

KALPITA PATHAK

FOR THE TREES

DETECTIVE VARELA calls it an *interview room*, but it looks an awful lot like the interrogation rooms in *Law and Order*. Over-airconditioned, scuffed floors, grubby walls, one-way mirror, rickety chair to keep you on edge. Paper coffee cups litter the tabletop. Goosebumps popping on your arms and legs, rubbing against your soft Baby Yoda leggings and green sweater.

As far as you know, you're the only neighbor who was asked down to the La Paz police station. And you know why.

"Tell me again, when was the last time you saw Sasha?" Varela stares, impatient.

You wonder how he categorizes you, a forty-year-old Indian American woman with dark brown skin and short curly hair, an autistic work-from-home scientific illustrator. Does he see an exotic? A terrorist? Both?

You can only glance at his eyes. Eyes are maelstroms, violent and violating. Every time you look away, he leans, trying to force eye contact until you finally turn sideways, a tendril of your hair blocking his painful gaze. He thinks you're hiding something.

((*sasha-is-missing*))

"Ms. Khare." Varela's clothes rustle. He picks up a closed manila folder, thick fingers nickering against stiff paper.

You've been repeating yourself for over an hour, reaching your breaking point. "Yesterday. I was washing dishes and saw her get the mail. She dropped a flyer and squatted to pick it up. Then she went inside, kicking her foot against the door to close it."

"That's a lot of detail for something so mundane." Rustling clothes, leaning torso. He crinkles a bag of M&Ms out of his jacket, the candy like pebbles clattering against his teeth, the wet undulation of his tongue unbearable.

((*sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-*))

Varela sticks his big hand into the bag again and you're going to scream. Too many sounds, layering over each other, making thinking impossible. Thank god you brought your headphones.

You clamp them on. "When I wear these, I can focus better."

His eyes narrow, angular chin jutting. "Is my chewing bothering you? Jesus. How do you go to restaurants?"

"I don't."

"Well, it's rude to comment on my eating habits, don't you think?"

"I'm not being rude and I didn't comment on your eating. I'm not even asking you to stop. I'm simply putting on headphones."

He nods thoughtfully. "I see. What if I said I can't focus on what you're saying when you're wearing those huge headphones? You look like you should be on an airport runway waving lights around. Let's make a deal: I stop eating and you take them off."

You want to refuse. But

((*sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing*))
where could a six-year-old go?

"Fine."

Varela taps his pen on the table. "We're here to figure out what happened to Sasha." The pen strikes the candy bag, *KKKRRK*. Then back to the table. *Tap-tap-tap*. "Yet all we're talking about is your autism."

The pen, hitting the bag at unpredictable intervals. *Tap-tap-tap-KKKRRK. Tap-tap-tap-tap-KKKRRK. Tap-KKKRRK.*

Varela lowers his voice. "I've met people with autism, you know. My neighbor's son has it."

He's looking at you with a half smile on his face, a *knowing* smile. Is he making noises deliberately? Is that why he wanted you to take off the headphones? As your eyes begin watering, the lights in the room flare even brighter and you wince.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is this bothering you?" Varela puts the pen down.

Through your discomfort, you offer a small smile. "No, it's okay. Please, let's continue."

He cocks his head, that half smile still on his face. Making fun of you. Electricity sparks in your brain.

((*zzzt*))

"He's ten. Doesn't talk. Only interested in his trains. Throws a fit if there's even a speck of green in his food. In therapy twenty hours a week during the school year. Thirty in the summer. Imagine what he'd be like without it." Varela's still talking about his neighbor's son.

((*that-poor-boy*)) ((*sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing*))

((*zzzt*))

You open your mouth to say, *Just let him play with his trains and stop putting green shit in his food. No therapy needed.*

Instead, nothing comes out. It's as though the connection between your brain and mouth has been severed. The words are there, in your head, but they're trapped, twirling around, disco dancing to the electrical pulses.

