House of Jerky

The day began at the crack of dawn, before the kids went to school, before the drunkards who quell their existential dread with either arrogance or desperation. Alcoholism and drug abuse had increased dramatically since death turned off, and Abe, fortunate to being only the occasionally imbiber in the Before, understood their motivation with a twang of empathy. Just recently Abe read in the news that the lungs of heavy smokers stilled turned black and necrotic like a charred raisin, their teeth ghastly tombstones, skin sallow and hanging, but instead of organ failure their body reacts just like everyone else’s now: plateaus. That’s what the Neighborhood Nurses refer to it, and Abe thought that was a catchy replacement for death.

***Plateau****:* when your organs failed and your body dipped its toes into death but cannot, when your innards regenerate just enough to function at a base level.

The neighborhood was a tree lined street marked by two posts at each end. Abe also read that the Department of Transportation had taken on the job of creating a symbol for each of these posts to signify to surrounding town this was a Neighborhood, but as of now it was only two brick formations that looked sort of like a cairn. Large oaks created a bristling canopy over the street, which in the summer must be very shaded and green but in the autumn their arms looked like giant witches’ fingers, the streets carpeted with decomposed orange and yellow leaves. It was the only living thing that decomposed in this street, which was empty, because there was no need for cars except the vans that brought in the platoons of N.N.s and custodians for the morning, afternoon, and night shift.

The houses were Victorian and massive, full of trellises and balconies, columns and ornamental trimmings. A real neighborhood vibe, Abe thought, and he allowed himself the fantasy of living in these houses in the Before. Houses like these would make him want to read by the fire, to relax on the porch as children learn to bike or handout treats to tiny ghouls and goblins and whatever superhero was popular at the time. Houses like these invite a reason to live, and Abe shuddered at the irony.

“You ready for this?” Tonya, his trainer, said, “You can say no. There is a white bus designed to take you back to the hospital at the end of the road.” She gestured to the white vehicle laying dormant, the driver waiting to take back the greenbeans who just couldn’t cut it.

“I’m fine,” Abe said, half lying, half becoming absorbed by the darkness in the windows, masking a vacantness that he knew was a lie.

Tonya, who Abe found to be incredibly gentle, looked him square in the eyes, “There is no shame, Abraham.”

“Call me Abe,” he said, and hopped out of the van and into the brisk street, rows of beautiful Victorian houses stretching out to each flank of the horizon. He needed to do this, to see a Neighborhood for himself. If he did not have the nerve then at least he could say he tried.

Already there were several groups of scrubbed N.N.s trudging up the street. If one didn’t know any better it would seem like a massive house call. Tonya was already at the front of the porch of *71*. The addresses did not have a street name unless there were two Neighborhoods to accommodate the population. Cities usually have many Neighborhoods. Abe heard in the car ride here that it was harder to be a N.N. in Los Angeles because of the driving to the satellite Neighborhoods, but someone else, Tonya, actually, who comes from the Bronx, said that the Neighborhoods are condensed into low-income mixed-use high rises, with the zoning laws being a percentage dedicated to managing the Plateaued. Abe could see the calculations of injustice within her eyes but they were gone now, replaced by an empathy reserved for healthcare professionals. Like Abe himself. He walked out with the items in the checklist: sponges, rubbing alcohol, gauze, a kaleidoscope of pills. Scissors.

“Where are your earplugs?” Tonya said, tilted her head and gesturing to the seafoam sponges in her ear.

“Earplugs? I wasn’t told-”

“It’s fine. Here,” two soft cones lay in her palms, “yes I wore them yesterday and yes they were in my pocket but please, take them. You’ll be thankful.”

Abe looked to the neighboring houses. He could spot multicolored plugs in people’s ears, almost like headphones. It reminded Abe of a boxer adjusting their gloves before entering the ring. Tonya assessed him, said something that, under the spell of the earplugs Abe could not entirely gather, and opened the door, revealing a great maw. Abe stood there on the porch, felt the breeze of the morning air, hours before the parallel streets would be activated by dog walkers and school kids and joggers. He took a breath, put on his sanitary mask, and plunged into the darkness.

“Their eyes have deteriorated to hyper-sensitivity,” Tonya said, leaning in close so her whispers could penetrate Abe’s earplugs. She activated a tiny flashlight at the end of a pen, traced the small illumination over a clipboard that was hanging on one of the hooks typically used for keys near the door. It was a floorplan of the house. “Eyes are painful when they Plateau.”

