20th-21st Century American Mythology

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Introduction

The following five short stories are independent, fictional narratives that follow people living in the United States during the 20th-21st centuries. These moments of their lives tell the stories of the individual and the communities behind modern American mythology. Each character is unique to their own story, and through their stories, I am aiming to pull focus away from the vastness of The United States, and instead center the individuals whose lives are altered by these mythological experiences.

As I study it, American mythology is the unique culture that has formed within the United States over the course of the previous century. These sets of mythologies are formed from ripple effects of the United States’ colonialism, racism, and foundation of violence; America’s politics cannot be separated from the stories that the country believes.

The reactions of a community are just as important as the person who experienced it. How the community moves and reacts are direct reflections of what they believe and practice. Notably in Nathan, the town of Joseph is based in a real town in Oregon, of the same name. During my time visiting I was actively turned away or ignored whenever I attempted to ask business owners about the local legends. As a visibly queer person, visiting with my partner, we were completely shunned from the community in a way other visitors were not. Any information I gained about the legends of Joseph was through eavesdropping, or what little I could find online. Other strangers to the town were allowed to know the stories, but my partner and I were not good enough. The heart of Nathan is small town culture; new things are placed in one of two categories. Fascinating or terrifying.

When the lens shrinks away from a community, and instead focuses on an individual, such as in Nathalie, the individual’s beliefs regarding mythology become as important to them as
any other core belief (religion, morals, etc.). As we enter a modern era, the planet we live on continues to get smaller. Myths from an older era could hide monsters in caves or dark corners, but we have quickly run out of dark corners on Earth. As the United States was forming as a nation, there was a prime opportunity to put new monsters off of Earth. Space, the ocean, the afterlife. The heart of mythology is still the same. It all comes back to the fear of the unknown but, what is considered “unknown” changes with the culture.

While I am not a personal believer in many of these myths, it’s important to treat people’s beliefs with respect. I have made the conscious choice to not comment on the reality of these situations within my stories. Truth and reality are completely subjective in this context, and in the case of these five short stories, the objective truth is not important to the message.
Jack

*Content Warning: *Hunting/dead animals, brief mention of domestic abuse

Jack Abram always wore an old, red flannel with rips in the cuffs.

He had exactly one pair of old blue jeans that he paired with it. They were stained on the knees with grass and motor oil, and they were too big for him. The hem of his pants would get caught under the heel of his boot, and tear away from the leg of his jeans. The limp loops of denim dragged behind him wherever he walked.

He would get up before anyone else in the neighborhood, and work all morning. Under his truck, in his backyard, up on a ladder. He appeared in a different spot every day.

And once noon rolled around, he would sink back in the rocking chair he got from Mr. Hopper.

Mr. Hopper technically lived on the street over from us, but he was a good craftsman, and cheap as hell. Mr. Abram loved to make deals and barter with him; he ended up getting the chair in exchange for half a hide of Mr. Abram’s hand-treated deer leather.

He would sit out on his porch, in that chair, every afternoon. We would watch him close his eyes, lean back in his chair, and listen to his old porch’s creaks and cracks.

That porch could barely hold the weight of a grown man, we were certain it had some kind of mold or rot. When he was rocking on his chair, I swear the whole cul de sac could hear that old porch screaming for mercy. That was the one thing in his house that he refused to change or fix. Every other part of the house was a rotating door of plywood and nails, but the porch never even saw a fresh coat of paint.

He used to have a wife, and she probably would’ve chewed him out for letting his porch get so bad and annoying the neighbors with it. The two of them used to have matching chairs that
they would lounge in together, but she passed away some time in the 80s. Right after she died, Bobby Across-The-Road started a rumor that Mr. Abram got sick of all of her bad cooking and sassing, so he shot her with one of his big hunting rifles. They told the whole town that he cut her up, wrapped her body parts up in wax paper, and sold it alongside the deer meat he sells to the whole neighborhood.

That story, more than anything, is a disrespect to Mrs. Abram’s lovely cooking. She passed away after a long battle with cancer, and had all of her body parts buried at the cemetery next to the church.

After his wife died, Mr. Abram moved her chair inside, and filled his time with hunting the deer in the woods just outside of town. He hunted in every season - regardless of what the sheriff begged him to do - but if you let him get on the topic of hunting, he would talk up and down about how much he loved hunting in the Fall. He said he liked the way the Fall leaves looked. If you really got him rambling, he would mutter something about how the bucks are less suspicious in Fall. They apparently don’t listen as closely when there’s not supposed to be any hunters around. Which is good for an old man who shuffled instead of walked.