((zzzt-zzzt-zzzt))

Varela nods. "I see you agree. *That* is a child with autism." He clasps his hands together with the vigor of burlap against a washboard.

You close your eyes but the glare of the lights penetrates through as though your eyelids are made of glass. Synesthesia makes your senses cross over and you can *feel* the lights, abrasive as sandpaper. Your skin hurts.

((*sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing-that-poor-boy-sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing-that-poor-boy-sasha-is-missing-sasha-is-missing-that-poor-boy*)) ((zzzt-zzzt-zzzt))

"Listen, Ms. Khare. I can tell you're a caring person. I know you want to help us find Sasha." Though you're separated by the table, his hushed voice is hot and damp against your ear. "I know you *think* you have autism. There are a lot of hacks out there overdiagnosing people with all kinds of things. But maybe you should consider the possibility that you're just *sensitive*."

Varela thumbs off the lid of his coffee cup, the *pop* pelting your ear like a piece of hail. "Maybe if you understood the pen-tapping isn't a big deal, my eating isn't obnoxious—everything's fine and normal—maybe you could relax and not react so much."

The smell of coffee mingles with mildew and old sweat and your stomach tightens. You grit your teeth, grinding your jaw. Everything's loud. Everything's bright. Everything's mean. Everything's hard.

"Like arguing about tedious things instead of helping me." Varela dampens in your ear.

((zzzt-sasha-is-missing-zzzt-that-poor-boy-zzzt))

"Can you set your own sensitivities aside, Ms. Khare? Because we need your help." He leans in. "Sasha could be hurt or worse and we're talking about my eating."

The clock clacks on the wall. You reach into your backpack for your water bottle, bending deeper than you need to, hiding under the table to momentarily get away from the sensory volcano that's spewing in the small interrogation room.

Varela's whisper whickers over you, dry now, a soft-bristled broom. "Do you have any idea where Sasha could be?"

You take a sip of water and it dribbles along the corners of your mouth. The sensation puddles there, no matter how hard you swipe the back of your hand across your face. Something primal triggers inside you, a fight-or-flight response that starts you pacing, three steps one direction before turning and going the other, water sloshing in your bottle, metallic in your mouth.

"Maybe you know something and are afraid to tell me, but I'm on your side, Ms. Khare."

"No." You shake your head quick—once, twice, a third time. "No."

"No, what?"

The lights hum louder and you squint.

((clack-of-the-clock-clack-of-the-))

((zzzt-sasha-is-missing-zzzt-that-poor-)) ((-clock-))

You slap your hand against your thigh. "No." Head shake. Trying to loosen the words and failing.

"No, what, Ms. Khare? No, you don't know where Sasha is? No, WHAT? STOP WASTING MY TIME!" This last part he roars, actually baring his yellowing teeth as he grimaces and slams his hand on the table. *THUNK*.

"You don't know me! You don't know me!" You shriek the words, each one tearing from your throat. You toss the empty water bottle high over his head.

Varela's face is ashen. He pushes his chair back, its metal legs screaming against the floor, as the bottle bounces harmlessly off the mirror behind him. "Hey!"

But it's too late. You pace faster, back and forth, back and forth. Muttering and yelling. "I am a *fucking* piece of *shit*. I deserve to *die*. Fucking piece of *SHIT*!" You punch your hip, heel of your palm bouncing off the pad of fat over your bones like the water bottle off the mirror. Reassuring bruises. "No wonder no one loves me. I'm too *sensitive*. I'm too *argumentative*. I'm *too godDAMNED FUCKING SHIT MUCH! I AM A FUCKING PIECE OF UNLOVABLE SHIT! I-WANT-TO-DIE-I-WANT-TO-DIE-I-WANT-TO-DIE!*" Your screeching doesn't sound like you. Not your words, not your voice. It's inhuman, a trapped wild animal with nowhere else to run. Mortal fear.

