ushered in by a worn-out nurse, I perched on a stool next to the desk. The itching became unbearable once I sat still, waiting. I balled my hands into fists and started bouncing a leg. *Crummiest ER ever. Thank God I'm not flatlining.* A young, bleary-eyed doctor stepped in, pulling on his medical gown. "What seems to be the problem?" he asked.

"I think it's hives."

"Is that so?" He blinked hard to stay awake. "Let's have a listen." He lifted the edge of my T-shirt, sliding his stethoscope over my stomach and side. *Skin problems stare you in the eye. So why is he listening to my organs?* He pushed up my cardigan sleeve and saw the welts. "You're right," he nodded. "Hives." He switched on the desktop monitor and started filling in a prescription form. "Did you eat anything unusual?"

"I'm not sure."

"It could be food, clothes, or anything else that was different."

I pretended to give it some thought. "No, nothing."

“There must be something.” He told the nurse I needed a shot. Then he tapped a pen against his clipboard. “For hives, the patient has to find the trigger. Try retracing your day—who you met, what you ate, where you went.” He scribbled illegible notes on the chart. “Think it through. Once you get a hunch, stop doing whatever it was, okay?”

I gave a slight nod and stood up. I entered one of the curtained-off areas and got injected in my butt cheek. It hurt—and humiliated me too—so much so that my eyes watered. I paid for the ER visit, got a day’s worth of pills, and came home. The jab had taken care of the itch but not the fever. I switched on my electric fan, crouched down, and stared at the whirling blades. The breeze stung as it brushed against my skin, but I didn’t mind.

I emptied a single-dose medicine packet into my palm. Two beige capsules and one softgel. I swallowed them all together and sat on the floor with my back against the bed. The drugs would flow into my veins, I imagined, invisible yet causing certain change.

It’ll get better. My T-shirt fluttered. I turned the lights off and lay down. *Will it get better?* I reached toward the fan settings, switched to rotate mode, and set the timer to thirty minutes. Those were my default nighttime settings ever since I’d heard about fan death—the urban myth that a fan left running all night could kill you. I’d turn the fan dials, bemused. *I guess there’s a part of me that wants to live. But like this?* My breath slowed as the fan motor hummed like a lullaby.

A SPOT of light gleamed overhead. As soon as I woke up, I checked my arms and legs. No itching. No burning welts. Nothing wrong with my skin in the mirror. My late-night trip to the ER seemed like a fever dream. Or maybe a hallucination, one that wasn’t worth mentioning to any of my friends or family.

What was it, exactly?

What if the rash had been so bad that I’d had to call in sick? What if I’d been covered in welts, sobbing to my team lead over the phone, switching over to FaceTime to prove my case, asking for sick leave? I got ready for work as those could-have-been scenes played out in my mind.

They wouldn’t stop.

They billowed like smoke from a furnace. They flitted through my mind even as I nodded off on the commuter subway. *I’m sorry for the early call. This is abrupt, I know. I’m sure you can see . . . I can’t come to work today. Yes, I’ve got hives. You’re right—it’s just an itch. No broken*

bones. But you're my team lead, and I need to tell you how it really is. I just have to. The thing is, I broke out in hives at two a.m. and went to the ER. Yes, the ER. You know what the doctor said? He asked if I'd done anything unusual. Anything. I started thinking. Really thinking. And came up with nothing. You know what I mean? Here's how it's been ever since I joined the company three years back. I wake up every day at 7:30 a.m., get dressed in the same budget-priced office wear, have the same breakfast of rice with basic sides, and head to work. I work all day, come home, watch a few shows on Netflix, and go to bed. That's my routine. Week in, week out. Those trips on long weekends? I barely remember them. It's . . . as if my life has stood still for three years. No love life either. Pathetic, right? This isn't what I'd imagined for myself at thirty-one. I didn't see this coming.

I didn't?

The train groaned and rattled to a stop. I lifted my head. I eyed the LCD screen above the doors to see the station name blinking in yellow. Had I not seen the writing on the wall?

Work wasn't all boring. It had its redeeming moments. I'd chosen my job carefully, never been exactly dissatisfied, and never considered a career change. I wasn't paid much, but it seemed fair given the easy workload. So what was the problem? Nothing, really. Problem was, there was no problem.

What had I done that was unusual?

I spent the morning at work staring blankly at my computer, lost in thought. *Something unusual.* I pondered the mystery. When my co-workers left for lunch, I stayed behind in the office. BTS's "Blood Sweat & Tears" blared through my earphones, reaching the chorus, "kill me softly." *Right, I'll live and die softly.* A part of me rebelled against the idea. *Maybe the doctor had it wrong. Could it be that I hadn't done anything unusual, and that was precisely the problem? Then why not start now? I could do something crazy.*

I mustered the courage . . . and sent an instant message to my team lead as soon as the lunch hour was over.