But as much as he loved hunting in the Fall, he hated dragging that creature’s corpse out of the woods alone. He kept hunting well into his 70s, and he was tough enough to make the hike out, but a 200 pound buck is a lot of animal to drag. We never saw him in the woods, but whenever we saw him drag the deer from off the back of his truck he would yank the buck by the antlers, and pull the beast up onto his shoulders. He had this sound he would let out as the full weight of a dead animal would rest on his shoulders, like he was trying to keep the air in his lungs, but it was still fighting its way past his closed lips. He would cling to the creature’s front hooves, grumbling and swearing as his ears and nose turned red from the cold. He would hobble
his way into his backyard, and disappear with the animal for days. Despite his love for hunting, at heart Mr. Abram loved his home more. He would rather skip a hunting trip than let his rocking go lonely for longer than a day.

He had been gone for about a day and a half when folks started to panic.

He left Thursday, early in the morning. On his way out of his driveway, The Evans Family heard his pickup backfire. Mrs. Evans said it had to be earlier than six in the morning because Mr. Abram’s string of swears woke her up, before he finally drove off.

At noon Miss Gillespie knocked on Mr. Abram’s door to deliver him a casserole she made. Mr. Abram refused to cook on his own after his wife died, he would live off of nothing but whiskey and unseasoned deer meat if it wasn’t for Miss Gillespie. She left the casserole, wrapped in foil, on his front porch after he didn’t answer the door.

Then much later in the evening, Miss Andrews - who used to live across the street from Mr. Abram before she moved out of the cul de sac - shooed some stray dog away from the foil-wrapped casserole. She knocked to tell Mr. Abram his dinner had been ruined, but he still wasn’t home.

I think Miss Gillespie called the police around noon the next day. She was insistent that Jack would never leave her casserole on his porch for a full 24 hours. Everyone in the cul de sac thought she had feelings for Mr. Abram, and we all figured she just couldn’t handle him blowing her off. Luckily for Mr. Abram, she’s insistent. The whole town could hear her screaming at the sheriff over the phone, until he finally agreed to do a wellness check, and send a pair of cops out to the woods.

The police found Mr. Abram in a tiny patch of grass that stretched between the edge of the woods and the street his truck was parked on. The EMTs that picked Mr. Abram up from that
field grew up in our cul de sac. Jamie Parks and Willow Fisher were both young and new to the job at the time. They were all too willing to violate HIPPA when their family started to apply small amounts of peer pressure. Jamie said that when they picked him up Mr. Abram was completely passed out, laying on his back, with no visible injuries. When he came to during the ambulance ride, apparently all he did was lay still and stare at the sky. We had no idea how much of all this was Jamie's imagination but according to her, his pupils were so huge that she couldn’t even see the color in his eyes. Willow claims she never noticed his eyes.

Jamie and Willow only told their friends, but the story took less than a week to spread. By the time Mr. Abrams was up and moving again, the whole town was salivating for more details.

Two weeks passed since his hospitalization before we got any more news on his state. The whole cul de sac heard Miss Gillespie’s shriek when she saw his truck parked back in his driveway. She dropped everything and rushed right over to check on him. A few random neighbors straggled in behind her, but he wouldn’t even open his front door for those first few days. He just stayed in his house, with the door locked, and the curtains closed tight.

The first person to pull Mr. Abrams out of his house was the youngest Chavez kid.

We were all in elementary school at the time, and a group of us went over with some to sell him some magazines or cookies or some other school sponsored junk, and when Ava Chavez paused her sales bit to ask him how he was doing, the story just bubbled out of his throat.

Jack was about to pull the trigger on a buck that was sitting directly in his sights, when an insanely bright light lit up the whole area, followed by the sound of a harsh buzzing (like a mosquito but louder). It obviously scared the buck away, so Mr. Abram turned around to tell off
Scott, 7

whoever ruined his hunt. He originally thought someone brought a truck or an ATV out to the woods.

As soon as he turned around, he got caught up in the beam. A sharp circle of light covered his whole body and paralyzed him.

After the light covered his entire body, it started pulling him in closer. He was being dragged towards the source by his chest, as the beam lifted his feet up and off of the ground. He lost his cap. A brown cap to keep his ears warm. He said it might’ve fallen off then; the paramedics said they couldn’t find it on his body.

Some of my old school friends, Parker and Shae, went into the woods to investigate his story, and they said they didn’t find anything special, but those two were always lying about something.

After the light drew Mr. Abram in, he was overwhelmed with heat so intense it nearly burned his skin.

Mr. Abram told us that being in the center of the beam made him feel like his blood was boiling and his bones were being prepared like pasta, his organs were being stirred into a chunky meat sauce to top it all off. And seconds after, the ingredients were shocked, and the cooking process halted. Cold air chilled his body. He didn’t say it the first time he told us this story, but after he had recited it a few more times he added that this whole process was the aliens decontaminating him. Maybe part of him was trying to come up with answers for all the things that he thought had happened to him. Maybe he was trying to make the story more entertaining. Apparently the trauma of the pain knocked him out.