And then you can't talk anymore, the muscles around your mouth frozen. Overloaded, you hit your forehead against the brick wall.

"Stop it! What the hell are you doing? Stop it!" When Varela grabs at your arm, you swing it wildly.

((touching-hurts-touching-feels-bad-no-touch-no-touch))

and accidentally smack him in the head. “Fuck!” He turns to the mirror. “We need medics!”

You back into the corner and slide down the wall, dragging your fingernails over your forearms, drawing blood and sweet release. Rocking rocking rocking. Slamming the back of your head against the wall, your spine juddering. Over and over, blocking the shouting and the lights and the clock.

Your bloody forearms over your face. Your hands over your ears. Someone grabs you again and you cry out, guttural, incoherent words. *((touching-feels-like-death-stop-please-stop-please-don't-you're-hurting-me-oh-my-god-please-please-please-NO-NO-NO-NO-NO . . .))* and out your mouth, “NO NO NO NO CONSENT!”

Then a sharp bite in your shoulder, then nothing.

THREE DAYS LATER, Varela knocks on your door. He’s alone, holding a manila envelope. You remember his fingers nickering against the folder in the interrogation room. You remember he called it an *inter-view room* but somehow you ended up on the floor beating your head against the wall. Somehow you ended up sedated and hospitalized until this morning.

As he steps forward to knock again, you step back from the peephole. You’re waltzing with the door between you. The knock is soft, so unlike when he thumped the table, baring his teeth and screaming at you.

“Ms. Khare? Akshi? It’s Detective Varela. I was . . . hoping to talk with you.”

You put your palms flat on the wood. “Go. Away.”

“Please hear me out. I have something to ask you, too. For Sasha, not me.”

You don’t care much about hearing him out but will do anything to help find Sasha. You step outside in another Baby-Yoda-leggings-and-green-sweater outfit, locking the door behind you.

“Thanks.” Varela rubs the back of his neck. “Akshi, my only priority is finding Sasha. Sometimes, as detective, I have to finesse situations to get to the truth, especially when people aren’t cooperating.”

There it is. He can’t just own up to playing bad cop; he has to make this your fault. You wait for him to tell you why.

You’re a loner.

You avoid eye contact.

You're twitchy.

You talk weird.

You're violent.

He shrugs, surprising you by saying, "Maybe that's not always the right approach." The fading bruise on his temple wrinkles like a wine-stained tablecloth. "First, let me reassure you that you're no longer a person of interest. New evidence has come to light."

"I already know I'm not a person of interest."

Varela flushes. "Look, I thought you were doing a little finessing of your own. I wouldn't have provoked you otherwise. My neighbors' son—he's different than you. More severe. But after our interview I spoke to his therapist."

"Those so-called experts don't listen to us." Still drained from the last few days, you sit at your wrought-iron table.

He nods and joins you. "Well, I don't just buy what people are selling. I investigate. So I also researched content by autistic people. And while I don't fully understand your condition, your interview could have been handled better." He's looking at you but not trying to force eye contact.

You don't have the energy to soften your bluntness or make your voice sound whatever-he-wants-it-to-sound. He's going to think your natural monotone and neutral facial expression are rude but you don't have the energy to care. "*You* could have handled it better instead of pushing—*finessing*—me into a meltdown and then 5150ing me."

The flare of his immediate defensiveness distorts the air between you like a heat shimmer in the peak of summer. He *did* involuntarily commit you, though.

Not your first time. Probably not the last, either. Like Varela's interview room—and the grocery store, doctor's office, gas station, anyplace *not-home*—the psychiatric ward is inhospitable. Cold. Loud. Scratchy sheets. Constant, impossible demands. Stranger in a strange land.

It makes things so much worse, not having your same food, beloved routine, quiet.

After a moment, he exhales and his shoulders relax. He's still soldier-straight, but you can see the yoke of his shirt slacken a tiny bit. "You're right."

"What did you want to ask me about Sasha?"