—I hope you're not too busy right now. I have to talk to you about work.

—What is it? Something wrong?

—Oh, nothing serious. I was wondering. Could I take an annual leave tomorrow?

—Is that all? Sure, go ahead.

—How about two days off? I don't have any deadlines.

—Sure, that's fine.

—How about the whole week off? Would that be too much?

He kept deleting and retyping his response. I stared at the three blinking dots, thrilled and terrified. Like the moment I scooted out of the house at dawn and inhaled the crisp air.

—Eun-su, is it a family emergency, by any chance?

—No.

—Are you ill?

—I was, last night. Not so much today, but I'm not sure. I'd like a break. I'll take the week off. Is that okay?

—All right. Just fill in the annual leave form this afternoon.

Sheesh. I let out a shallow breath, pulling my hands away from the keyboard. I slumped into my chair, deflated, and stared at the ceiling. Come to think of it, my team lead had never been the inconsiderate type. He was a product of Gangnam's School District 8, the hotbed of academia, and his mother, a widowed schoolteacher, had instilled in him an acute social awareness. He'd gone on to study at one of Seoul's top universities, where he served as student council president. He'd been a national liberation activist, and if the rumors were true, had shaved his head to protest tuition hikes. Good to a fault, he made me think, *He's too upright. He'll break. Someday, he will. I hope.*

Maybe that was the problem.

If only he'd boss me around like a bullying supervisor, insult me or grope me like a perv . . . then I could scream, declare I was quitting, grab my bag, and stomp out. I'd make a scene the way they do on TV. That way, there would be a clear cause and effect, everything reaching a neat conclusion.

I should be so lucky. Nothing unusual had a chance in my life—at least, not here. I was trapped in this hamster wheel of an office for good. That was what my team lead wanted, it seemed. Why else would he be so considerate? Just too damn considerate.

When my team lead messaged me at the end of that workday to wish me a good break, I switched off my computer without replying. I breezed out of the office. Once I got home, I had a long, lukewarm shower. I sat at my computer feeling depressed and watched the latest season of *Good Girls* on Netflix. Mom arrived after closing shop, peeked into my room, and asked if I wanted some fruit, but I shooed her away. The pills I'd taken for my hives had made me drowsy, so I set the fan's timer to thirty minutes and went to sleep.

Goddammit.

When I woke up, my skin was burning. I stood before the mirror. I looked beaten up, my eyes and lips swollen. Crimson rashes ran down my neck, sides, hips, and back.

I gritted my teeth and headed out to the ER. It'd taken some resolve the first time around, but now I was walking with eyes half-closed. No more adrenaline rush. I crossed the intersection and marched straight to the hospital. There was a different doctor—a well-built and bearded middle-aged man. He was wearing a navy plaid shirt under his medical gown and sounded pleasant, not tired at all. "What brings you in tonight?" he asked.

I sat in the patient's chair and explained my symptoms. He gave me the same diagnosis and same prescription: "For hives, the patient has to find the trigger." "Right." "Think over all the things you did or didn't do. Then change whatever stands out as the problem." "Sure."

My indifference seemed to take him by surprise. He handed the chart to a nurse. "It's nothing serious, though. Only a rash. It comes and goes like a cold."

"When will it go away for good?"

"Hard to say." He pulled off his stethoscope, head tilted. "There's no definite cure."

Two more jabs in my butt cheek, and I was ready to go. I huffed my way up the sloped street, prescription bag gripped in hand. *How could there be no cure?* Overgrown bushes crowded the base of a pink-flowered crape myrtle. The wind carried whiffs of dry soil and grass. Once I reached the entrance to my family's walk-up, I stopped to catch my breath, hands on my hips. I checked my pockets to make sure my wallet was still there. Then I noticed a letter in the mailbox. Addressed to me. In a corner of the lavender envelope, there was a block of text: *We live in an age of quick deliveries, smartphones, and the internet. Amid the accelerated pace of change, the Incheon Airport Expressway's Slow Postbox presses pause. It lets you reflect on yourself and your loved ones. It reminds you to appreciate those ties and value slow living.* . . . Up to that point, I was still confused.

Stay connected with slow letters. Receive memories that arrive across time.

Shards of drowned memories resurfaced. I stared at the heron stamp postmarked by the Incheon Postal Office. I thought about crumpling up the letter, but I slipped it into my pocket instead and went straight to my room.