Abe had always wanted to walk in a house like this. He loved architecture, and Victorian houses always possessed a dream like quality to him, but now the house was almost pitch black, illuminated with ghastly warm night lights watted to some government standard, allocated at various junction and corners like the lighted path down a mine shaft. Abe immediately felt the damp, salty tempest of dead flesh and acrid bodily fluid slap onto his scrubs like the ebbs and flows of a tide. To the left of the clipboard was the supplies they would need, no different to a typical medical mis-en-place; rubbing alcohol, extra gauze, cotton balls. Underneath were fresh sheets and pillows. Tonya explained that it was the responsibility of the custodians who come in after every shift to refill the supplies from the basement, and when she gestured to the door at the end of the hall, the only closed door, it seemed to warp and bend into another dimension, like some void into hell, a maw within a maw. Abe was happy he was not a custodian.

Tonya tapped Abe on the shoulder, and he followed her to an adjacent sunroom, the blinds drawn with light blocking curtains. Abe’s eyes had not adjusted to the void, but in the corners of his eyes he could see them. All available space lined the perimeter with bunks that reminded Abe of a boyscout trip he took in the Poconos as a kid. Or, Abe thought, they looked more like filing cabinets, shelves in a desk. At least five Plateaud stacked like logs from the floor to the ceiling, their bodies giant scabs, sticky and shining in the limited glow of the nightlights. Sunken eyes, receded lips. Living skeletons, their muscles atrophied to the bare minimum of subsistence and existence, atomically stitched back together, unable to remember how to achieve cellular death. The room stunk of molted flesh and the last vespers of anti-septic from the night crew. Scraps of dead skin lay on the floor like a shed down of a bird. The bodies moaned in their tombs, living in constant agony as their bodies consistently dipped into death only for the mortal coil to be a bungee cord, snapping them back to existence. Here was the dream of dictators, of politicians, artists, egomaniacs: to live forever.

Abe found himself shaking, watching the scabbed and mottled rags of flesh, knowing that if the egg heads don’t figure out how to reverse whatever evolutionary gene was turned on, this would be his future too, and Tonya’s, and everyone he knows and will ever know forever, all of them aware of this unspoken, terrible fate. It was at this precise moment when Abe learned why the turnover rate for N.N.’s was so high.

Tonya tapped him on the back, bringing Abe up from the dredges of his stupor. With the earplugs and the sanitary mask, it was difficult for her to communicate with him, but he had gone through the practice runs and taken the right tests and he knew, for the most part, what needed to be done. What mattered was that he followed Tonya’s lead. She shined a light on the clipboard, showing Abe the plan of the house: *House 254, Front Room B, Column 1, Bed 1*, and made a show of the endless grids on the following pages, glimpsing locations of the house like *Master Bathroom, Column 4, Bed 6,* and *Nursery, Column 2, Bed 3.* Their eyes connected and Abe nodded, a single pearl of sweat trailing down the side of his face.

He followed her to the first bed and knelt, as if in prayer. The first Plateau writhed in its slot. There was a time when all residents of the Neighborhood’s had their name and registration on their headboards, and family members could visit the Neighborhood during certain hours like a retirement home or hospice care, but it was determined after two sad decades of collective hope breaking that the Plateued were incognizant, their only actions to be filtering excrement and abscesses from open sores, to involuntary snap back to mortality, to restitch their sinews slowly, painfully, stubbornly, back together. Their existence was so primordially consumed by their permanent death/life cycle that all semblances of a personality had been reduced to a scabby, damp lump of skeletal shaped meatloaf, the only movements the occasionally painful twitch of neurons electrocuting muscles that have long wished to die. And the numbers have added up. They cannot be cremated, as the cellular regeneration it would cause is inhumane. They cannot be buried, as they are still awake, but the land to house the dead has long been converted to warehouses not dissimilar to this Neighborhood, and now they lay, forgotten but a burden, a necessary evil to ensure a public service. Such is that Abe, bending down into the humid pocket of the maggot-filled hamburger before him, could not help but see himself on this cot, waiting to die, forced to live.

Fortunately, his training came back to him, activated by Tonya’s own rummaging through her med kit. She cleaned the crusty pustules on the body, wiped away flaking pus as if it were dried yolk. Then she changed the catheter, the colonoscopy bag. She rebandaged portions of its limbs that had gone necrotic, the natural order of the world excavating a deep recess into revealed bone that will slowly and excruciatingly begin to tack itself back together and will bleed heavily. Tonya moved aside and allowed Abe to mimic her. He was grateful for her patience.

They moved in silence, communicating with gestures, subtle taps on the shoulder. Tonya instructed Abe on how to suture open wounds so they can rejuvenate easier, how to apply the right amount of ointment on exposed bones without using too much light, how to give them the pills they need to sedate them for another couple of days, as time is not on their side, and their psyches are too shattered for any kind of distraction from this mortal hell. They moved about the house, up and down the rows, and Abe likened the rhythm to watering plants, doing maintenance.