Varela frowns—you have no idea why because you don't speak body language. "Ohhhkay. Guess we're switching gears." He puts the envelope

on the table. “Despite obvious police presence, someone left these photographs at the Murrys’ door yesterday. No one heard or saw a thing. While we wait for a ransom call, we’re asking neighbors to share any security footage with us.”

((ransom))

Something cracks in your chest.

((oh-god-sasha))

Your heart, breaking.

Varela clears his throat. Maybe he’s waiting for you to say something? You review his words and come up with a bunch of facts about photographs and cameras. There’s no entry point, no window left ajar that you can push all the way up and climb into the conversation.

So you say what you’re thinking and hope it’s what he wants. “How awful for the Murrys to have to wait for a ransom call. To almost want one, just to hear *anything*.”

He holds out his hands. “And . . .”

“And . . .?”

“And. You. Have. Cam. Eh. Ras.” He speaks slowly, each syllable its own sentence, churning your stomach.

“Yes. I got them this year after a series of break-ins in the neighborhood.” Cautious, feeling your way through this confusing conversation.

Two lesser goldfinches land on your roof, their pretty call-and-response tingling your cheeks. You’ve always wanted that kind of seamless back-and-forth with anyone. Even Varela.

((ransom)) ((oh-god-sasha))

He raises his eyebrows. “So will you?”

You raise your eyebrows back, anxiety spiking. Any step you take could cause an explosion. Better to stay silent.

God, you hate talking to people.

He sighs—hard—and throws up his hands, barking, “I asked if you would send me your footage!”

Adrenalized outrage cold-careens through your veins. “Of course I will. But—and I’m not arguing here—you didn’t *ask* me anything. I’m super literal and I need you to be as patient with my way of communicating as I am yours.” You apologize, as you’ve been trained to do. “I’m sorry.”

It’s terrifying, telling people what you need. Angry people, treating you like a burden. Like you don’t *know* you’re a huge burden. Like there isn’t a line of angry people going back all the way to childhood who’ve told you exactly how burdensome you are.

But Varela mostly hides his annoyance. He sighs again, then nods.

The tension burns away and you're glad because Sasha

((ransom))

needs the two of you to be able to work together.

"Is there anything else I can do? Maybe take a look at the photos?" Your desperation to help is an unquenchable thirst, mostly to find her, partly to please him, as you've also been trained to do.

He scoffs. "Absolutely not. You're a civilian."

"Yes, but as you pointed out, I have an eye for detail. I'm autistic *and* an artist." You stare at the diamond pattern on the tabletop, squishing the pads of your fingers through it from the bottom up. "You must've brought them with you for a reason, right?"

He hesitates—again you've no idea why—then pulls out two photographs, image-side down. "I'd appreciate any insight you have. The Murrys, when they saw these pictures—let's just say they aren't doing well."

You feel a chill at your crown

((oh-god-sasha))

and shiver as it drops over your body.

"Are they . . . graphic?"

"No. They're of a place we can't identify. Sasha's in one of them. Alive." Varela rubs the back of his neck. "I'm going to show you one at a time and then together. You can touch them; they're copies. The FBI has the originals. Tell me if you see anything, anything at all."

You appreciate him for giving you step-by-step details of what he's going to do. When you know what's coming next you can focus on what's happening now.

As Varela turns the first photograph over, a warm breeze blows your hair back from your face. Sweet jasmine in the air.

SASHA, SQUATTING in the recessed doorway of an abandoned warehouse. It's littered with empty food wrappers. Boarded windows. Brown streaks on brick walls. No identifying numbers or signs. The timestamp says it was taken two days ago at 5:25 p.m. If accurate, more proof it couldn't have been you.

Sasha's face is smudged purple above her cheekbones, like overlapping thumbprint bruises. In the shadowy doorway, her eyes look even greener, magnified by her tears, strangely complemented by the dirt on her cheeks. She's wearing a Disney princess costume, blue and red on

top with a yellow skirt. It's ragged and stained at the hem, torn on one sleeve, as if it's been worn before, an old hand-me-down.