I took my pills and crouched down in front of the fan. My lips dried out even as warm saliva pooled in my mouth. I checked my forehead and neck for a fever, then pulled out the letter. *I might as well see what it says and throw it away. But then I won't be able to unsee it, and tossing it out would be a bit pointless.* I cut open the envelope. The letter paper inside had a sheen that reflected the fluorescent light. I ran my eyes along the handwriting.

I didn't expect to write a letter. I feel shy.

I haven't written to you in ages. I should do it more often.

We've been together awhile now. So much has happened, but we've gotten on well. On breezy autumn days like today, I'm reminded of the first time I saw you. It was at Hongik University station, Exit 9. I remember being happy, excited, worried.

I was lucky to meet you and stay with you all this time. I wonder where or how this letter will find you. What will we be doing in a year? What kind of people will we be? Will any of our wishes come true? What will we find, and what will we leave behind? I know we've had our disagreements (lately, especially), but I hope we'll be together, smiling over our letters.

P.S. Sorry about what happened on your birthday—the way I kept pestering you to introduce me to your friends. You'll warm up to the idea someday. I'll wait till then.

Yours, J.

I took a closer look at the envelope and noticed it was postmarked five years ago. I should have chucked it out without reading it. The Slow Postbox website had promised to deliver all mail exactly a year after being posted. Why had this one taken five? I had no clue.

We must've been on one of our drives to Incheon Airport. Around that time, we'd fallen into a pattern of pointless quarrels followed by long, rental-car drives or trips to the amusement park, where we'd kiss and make up. *One day, we'll travel abroad. Plane tickets are on whoever gets a job first.* We made vague promises at one of the airport's fast-food diners, where we sat looking through the glass walls at planes about to take off. We must've mailed the letters back then.

We split up and forgot about those letters. I completed an M.A. program, landed a job, and worked nonstop since then. Meanwhile, J's letter had traversed time and space, carrying long-lost promises from people who no longer recalled making them. Why had it turned up?

What was I supposed to make of it?

I put the letter back in the envelope. Then I buried it away in the bottom drawer under my desk. Not that I could hide it, since the letter was there to stay, seared in my mind.

Back in front of the fan, I cooled myself down. I let out a low “ahhh.” The fan breeze seemed to carry my voice away, but the sound returned, reverberating in my ears. I turned off the lights and got into bed. I wanted to stop thinking and fall asleep. I reached toward the fan settings but then changed my mind. Instead of setting the timer, I turned to face the wall.

WE FIRST MET on an early autumn evening. The air had a slight chill. I waited outside the KFC, watching crowds pour out of the subway. All I’d received in advance was a single photo, and I was worried I might not recognize you in the sea of faces. Ten minutes passed as I stood there at a loss, trying to recall your features, when someone squeezed through. Our eyes met, and we recognized each other. You held out your hand.

“Sorry I’m late. I should’ve chosen a less crowded place. Let’s go.”

I took your hand without question and followed you.

Your hand was warm.

My memories of that night faded over time—your clothes, your smile, our dinner, our walk in the park—except the warmth of your hand.

But why?

The question echoed in my mind until it woke me up like a drop of water splashing on my forehead. My eyes opened to the late morning sunlight. I breathed in the pleasantly cool air and pulled back the linen blanket. The fan had somehow been turned off, and the welts on my skin were gone.

I entered the living room and sat on the leather couch. Rays of sunlight rippled on the floor as I waited for my bleariness to fade. The windows were open. A motorcycle rumbled uphill, grade schoolers on autumn break babbled in the alley, and birds chirped on a power line. Lulled by the peacefulness, my eyelids fell.

Who knows for how long.

The air conditioner in the living room switched on. The front panel slid open, and out came a blast of cold plasma air. I shrank from the chill. The curtains fluttered in that icy airstream as I reached for the AC

remote. The power button wouldn't work. I went to turn it off manually, but the switch wasn't working either. I pulled the plug.

What was going on?

Come to think of it, Mom had complained that the AC needed replacing. Yanked awake by the cold blast, I went to wash my face. While brushing my teeth, I wondered how to use my free day. I could visit the hair salon or a museum. I was lathering up my face wash when I heard the living room TV through the door.

Did I switch it on? On my way to the bathroom?

I rinsed my hands and crept out. People were laughing on the TV screen, but I turned it off without bothering to look. *It must be the TV timer. I bet Mom pressed the button by mistake.* I was returning to the bathroom when the half-open door to my bedroom slammed shut. As I stared, the door to my parents' bedroom slammed as well. Alarmed, I rushed to close the window that was letting in the wind. Then I stood before my bedroom door and held an ear against it. I knew there was no one inside.