An hour later they were on the last of the columns. Their shift would be over soon enough. Abe was not much of a drinker, but he craved alcohol. N.N.’s statistically have a high rate of substance abuse, which is ironic because the bodies that have given themselves to drink or drugs are having a slightly more difficult time Plateauing, although at this point the differentiation between pain is nominal. Abe knew that misuse of the body ambers like an incorrectly healed bone, but seeing these poor people, knowing that he will be them unless those nerds in the Arctic can isolate whatever signal in the DNA decided to turn off…one of the prospects to Abe’s interview to even become a N.N. was that he tested low for substance abuse, but this seemed to only be a hiring pattern that stopped past the paperwork.

They were administrating an oral tonic to what Abe thought was a woman but looked more like a mummified cat in *Second Bedroom*, *Column 6, Bed 4* when Tonya gripped Abe’s shoulder and hoisted him up to *Bed 5*. Tonya pulled out her scissors and urged Abe to do the same. Before them was a slimy pink, purple cocoon that reminded Abe of an enlarged chunk of deli ham before its sliced. In the darkness it was difficult to make out features, but Abe’s eyes had adjusted slightly, and he could make out the hollows of eyes, the subtle indent of an ear, the absent gaping of fish like lips, nubs of toenail-less toes poking out of the slab like ridges in the thin socks. Abe watched a series of mental bracings occur in Tonya’s mind before she took the scalpel and plunged the blade into the shimmering meat mass, her eyes wincing, refusing to look away. A volcanic explosion of rotted meat, dead skin, exposed muscle, and sour pus invaded the room and Abe had to steady himself on the banister of *Bed 4*, ignoring the mummified cat woman at his knees, moaning in her own way. Tonya sliced the lumps of body that had become fused to the sheets, carving like a turkey, cutting the adhesive binds of improperly healed skin that looked to Abe like the poor person was melting. Every now and then Tonya would stop, inspect the newly freed square inch of liberated flesh, and nudge their arm to see if there was any fragment of melted skin still fused to the sheets. Abe refused to look away, inspired by Tonya’s resolve. He got out his scissors and cut away the sheets where he could, his gloved fingers slipping more than once on account of the melted, greasy biomass. The process took upwards of two hours, and Tonya did not stop until they were able to lift the poor soul from the bed and put it on a stretcher, its skeletal frame a reverse chrysalis, freed from its meat cocoon of death, speckled flesh that weighs no more than a small child, joints permanently contorted, its flesh slick from the inner humidity. After they had replaced the sheets and applied antiseptic and anti-adhesives to the canyons of skin flabs on the things back, legs, arms, and neck, Abe made a move to go to the bathroom to wash up. Tonya tapped on his shoulder and directed his attention to the other beds and columns.

“Almost,” she said, and Abe understood what she was trying to say: sprint the rest of the shift.

Fortunately, they only had one more case of the Plateaus fusing to the bed sheets, although this time was not easier to do and it was just as much as an assault on the senses, but at least Abe had a better idea for the process and how long it would take. After resetting the bed, he bent down to adjust his pants that had become caught on one of the bed posts and felt an immediately reverse suction of air tickle his ears. In the darkness the aquamarine earplugs fell to his shoes and in like a vortex funneled the sounds of the house. All around Abe was uneven rhythm of moans and cries and attempts at whispered praying through mouths with no lips or teeth and dry sandpaper tongues. Sounds of the body stitching together mimicked creaking wood, low snaps as joints healed and broke and healed and broke into some cosmically insulting joke against the mortal coil. Soft sobbing that comes not from their scabby bodies stitching back together but from the utterly dreadful defeat that this is the life of a Plateaud, themselves envious of their ancestors who could walk through that final white door instead of being pulled back. This is a fate that will befall everyone. Abe was looking into his future. Abe was *hearing* his future.

As he ran out of the house he felt like a failure. He had never left a job undone; it was one of his proudest work achievements. He had also never left work that was meant for him for someone else. But this, that house, the Neighborhood…Abe tore off his mask and bit his knuckles and began to sob silently, grateful for the sun, now afraid of the darkness. He saw others outside too, green bean N.N.’s on their first shift who had also glimpsed their future, saw the proof that death was not an abstraction, but that it was totally, entirely, biblically absent from the human paradigm. Some of them were weeping openly, their heads buried in between their scrubbed knees on the porch. Others were fumbling into the vans to rummage like a raccoon for the nearest cigarette, which was not permitted in the Neighborhoods. More than a couple N.N.’s prayed, but there was fear in their eyes, and with that a sad and profound humbleness.