Mr. Abram only remembered waking up for a few seconds during the whole process. The brightness was piercing, he had a migraine, and his spine felt like a noodle. He was paralyzed, as
short, gray men poked at his old, calloused skin. Mr. Abram said they had little bodies, with round stomachs, and little space suits that looked like they were made out of that shiny silver fabric. He described their arms and legs as little, but called their heads huge. The features on their faces were supposedly small, except for their large, black eyes. Their faces were mostly made up of eyes and forehead. He heard utterances of, “too old” and “defective” and “won’t work” as they worked on him.

Jessie from down the block said his story was insane. Why would aliens speak english? It’s just not realistic.

But Mr. Abram swore up and down that’s what he heard. He had never told a lie in his whole life, why would he suddenly start lying now?

Parker and Shae went out in the woods a lot; they were trying to find some kind of evidence to back up Mr. Abram’s story. They said they found his rifle, still on the ground, and a bunch of the trees had burn marks in the bark. But neither of them brought a camera, and neither of them could remember where in the woods it was, so no one else could go and verify their story. Those two loved attention more than actually helping out Mr. Abram.

When they were done with the old man, the aliens dropped him in the stretch of field just outside the woods. Mr. Abram remembers seeing the UFO. He said it was disk-shaped, and had glowing blue and white lights on it - so that it’ll look like stars once it gets up into the sky. The ship itself was covered in that same silver lamé fabric as the spacesuits, but it looked like it was stretched tight. The last thing he saw before he passed out was the craft shrink in size, before launching deep into the night sky.

After he told his story for the first time, the group of us had dropped what we were selling, and were sitting on his porch. We were obsessed with this story he was telling. He
seemed happier, knowing we cared so much about the little details of his struggles. The neighborhood threw a Welcome Home party for him in the next few weeks. He seemed alright. A lot quieter than usual, but alright. He waited until there was a silent moment before he announced he had something to say. Children gathered around his rocking chair. We sat on our knees, in the grass of his backyard, and listened to him tell his story again.


Nathan

“Don’t leave the beach, Mommy’s going to be right over there. Remember baby, don’t let the water get above your knees, ok?” One hand held her large, round sunglasses in place as she bent at the waist, fidgeting with his floaties. Her son awkwardly shifted his arms, they felt squished in the inflatables, “Shout if you need me, I’ll be right over there.” He was just a little too old for this many protective measures. She wasn’t ready for that yet.

Her son nodded in understanding, his toes tapping in the rough sand as excitement shook through his every nerve. He could feel the pull of the waves on his heels as he listened to his mother’s speil; Nathan was desperate to get deeper in the blue-green waters. It would be his first time going in without direct supervision.

“Love you,” his mother adjusted his puffy, yellow floaties one more time - squishing his biceps to make them fit - before she stood up straight.

She took a few steps back from the shoreline and sank herself into a beach chair. The brim of her hat lowered over her sunglasses, and one leg crossed over the other, before the chair fully reclined back. As she let the chair hold her full weight, the back legs sank deeper into the sand.

Nathan watched impatiently as his mother situated herself. She slowly lowered her sunhat over her eyes, taking one last look at her son before letting herself fall completely into the chair. As her eyes closed, a weight was lifted off of Nathan. He turned towards the lake, and he ran. He slapped his feet into the wet sand and threw his full weight into a sprint out towards the lake. The lake water came up to his shins, he paused to kick at pebbles. He jammed a few of the cooler looking ones into the pockets of his swimming trunks. He grunted in frustration when he bent down; his mandatory floaties pressed to his chest, and kept him from fully stretching out his
arms. When he lifted himself back up, he flung the runny sand off his fingers, and watched as the particles scattered into the water.

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Nathan and his mother lived in the small town in the Pacific Northwest named Joseph. In the summer, Joseph's singular paved street became crammed with sunburnt faces. The fate of the town relied on the summer traffic. Any roads that weren’t traveled by the summer strangers weren't kept up, so the residential streets were made of cracked concrete and compressed dirt.

Stepping off a side road and onto Main Street felt like teleporting directly in the middle of an entirely different town. All of the shops were suddenly open for long hours every day, there was no walking space on the sidewalks, there were events nearly every weekend, and Nathan’s mother got a lot grumpier than usual. The locals of Joseph found themselves acting like employees of the town they lived in; tourists wanted to experience the locals of Joseph as happy, easy-going folks, they didn’t want to see someone living in their version of paradise experience any emotion other than joy.