Just as she was the last time you saw her, Sasha is barefoot. When she went to get the mail four days ago, her feet were clean, pink as a piglet. In the photograph, they're dirty with blackened toenails and a smear of mud over the top of her left one. A grotesque facsimile of the tongue of a shoe.

She has one hand around her knees, the other gingerly balanced on the filthy wall. She's backed against the door, looks as though she's sliding down it. Her eyes and mouth are big and round. Three black holes in her face. She might be screaming in this picture. A silent, unheard scream.

You start crying. "I can't look at these. I can't."

Sasha's pigtails, one still holding tight, the other slack, loose hair falling over her neck and shoulder.

Varela inhales, as though he's going to say something. You close your eyes. The clean smell of sunlight contradicts the horrors in the photograph.

"Give me a minute. I can do this." You open your eyes and touch her face. "She looks scared."

"Yes, she does." He flips the photograph over. "Ready for the next one?"

((no))

"Yes."

The second is again of the warehouse entryway. Sasha is nowhere to be seen. Shadows crisscross the ground and building. Somehow that emptiness is eerie. Foreboding. Something was there and now nothing is there. Timestamp of two days ago, 5:29 p.m. Four minutes after the first one was taken.

"Anything jump out at you?" Varela asks.

You shake your head. It looks like a thousand other warehouses in California. Probably Arizona and Nevada, too. "Not yet. Nothing specific."

"Yeah. It's pretty nondescript. Image searches have been useless—too many results." He picks the photographs up. "Ready to see them side by side?"

"Sure."

He lays them out, flipping each over slowly as though dealing blackjack.

You lean forward. The photograph of Sasha in the vestibule is zoomed

in whereas the other one is taken from farther back. You gaze into her eyes, hoping to catch a reflection of the photographer. No such luck.

"I need to get my pad." You push your chair back before Varela can say anything. Not so long ago you would have asked if you could get it, giving him the opportunity to say no, he didn't have time. Now you do what you need to do.

You place a gridded sheet of transparent tracing paper over the zoomed-in photograph and go section by section, lifting it up to more closely examine as needed. This keeps your panic and despair at bay by forcing you to focus on the small details rather than the big, ominous picture.

The hardest part is Sasha's gaping mouth. The grid cuts it in two, but still, all you can see is pain in the downturned, taut corners where her lips meet.

Varela keeps shifting in his seat. The chair's uneven and one leg or the other clicks on the brick patio. You want your headphones. You want to be alone so you can concentrate.

"Can I keep these for a day or so?"

He shakes his head. "Can't leave them with you. Shouldn't even be showing them in the first place."

"I need to be alone so I can concentrate. It's nothing against you. I can't work with other people around. Can I take pictures of them?"

"No. Way." He stands, the chatty goldfinches taking flight as his chair squeals. "Would it help if I took a few steps away?"

Your heart frantic-flutters. Anything he does is going to distract you. Type on his phone. Stare at you. Breathe. Sigh. Walk around, out of sight—on your property. At least if he stays in the chair, he'll be in one spot.

You wave your hand. "No. Go ahead and sit down. You're fine. I'll do the best I can. Let me get my headphones."

You also put on your sunglasses with the side-shields. Tracing, moving down the grid. There, at her right ankle, is the end of a trail of blood. You have no idea how long it is, what its source is, just that there's a ribbon of blood unfurling on the inside of Sasha's leg.

"What do you see?" Varela asks, but you can tell he's already seen it. He has a certain inflection, one you associate with people asking questions they already know the answer to. He's pretending he doesn't see it. Who knows why. Not you.

"The blood on her ankle." Your voice sounds like it's going over a

speed bump in the middle of the sentence.

"Yeah, we saw that, too."