Tonya’s shadow engulfed Abe and she bent down, carrying with her the atoms of rubbing alcohol, dead skin, and sweat. She reached to pat Abe on the shoulder, but she recoiled. Abe wished she hadn’t.

“I’m sorry I left early,” Abe said.

“It’s expected,” she said. By now the more veteran of the N.N.s were consoling their own charges. It made Abe feel better knowing that he was not alone in this tempest of existential dread. Tonya continued: “A lot of people think that your first day is the hardest, but it’s not. It’s the second day, because you made a decision to *come back*.”

Abe was silent.

“Will you come back, Abraham?”

“Call me Abe,” he said, and apologized again for leaving early. He was silent the rest of the night home, had not gone out for drinks with the others to unwind after the long day. He noticed a lot of the other green beans flaking too.

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Being a Neighborhood Nurse had not so much as made Abe popular but made him a novelty. His friends would ask him the simple questions, so much that he had the answered rehearsed two weeks in. *How was it? Is it real? What do you do to quell their pain? Do you build a new house if there is no room? What is the worst case? Do they dream?*

Abe understood this. It was a natural curiosity to inquire about the sudden lack of afterlife. Church attendance had quadrupled in the past twenty years. The elderly had taken out their wills to pay for N.N., much like hospice. Abe did not know what happened when their money ran out, or when the government subsidies ran out, or when the land when out. He heard in the breakroom about a rumor which posited that those who could not afford the cabinet slot dignity of an N.N. are put in holding warehouses, or dumped into the parking lots of large, anonymous apartment buildings converted to acres high Neighborhoods, where they live/die like a stack of cards, with each card representing another stack of cards, and each card representing another stack of cards. Tonya said the entire process was inhumane, an insult against our public empathy. When someone countered and asked what Tonya would do instead, she told them to shove it.

Criminals on death row would be forced to live out their life sentences in a coffin with minimal air, their lungs forced to combust from the density of the atoms underground and regenerate, each twelve feet government mandated plastic straw sucking in feeble jet streams of hot air into lungs that are just aching to die. It was not uncommon for teenagers to raid fields of what the media referred to as “Survivors” and put their thumb on the straws, which Abe, as much as he disagreed with the endeavor, could see where the righteous power high became addictive. Their van passed these fields every once in a awhile, and they looked vacant, but if you looked closely enough you could see the literal life lines like an old fashioned scuba diving apparatus, and all you could do was

“Just ignore it,” said Bill, much to Tonya’s grumbling displeasure. He had been an N.N. since the inception of the Neighborhoods. He was one of the first psych eval tests the government did to assess any trauma and he made sure to let everyone know. When Abe asked him if the studies had any results, he scrunched his face and said that it was a longitudinal study.

The van turned the corner into the Neighborhood. The driver assigned houses via a clipboard on the dashboard and the pairs walked across the dew dotted lawns, putting in their earplugs along the way. Abe and Tonya were still assigned to one another, and while he no longer followed her around like a ball and chain, he was still relieved to know his experience was under her tutelage. She seemed to possess an incredibly hardened fortitude for the Neighborhoods, her resolve ambered instead of destroyed. Abe asked her why she had adopted this mentality once, after a house visit, and she simply shrugged.

The days were not significant. Rummaging through the darkness of the Victorian homes, looking at the notes left by the previous N.N.s on the grid hanging on a hook on the wall, sanitizing, bandaging. Cutting. Abe made sure not to let his earplugs fall, was particularly conscious of making himself all but deaf along the columns and beds. It was the moans that did him in, that haunted his dreams. Even hearing a whisper of a Plateaud moaning as their body rejected death was enough to crash within him a wave of nausea and bring tears to his eyes. Yet in a way Abe was grateful for these experiences. Neighborhood Nurses were not regarded as heroes, the media designated the geeks in the Arctic who were trying to solve whatever caused the body to reject death and the brave volunteers that were going through horrible experiences to isolate the genome or whatever. But Abe didn’t care, for if this was the way of things.