And yet. Did I know for sure?

You came to mind. No way would you be there. No way *could* you be there. Yet I felt the gaze of someone standing behind that door with their eyes on me.

ON THE DAY of our mishap, my parents had left on a trip early in the morning. They were joining thirty other couples who had pooled money for a year to fund a group tour. The three-day itinerary began with a bus ride to Pohang. At Yeongilman Port, they were boarding a cruise ship bound for Ulleungdo and Dokdo Islands.

I'd been sitting on the living-room couch, just as bleary as I was today. Once I saw my parents out, the silence of that empty house sank in. I'd taken a leave of absence from university with one semester left, still debating between grad school and a job. It was a free day for me, and as soon as I finished breakfast, I texted you. "I'm bored. Let's meet up." I wheedled until you gave in—"You win," you declared—and suggested we catch a movie near my place. "I'll come pick you up. Be there soon."

Around noon, you arrived in a chiffon blouse and a black pencil skirt. You'd backed out of a job interview prep session to meet with me. It'd be my fault, you laughed, if you ended up unemployed. Demure on the couch as you glanced around, you made me feel hot. I'd never had

a girlfriend over before. I put on a kettle in the kitchen. We sat on the couch, sipping on hibiscus tea and leafing through reviews in *Cine 21* to choose a film.

By the time our teacups were empty, you relaxed and unfastened the top button on your blouse. That's how it started. *Should we make out on the couch? No, it's our chance to do something different, something unusual.* I suggested hide-and-seek. "You hide. I'll seek. Each time I find you, you strip a layer. If I can't find you in five minutes, I strip a layer."

On any other day, you would've called me a perv. Yet you giggled, "You're on." The game started, and it only took one round for us to realize how unfair it was. Hiding places were scarce in that small house with no attic or storage room. But the unfairness was part of the fun. I couldn't wait to strip you, and you couldn't wait to be stripped.

I leaned against the foyer wall and counted to thirty. You scrambled to hide—in my closet, under my bed, behind the washer on the balcony—only to be caught right away. In your undies in no time. We ogled each other and giggled out of control. I counted to thirty while you hid yourself one last time.

"Ready or not, here I come!"

I prowled through the house. "Are you here?" I swung open the closet doors, then closed them with a thud. "Or here?" I swished the shower curtains aside with a cackle. After glancing through the kitchen, I was on my way to the living room . . . when I heard someone unlocking the front door from outside. The door opened with a grating groan.

My parents appeared in their outdoor wear and sunglasses, out of breath. "My feet are killing me," Mom moaned, throwing down her backpack. "Don't even get me started!" She pulled off her hiking boots and collapsed onto the couch. They had missed the bus, had caught a cab to the port, but missed the cruise ship as well. "Your dad is my worst enemy, I swear." Dad disappeared into their bedroom without a word.

I stood frozen in the living room.

Mom fanned herself to cool down. Then she got up and walked past me, dragging her bag behind her. She tried the bedroom doorknob a few times. "The nerve of you! Locking me out as if you hadn't done enough already!" She banged on the door. Then she collapsed back onto the couch with a grunt. "I warned him not to eat that spicy octopus last night, but would he listen? Oh, no, he stuffed himself sick. I waited all year for that trip, and now it's ruined. Your dad ruins everything." She took off her sunglasses. "Why are you standing there? Did you eat yet?"

Time for damage control, but how? My head spun. Is she still hiding? She'd better be. What do I say to Mom? That a friend and I got hot and started stripping for fun? That she has eczema, and I was about to rub lotion on her? Ridiculous—as if that could explain why she's hiding in her undies. I nibbled on my lip.

"Mom, you must be starving. Let's go out to eat."

"What?"

"You need cheering up. Why don't we all go for lunch, Dad too?"

Mom glanced down at her full ensemble of outdoor wear. "I guess we could," she said. I began pounding on their bedroom door. "Dad, come on out. It's okay. Mom's not angry anymore. Let's go out for lunch. Come on, Dad. A nice lunch will cheer you up."

Dad unlocked the door and ventured out. Judging by his face, he hadn't seen anything shocking in the room. I rushed my parents out the front door. "Off we go."

We set out for the neighborhood branch of Coastal Kitchen, a franchise famous for its cockle bibimbap. On our way, I made up an excuse to turn back alone. I'd left my phone at home, I said, and I was expecting a professor's call about a recommendation letter. "Go ahead without me. I'll catch up." As soon as my parents turned the corner, I reached for my phone in my back pocket.

You wouldn't pick up. Or text back. *Did she duck out? She would've, by now.* Still on edge, I hurried home.