Your elm's green-and-yellow canopy rustles, sounds like playing cards shuffling. You gaze at the final square. It's of Sasha's left big toe, pressed hard into the ground, the pad spreading out. Dirt in the creases makes it look a thousand years old. The more you stare at it, the more it looks like the root of some ancient tree, breaking through the concrete.

((don't-think-about-why-she's-bleeding-concentrate-concentrate))

Varela sits very still, no longer watching you.

Three shadows form a broken circle at the edge of the empty-entry-way photograph. Trees, just out of view. You trace the curving shapes of spindly trunks and branches, the small, thin leaves. Three dark souls frozen in a game of ring around the rosie.

You take off the headphones and sunglasses after you finish. "I have what I need. Give me some time to process. I'll contact you if I think of anything."

A falcon shoots up into the air, three crows surrounding him, squawking ferociously. The elm shudders from their aggressive ascent and several leaves shake down, whispering against the brick.

"Wow. They're fearless." Varela tracks the birds through the clear sky.

"Yes. Crows are very protective of their juveniles." You push back your chair. "Goodbye."

"Oh. Okay." He slides the photographs in the envelope. "Thank you for your help. Here's my business card. Cell on the back. Please call anytime with anything, however big or small."

You nod, not taking your eyes off your tracings. "I may text you, instead. It's easier for me."

"Anytime. For anything." He falls silent and you glance up as he rubs the back of his neck. His eyes are drooping, the lines around them etched into his skin. You think he looks worried or tired, maybe overwhelmed, resigned. The nuances of facial expressions are out of reach for you, but you're pretty sure he isn't optimistic.

Not wanting to say the wrong thing, you deliberate before asking, "Have you heard anything from, you know, the tip line or Amber Alert?"

He shakes his head. "We are *flooded* with phone calls and on Twitter, too. They're mostly . . ."

"Bullshit?" Nervous now, because you interrupted him by accident.

But Varela laughs, crow's feet deepening into fissures. "Yeah, bullshit. So any help from a legitimate source is greatly appreciated."

Although you have a hard time reading subtext, you're pretty sure he means *you* are the legitimate source. Your skin quivers. Maybe you can contribute and help Sasha come home soon.

FINALLY ALONE. Something's niggling at you. Something in those photographs is trying to crawl to the surface of your brain.

You make chaha the way you always do, the way Aai taught you: fresh grated ginger and cardamom. Lots of milk and sugar. As it steeps, you look out the window to Sasha's house, the mailbox where you saw her last.

In general, kids tend to be easier than adults. If they're happy, they tell you. If they're unhappy, same. No fake-smile-doublespeak-subtext-rich quicksand with kids. But that lack of pretense makes them vulnerable, like you. Kids need protection.

Moreover, it's *Sasha*. While you're not friends with her parents—not friends with anyone, really—you've watched her grow up. As a baby she'd wave from her stroller. When she learned how to ride a bike, you cheered from your kitchen. You always give her a full-sized Snickers for trick-or-treat.

She loves unicorns and rainbows. Her school backpack's covered in them. Unicorn dresses and rainbow barrettes. A unicorn Halloween costume with a rainbow mane.

Once, she won a Baby Yoda pencil topper in school and gave it to you because she knows that kind of love.

You're sure the other neighbors are bringing food and running errands for the Murrays. No one wants you there. Not with your perceived non sequiturs and too-direct way of talking. You can help by keeping your distance and allowing the niggling thought to work its way up.

You take your chaha and a plate of spicy, spiky chakli spirals to the backyard. The pool pump hums and sends small wavelets through the water, making the shadows from the overhead power lines wobble. You rock back and forth on the old palm stump, sipping and crunching, gazing at the rippling reflections of sunlight, listening to their orchestral music—cymbals crashing bright against the blue and black tile, trilling flickers in the pepper tree leaf-grottos, metallic trumpet buzzes on the lantana blooms, the cascade of a harp along the fountain. The yard is full of moving light. *Caustics*, they're called, but they're soothing.