The pay was good and the benefits even better. His friend Charlotte said that N.N. nurses had the same target audience of funeral directors, of which the field had all but dwindled into “ceremonial” funerals, and even then, this was considered kitschy. Yet Abe had a difficult time appreciating his spoils. He had taken up the therapy perk which was built into his contract of employment and even though this made him feel better to talk about his N.N. experiences, he knew it was a part of a larger longitudinal study to determine how the present mind reacted to the far and unlimited future of suffering immortality. These tacked on extra hours thinking about work every week, and even though the therapy assisted in helping him sleep, it dominated any attempts at balancing work/life. The extra pay had gone into a nice car, a bigger apartment, and keeping his fridge stocked since the government had increased the prices on everything to pay for the Neighborhoods and they couldn’t tax the hosting counties anymore. Abe had started to even keep bottles of alcohol, even though he wasn’t that much of a drinker, and at his house warming party he invited his friends from outside of work and his colleagues from work and both groups looked at one another like the other was threatening them, as if the N.N.’s would personally shepherd them across Styx and shoot them like T-shirt cannon in the Neighborhoods themselves, even though Abe was really hoping that Tonya would find a way to enmesh herself with the “normies” in the same way that she soothed Abe’s psychic break that first day.

There was a girl at the party that Abe liked and things were going well and in the midst of the heavy vapors of alcohol Abe could not help but look into her lust filled eyes and see the meatball hollows of the Plateaud, could not see the pebbles of a gin and tonic on her lips without seeing the receded and necrotic patchwork of veins that had become the Plateaud’s gum lines. This punched Abe out of the intimate vortex of finding a suitor, ejected him from the sexual electricity between the two of them, and, like the dissipating of a mirage, all Abe could see around his apartment were not his friends or his coworkers but skeletal meat sacks, their bodies fused to the carpet, the wall, the couch. He thought of the girl, thought of bringing her to bed, thought of the pink coagulate of incorrectly Plateaud limbs pulling away from the sheets like skin on hot leather during a summer day. Abe drew back and tried to recover, blinking several times, but he knew the next morning from within the hangover daze that he had ruined the night for himself, and probably everyone else too. His friends agreed, which he was grateful for their honesty, and they suggested he get more advanced therapy, which upset him for reasons he could not quite understand. The N.N.’s understood. Apparently, it was a part of the process, a social chrysalis, and this upset him also for reasons he could not quite understand.

“It never ends,” said Tonya one morning, the rim of her thermos hovering below her lips, her eyes scanning the news on her phone. “Suicide bombers are found in the wreckage with their victims. The bodies are too disconfigured to identify who is who.”

“So how do we differentiate?” Bill asked, looking out the window and at the pre-dawn sky. “We can’t all put them in Neighborhoods.”

“You can’t tell the difference,” Abe said. “All the bodies look the same.”

“You can tell by the…” Bill waved his hands in the air, “you know, by their…stuff.”

“We’re nurses,” Tonya said, “you can say genitals, but I’ll stop you there and say that we both know you can’t identify any Plateaud by their genitals.”

Abe knew Tonya was right, of course, but he had never allowed the rent in his head to free up enough to acknowledge this thought. He looked down at his own crotch, thought of that night a couple weeks ago, even thought of the guy he met at the bar last week and how he could not escape the phantom clutches of what he and everyone else will all become. It was not even 6 in the morning, and he needed a drink.

Tonya continued, her thumb scrolling lateral to a new story: “A car accident kills a family of four. The family is so *goodness* *fuck* discombobulated by the impact that their bodies Plateaued incorrectly.”

“Would they be in the same Neighborhood?” Abe asked.

Bill recoiled into himself. His face was calm, but his eyes portrayed a grimace. “There are separate houses for kids.”

“But wouldn’t the families want to be together?” Abe pushed, surprised at this new information.

Tonya did not raise her head up when she said, “When we Plateau we are alone.”

Abe stayed awake that night, aware that he had plummeted into a feedback loop of distress. He lay in his bed, extra conscious of his healthy flesh that has years before deteriorating. Every morning and night he checked the news for updates about the Arctic outpost trying to reverse the immortality and every morning and night he felt as if another stone was put upon his shoulders, dragging him into this mental hell. He read about a boat that crashed in the Pacific, and everyone in the wreckage are Plateauing amidst the corals, food for sharks, trapped underneath debris with lungs that are regenerating just enough to drown, ad infinitum. No one outside of the N.N.s seemed to care. Immortality is old news now, the way of things. Abe figured it was because anyone who is not an N.N. had abstracted the curse enough to be minimal in its intrusion, like how the death used to come to us all but for grandma when you’re a kid the weight of the matter is too adult for you to understand.

It had been three years since Abe first started doing house visits. Tonya had been promoted to a head N.N., which meant that she over saw entire neighborhoods, some that were designated for children and some for plots of convicts. Abe and Bill, now partnered together, walked into one of the houses and as Bill made to put in his earplugs Abe saw vertical slices nf on his forearm.

Bill looked at him with puffy eyes. “What of it?”