I burst in the front door. "Are you here? No, right?" I whirled around the rooms. "You aren't still here, are you? You shouldn't be." But you'd left. I combed through all the hiding places and found no one. The clothes you'd draped over my desk chair were gone, which meant you'd escaped safe and sound. *She slipped out. So why won't she pick up?* No matter how many times I called, you refused to answer. You even turned off your phone a few hours later. By then, I was the one fuming. *Sheesh. It wasn't my fault.*

When you called me to go out a week later, I was still miffed. *So what now? Will she throw a hissy fit or what?* But you smiled and put an arm around my shoulder as if nothing had happened. "I'm hungry—let's go eat. Where should we go?" Your usual, nonchalant self. I smiled along.

We ate the tteok-twi-sun combo of spicy rice cakes, fritters, and blood sausages for dinner and went to an arthouse cinema to watch the rerelease of *Maborosi*. After a shared cup of iced Americano at Starbucks, we took a room at a self-check-in motel. Once I showered and

climbed into bed, you broke the silence about our narrow escape. “Isn’t there anything you want to ask me?”

“Ask you?”

“Isn’t it about time?”

I moved away and sat up. After a moment, I looked away toward the headboard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t?”

“No.”

“You don’t mean that. Or do you?”

I didn’t answer. We sat in a long silence that warped whatever was between us. “Oh,” you forced a laugh. “I see. That’s how you are.”

We had sex that night. It didn’t last longer or get any rougher than usual. We moved down the dark corridor to leave the motel. Once outside, we went our ways at an intersection. You ran to catch the green WALK signal while I turned to leave. *Wait. This can’t be right.* When I spun around, you waved from across the wide street. You must’ve thought I didn’t see you because I stood rooted in place. You waved both arms over your head to catch my eye while I simply stared.

That was it.

We saw each other for a few more months, then stopped.

WHY WAS I reminded of it now?

It all came back to me—the way your chin would twitch whenever you’d wait for me to answer a question. The brows arched over the corners of your dewy eyes, the groove under your nose, and the full lips parted slightly over your teeth. Why had that vivid image returned?

Perhaps that was our last time together.

The start of a long breakup.

I glanced around the house. Dust floated in the beams of sunlight shining through the windows. Those flecks floated in slow motion, it seemed, until time came to a halt. The house was hushed and empty—no one there. No one? I gripped the doorknob to my bedroom. But another door creaked open. It was you in your underwear, slipping out of my parents’ bedroom. You ducked down and glanced around.

The coast was clear, and you picked yourself up. You slinked across the living room toward my room. I stood in the way, but you passed through me like a ghost, opened the door, and went in. Stepped into your skirt, buttoned your blouse, and tucked your hair back. You even glanced in the mirror, blank-faced. Once you emerged from the room

and reached the front door, you turned. I confronted that face, the look in your eyes I'd been avoiding.

You'd gone.

I'd been left behind. It finally sank in.

A DUSKY HALF-LIGHT filtered through the room. I'd slept in, staying in bed well past noon until I eventually propped myself up. I turned on the lights and stood before the mirror. No welts, no itch. Were my hives gone for good? I peered into my mirrored face. Dry skin, dull eyes. Dark circles, visible pores. When had these changes set in? Sleep wrinkles stayed longer now. Scars left blemishes behind instead of healing, and my crow's feet were deepening. Disheartening traces of time. *I'm aging. Alone.*

I wondered.

Had we stayed together, you would've rushed over whenever I'd call; on nights when you got sick, I would've come over in a cab to take care of you; we'd be in bed, chatting, laughing, whispering "sweet dreams" and falling asleep; we'd argue and hurt each other too, but still. What could we have been? What could we have become?

Those imagined scenes never stretched into the future, and despite my best effort, never took on a specific shape. Maybe those were dreams I couldn't dream. Beyond my reach.

Every now and then, the passage of time, that irreversible tide of age, provided solace. Reminding me that autumn would pass and winter would arrive. The last vestiges of autumn heat would fade, and there would be flurries of snow. The world would be blanketed in white, frozen, until all would melt away. Four seasons drawing to a desolate end. Then time would bring another spring.

With the fan switched on, I crouched down in the breeze. I let out a low "ahhh." That steady note echoed in my lungs, growing louder. The sound rippled beyond me, and the reverberations returned like a reply.

I turned off the lights and climbed into bed. I pressed an arm against my forehead and took a few deep breaths. Darkness swallowed the fluorescent fixture. But thin sparks flickered within, like a silver thread running through and around the light. My eyes chased that thread until it all glazed over. I reached out to set the fan's timer. Thirty minutes.