You think of nothing while you rock, the sun warm on your skin.

Time passes. Not straining, not stressing, not perseverating, you watch the dancing light until it fills you up and you sigh, your body out of fight-or-flight at last.

Butterflies dip in the pool and back up, the thin, triangle-shadows of their wings connecting at various points with the thicker, curving shadows of the power lines. You draw the shapes they make in the soil at your feet. The niggling gets stronger, fingers in your brain trying to peel back a memory like peeling back the plastic sheet in a photo album.

You breathe rhythmically and let those fingers work at their own pace. The sun moves across the sky until all that's left is a whirlpool of light at the top of the fence, wire brushes swishing on a snare drum. It shrinks and shrinks until the light disappears with a *plink*.

It's late afternoon.

You text Varela. *I have something*. Pencil in hand, you add to your tracing of the warehouse's empty entryway.

A HALF HOUR later, you're both back at the metal table sitting across from each other.

You take charge. "Did you bring the photographs?"

Varela's blue eyes are gleaming. "I did." He spreads them out, black-jack again.

Examining the empty-entryway photograph with your magnifying glass, you sense Varela wants to look over your shoulder, something about the suppressed restlessness in his shoulders and hands.

You're glad he refrains. "Einstein said that coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous."

He frowns. "What does that—"

You take a deep breath, worried he might suspect you again. Doesn't matter—Sasha needs you to take the risk. "I know this warehouse."

He sits up even straighter. "You do?"

"Yes. It's by the Blue Monday in Palmvale."

"And you know this how?"

You turn the photograph so it faces him. "This circle of shadows? Boojum trees. In a strange coincidence, I've seen them before." You show him your tracing where you've sketched three boojums next to their corresponding shadows, bending and curling as though they're doing some kind of ritualistic dance, the triangle leaves like butterfly wings. "I saw Toadies at the Monday last year with an ex. We got in a fight right beside these boojums." You'd paced around them, finger-

tracing their full-moon shadows into your leggings over and over, wondering how you were going to camp the rest of the weekend, just the two of you, alone.

You open Google Maps and drag your phone screen past the Salton Sea and Salvation Mountain two hundred miles east. When you find the warehouse, you zoom in. The boojums are visible in satellite view, surrounded by rocks and desert shrubs. You compare their blurry shadows to the photograph. “See? Unusual trees in an unusual configuration. I *know* I’m right—look.” You switch the map perspective to the front of the warehouse. Empty entryway. It’s the same one.

Varela is nodding, careful to not make eye contact. “This is good work. A real lead. Thank you, Akshi. You do have an eye for detail.” He stands, reaching for your shoulder. When you shrink back, he stops. “My team and I will head there now.”

You also stand, relieved he believes you. “You know your neighbors’ kid?”

“Yep.” Remotely unlocking his car with a *beep-beep*.

“He may be nonspeaking but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t communicate. They have to learn his language.”

“You’re right.” He smiles. It’s a good one, asymmetrical and authentic. “I’ll text you. I promise.” He strides off.

The moment he leaves, it begins.

((three-black-holes)) ((Sasha-in-entryway)) ((empty-entryway)) ((trail-of-blood))

With nothing but time to kill, thoughts become parasites consuming your brain

((three-black-holes-Sasha-in-entryway-empty-entryway-trail-of-blood))
until all you are is a sobbing, sweating host of worst-case-scenarios.

((stop-stop-stop-please-stop))

Back on the palm stump, rocking, sketching, not-thinking. The sunset glitters pink in the pool with the bright sound of a glockenspiel. A squirrel runs along the fence and leaps into the pepper tree.

You draw Varela’s jacketed back and, over his shoulder, Sasha’s face. She has her arms around his neck. Dirt-smudged and tear-stained, she looks straight at you as though into a camera lens. She isn’t smiling, but she’s alive. She’s alive.