Abe shrugged. “I just, you know if you need anyone to talk to.”

“What’s that going to do?” Bill said, shouting above the muffled earplugs. None of the other N.N.’s had taken notice and were entering their assigned houses for the day. He looked down at his feet, at his wrinkly periwinkle scrubs. “You read the news this morning? About the birth rate?”

“Lowest birth rate in decades,” Abe said / shouted.

“A couple hundred additions to the Human race in this country alone,” Bill said, “who the hell would want to bring children into this world just so they can turn into…into *them*. We’re going to run out of room on the Earth eventually. Already the government is starting to implement food rationing, these damn Neighborhoods are taking so much money and resources to maintain. We bring kids into the world and what are they going to eat? There will be more Plateaud by the time they are teenagers. The system we have is unsustainable. And um,” Bill swallowed, “it’s uh, it’s the only way I can sleep.”

This paralyzed Abe. He could tell that Bill needed an answer, any answer, but instead he had only succeeded in infecting someone else with the invasive thoughts. With disappointed eyes, Bill walked into the house and Abe followed soon after, sulking like a reprimanded dog. They worked the rest of the day in silence, which Abe was thankful for. They walked through the rooms via navigation of the pen light. They scaled the file cabinet columns, gauzed when they needed to, scissored when they needed to, sanitized everything. The previous shift forgot to refill the rubbing alcohol and the supplies in the foyer, which usually would create an intimate moment of shared annoyance that served to ground the incoming N.N.s, but this time Bill looked at the clipboard, showed that all the beds in *Laundry Room, Columns 1 & 2* needed gauze and easy maintenance, and suggested Abe go into the basement to restock since it will get them out of this place quicker. Abe agreed. He was done with the day too, his mind craving numbness, much in part to Bill’s own moroseness. Bill was a drainpipe for happiness, his approach to life very different from the empathic Tonya or the others, who deal with the heavy nature of the job through their own depressants / stimulants and with a *M.A.S.H.-*esquedark humor.

He approached the basement door and released a plume of burnt flesh and acrid hair that almost kicked him back. It was like walking into the mouth of some great and necrotic beast. He had thought that the Neighborhoods were the smell of immortality, but he was wrong; it was in the basement. He stepped down the stairs, his arms gripping the railing to maintain purchase in the darkness. The steady drum *thunk thunk thunk* of washer machinescleaning bloodied and meaty blankets swirled into vibrations at his feet, which was new knowledge; Abe had never actually considered where the laundry was done.

He reached the end of the splintery banister, and he began groping into the darkness, blind and deaf from the ear plugs. There was no one in the basement, but he was afraid of turning on the lights in case the sliver of escaped yellow atop the stairs burned the Plateauds in the front room’s eyeballs. He found the washing machines rumbling and touched its rocking surface, his fingers grazing on the cold iron of tools; the sharpness of a saw, the glacial touch of a hammer. Abe scoffed, it was told that the Custodians were not entirely organized, or perhaps had a different method of organization as opposed to the anal-retentive necessities of the Neighborhoods Nurses. He searched for the vague shapes of large industrial containers of alcohol and pyramids of gauze, until his feet were knocked from underneath him, failing to vault over an obstacle in the black ichor below. He swore at the Custodians as his knees slammed against the chilled concrete, sure that patches of his own blood had begun to seep through the knees of his scrubs.

He was holding onto a denim coated shin, and as he tried to strain his eyes to get used to the darkness his earplugs fell out and the seafoam-colored sponges looked like little glowing buoys in a black void and he heard something croak *help me* and it came from the other side of the room. Then it rose like a mismatched and mangled chorus of frogs, croaks of *help* and *please* and *god* passed around the room as if the voices were playing catch. At first Abe collected himself, his back against the *thunk thunk thunk* of the washer machine, then he decided that the voices were not coming closer and that they sounded awfully like the Plateaud’s groaning upstairs. He refrained from calling out, afraid of hurting their malformed eardrums that pop and restitch back together on the hour. Abe himself had been making house visits to every house in the Neighborhood and not once did he see on the clipboard a designation for *basement.*

With his eyes slightly adjusted to the black ether, he could see the custodian on the ground, his leg slightly ajar from where Abe tripped over it, his large frame laid like a fallen mannequin. A butcher’s knife was sticking out of his ribs. Abe walked towards the voices, hearing the sound of lipless groans, of pulled apart Velcro skin, of wounds opening as if pulled by a zipper.

Footsteps at the top of the stairs and Bill called out, louder over his own ear plugs and an assumption that Abe had his own. “C’mon, Abe. I don’t want to do the whole house myself.”

Abe paused for a second, considering that he shouldn’t answer to respect for the Plateaud’s eardrums, but he did not know what was happening here, needed to isolate the factors without waking up the entire Neighborhood.

He mentally projected an apology that he knew was worthless and shouted back: “I’ll be back up in a second.” His shout was answered with a cacophony of painful groans and grimaces as ear drums popped like kernels.

Abe could make out several large tables at the edge of the room, occupied with tiny dolls, contorted like some paper crane. Abe knew better, though. He approached the Plateaud, found several of them wrapped together with twine like some abominable chimera, a fusion of coagulated meat stuck together by their tri-fold regenerative qualities. Cheeks connected with jowls, skeletal torsos bound like bushels of hay onto bony, skinless hipbones. *Help us*, one called, the cracking of tearing flesh forcing the fused forearm of another to split and weep with shiny pus. *Save us.* Abe stumbled backwards, steadied himself on a worktable that held more tools within an aura of alcohol sanitizer. *Kill us*. There was a poof of cold wisping from the side of the bench and Abe’s fingers nervously tap danced over to a cooler that he had usually associated with camping trips and barbeques. He gulped and began to shake as he lifted the cooler top, found tiny packets of air packed bags full of flabs of meat that look like vacuum sealed containers of beef jerky. Abe shuttered, felt himself beginning to get lightheaded and lose balance. He made to run out of the basement but was stopped by a movement on one of the tables. It was not swift enough to stop him but enough that it registered that someone was trying to get his attention.

*Please*. Each word was strained, ripping not just one fragment of flesh but the intertwined combination of the haystack of meat on the table. *Eating. Me. Me. Me. Me. Eating. ME.*

“I’m sorry,” Abe whimpered, and the trifecta of voices screamed in a unification of mismatched pitch. He ran up the stairs and had to stop himself from slamming the door behind him as if that would quell the demons hidden underneath. He sped walked into the foyer, where Bill was putting in new hand sanitizer.

“You took forever,” he said. “Next door had extra.”

“Sorry.”

“What took you so long?”

Abe opened his mouth but shut it. Flashes of the trifecta of bodies merged, the dropped serrated knife, their lips rupturing their cheeks as the skin incorrectly regenerated, *plateaud.* “I couldn’t find it.

“Whatever, let’s just finish up. I can’t stand another minute in this place.”

Abe thought of telling Bill what he had seen in the basement but, after seeing him work hastily, unemotively, alienated from the very empathic work that the N.N. profession demands, he knew that Bill would not have the emotional fortitude to withstand another horror. They finished their shift and Abe closed the door of the house behind him, making sure the door to the basement was unlocked.

Later that night he called Tonya. She had made sure to give him her personal number before being promoted, perhaps with hopes of reaching out in a more casual context, but Abe figured this was a good enough reason as any. He reported what he saw to her.

After a silence, all she said was, “I heard about this. Never thought it would be in my Neighborhood. Thought the rumors extended to just the cities and lower income zipcodes.”

“You knew?” Abe said, his hand rocking the tumbler of whiskey.

“A rumor,” Tonya repeated. “We were briefed on it during my training. We were told to neither confirm nor deny. I figured since I’d never seen it and no N.N.’s never talked about it when I was an N.N., it was just some P.R. stunt, or some Internet jest taken too far.”

“That’s awful,” Abe said, downing his drink and pouring himself another glass before swallowing.

“What’s more awful is that they had somehow managed to overpower the custodian. That must have caused their bodies immense pain. This does not bode well for future treatment of them.”

“What’s going to happen to the custodian?” Abe said, “He’ll be arrested, right? Look, I’ll talk to whomever I need to.”

There was no answer.

“Tonya?”

“Yes, Abe?”

“He’ll be arrested, right?”

“He will be back to work in a couple of weeks after some extensive therapy, talks with the eggheads in the Arctic, social services experts and a decent pay bonus to compensate being hurt on the job.”

“Are you serious? This is immoral.”

“I’m sorry, Abe, but so is having non-Plateau’s starve because of a resource shortage. In the last year since you started, more than a fifth of every state’s land has been reclaimed by the government of these Neighborhoods. In a couple years even your Neighborhood won’t be a neighborhood anymore.”

“What are you saying, Tonya?”

“I don’t know anything, I’m sorry,” he heard her sniffing, felt sopping syllables of her tears.

“What if that were *you*?”

“But it’s not. It’s just a rumor.”

“Tonya, please.”

“Goodbye.”

“What happened to you?” Abe shouted.

“I…I don’t know,” Tonya said, “I got promoted, I guess.”

“Tonya!”

“I’m told by my superiors that furtherance of this conversation will lead to immediate termination. For both of us. Goodbye, Abraham.”

Abe was met with silence that he defeated by shattering the whiskey tumbler at the wall. After a second Abe began to cry. He said to himself, “My name is Abe.”

He received a call the following morning that he would be transferred to one of the newer Neighborhoods at the other side of town. The same cluster of beautiful houses, same layout. He suspected that Tonya had initiated this, and he could only assume she had one of their best interests in mind. He also missed her, and, surprisingly, he missed Bill. He acted like he was getting ready to become a Plateau, and when they passed one another getting into the vans for their house visits he noticed he had a slight yellow pallor to his flesh that seemed to make it sag. He was familiarizing himself with death and made no effort to hide it. On the occasions when Abe could get one of his new colleagues alone, he would tell them of the operations with the custodians in some of the houses, but no one believed him. Abe stopped eating meat quickly, even though the costs of produce had more than quadrupled since last year.

There had been no news of the nerds in the Arctic, or at least any that trickled down to the peons of the world. Last Abe heard they were sending more volunteers to learn how to die and throwing more money at the scientists who were just as afraid of immortality that Abe was. The lack of volunteers after this twenty-year excursion had slowed the rate, becoming a problem much like global warming, a periphery issue touted by politicians trying to get elected, special groups who hand out pamphlets at street fairs. Abe understood the reluctance to join the Arctic; it was a horrible way to live when compared to the worldly comforts of his own apartment, and the volunteers are *test subjects*, constantly dying in uniquely horrible ways so the lab coats could figure out the gene mutation or if its divine presence or, as Bill said years ago, a “cosmic joke”. There was only so many years one had to actually *live* before Plateuing, and it stood against reason that it should not be wasted committing yourself to an early life / death cycle. Abe saw a flier in the breakroom and walked away, feeling hollow, shying from the people eating what he hoped were baloney sandwiches.

The new Neighborhood looked familiar in the ways that all Neighborhoods in this country did, except Abe knew better. He started his shift with the ear plugs in, sensing the butcher shop in the basement, hoping that the supplies were well stocked to avoid any possibility of having to go into that dark void. He walked with his partner through the rooms and down the columns, administering, slicing, wrapping. They encountered a seemingly mummified skeleton whose bed was eye level with Abe and had become fused to the sheets. It was an inevitable task, happens once or twice a day, three times at most, but luckily Abe and his new partner were able to tackle the task with wordless ease. When his partner went to deposit the coagulated sheets into the bin and Abe set about redressing the bed, he saw the name on the placard, glinting in the tiny cone of light from his flashlight pen. He always felt it was cruel rather than dignified to allow Plateauds their names, since their minds had been broken and repaired for so long that they were hardly “in there” anyway. But the name caught his attention, one which put him into a spiral of haunted ambiguity. His light flashed over the name of the empty bed: *Abraham.*

It was in this moment that Abe knew the direction of his life. It was this, caring for a system that only applies pressure to a puncture wound. Without another word he pulled off his gloves and left the house, wiping away a tear with the back of his hand as his colleague ran after him but was rebuffed. Instead of waiting in the van Abe pivoted and walked towards the miniature school bus at the end of the road, chest puffed forward underneath the dawning sky, the shade of the rustling elm tree canopy. He sat next to a couple greenbeans who were weeping openly, their minds broken from their first day, and Abe could not help but feel that they were an alternative universe version of him had Tonya not pulled him from the depths of his dread all those years back. But the system had gotten to her to. The bus drove away, and Abe did not look back, ignoring the small cluster of scrubs that had gathered in the middle of the street to watch his rebellion. He refused to be reduced to a plaque even though this was an inevitability. If not it was being butchered alive and living as *they* are.

A couple of weeks later he had said goodbye to his friends and family. He took pictures of some of the basements, was sure that he passed the custodian that he tripped over a couple months ago in between shifts. Not all the houses had a butchery, but some did, more than Abe thought. He broke some laws that he was not even privy to the fine print of by anonymously wrote to some journalists and sent the pictures by physical mail. By the time they are received he will be long gone, clad in his parka with only a suitcase and one change of clothes to get him into the base.

The U.N.’s Arctic base was an eggshell an white infinity. Lights were on and looked inviting, but Abe knew better. This was where he was going to die. Over and over and over again. He would die from incineration, from poisoning, from asphyxiation, from corrupted stem cells. The receptionist received him as the new volunteer, and as he stepped out of his parka, handed the appropriate people his belongings, and stepped into his hospital gown, he hoped that eventually, with luck, he would never wake up again.