In the off seasons Joseph got a lot quieter, and went right back to moving slowly. Most of the small businesses couldn't afford to stay open every day anymore, and went back to only opening a few times a week. Family-owned shops would close and open at the owner’s leisure. While her spirits lifted slightly, Nathan’s mother remained stressed regardless of the season. Fewer tourists meant fewer annoying strangers to ask her dumb questions, but it also meant fewer hours at work. She worked as a cashier/barista/hostess in a little tourist trap that sold novelty clothes, toys, drinks, and snacks; just about anything a glamping stranger might need. Her slightly above minimum wage job stretched her abilities until she became a Jane Of All
Trades. Customers needed her to know the history of the town, the price of every item, and how to make a latte, all with a smile on her face. And she did it all.

He waded out a few inches deeper.

When the water was at his ankles it was freezing cold, but as he adventured further and his feet sank deeper, the lake around him started to run warmer.

He turned his head to look back at the beach, as the wakes from far out boats - turned to waves - started to splash around his knees. He scanned the shoreline, searching for his mother’s eyes; her head was still down. She wasn’t watching.

His gaze shifted from the beach, to his feet, to the expansive lake before him.

And he ran.

He felt true freedom from his mother, his town, his school. He could run and no one was there to stop him.

He kept running until the water forced him to slow down, dragging all of the momentum out of his body. His floaties lifted up to his jaw as he waded out further; the sharp plastic seams pressed up against his red cheeks. He took a final step on solid ground, before pushing off. His toes now dangled in the water, occasionally catching a fleeting feeling of the clay and kelp below him. His chin and lips bobbed up and down in the water, he started to sputter out the liquid that gathered on his tongue whenever he gasped in a breath.

Water rushed into Nathan’s ears and nose, filling his sinuses and throat with cool, silty water. He stayed above the depths by the grace of his floaties.

He tried to dip below the water’s surface just to ground himself, and to feel the mud on his toes. The expanse of the glacial lake in front of him made him feel lost and dizzy. The never
ending lake that stretched out before him made his body shake. Glossy water lined tall, snowy mountains. The hugeness of the world suddenly pressed into his chest, and made his stomach flip.

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When Nathan got old enough to navigate Joseph on his own, he started to understand a little better why this town made his mom so angry. She was so young when she moved to Joseph. She was a different person; a person in love. The town was everything a growing family needed. Small, quiet, close-knit. For any of its faults, it’s really not a bad place to raise a few kids and live an American family life.

The Joseph experience didn’t stand the test of time.

As Nathan and his mom got older, the town stayed the same age. Every year, in and out, things were the same.

She lost the love of her life. He walked out of Joseph almost as quickly as he walked in.

Her child grew up. All of the things she loved about Joseph morphed into all the reasons she couldn’t stand living there a second longer.

But Nathan was still a kid - a little older, but a kid nonetheless - and her barista/hostess/cashier job just didn’t pay enough to move them both to some place new.

A few years after almost drowning, Nathan started picking up shifts at the same tourist trap his mom worked at, just a few months before he was technically the legal age to do so. He already knew the store well, and was charismatic enough to make the customers feel welcomed, the owner had no problem fudging the rules just a little bit.

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Tingles ran through his limbs as panic permeated his entire body. He could barely keep himself afloat. Safety less than 15 feet behind him, but calling for help would mean his mom would know that he went out past his knees.

He gulped down a big breath, and forced his head under the water’s surface, pushing himself as far down as possible in order to feel for the ground one more time. His foot made contact, but it wasn’t the muddy ground; he felt something slither under his foot. It had to be large, it felt rough and unnatural against his skin.

He let out a whimper and pulled his knees up as high as he could. His constant paddling was starting to wear his body out. He was feeling his body lose energy.

He felt something move against his feet again, water splashed around him as he kicked at it. He could feel the rush of water as the thing retreated back once his heel made contact. He tried to turn his back to the lake, and paddle hard towards the beach. Brackish tears started to roll down his freckled cheeks.

He felt it again. He felt scales against his feet, as the creature beneath them pushed his body forward. He felt unsteady, as if he were going to land face-first in the water. Water wooshed around his skin, before he felt his toes crash into mud.

He stumbled a bit, before the scales retreated back, and he could stand firm on the lake floor. He could see people lounging in inflatable tubes, and splashing each other around him again.

Nathan turned out towards the lake that nearly swallowed him whole. He made eye contact with yellow eyes, attached to a head made of green scales, with a frilly fin running down its neck. It rose up from the surface and stared into Nathan. Without breaking its gaze, the beast shrank back into the water, and vanished in the inky dark.
When the next summer rolled around, and all the strangers poured back into town wearing their ugly shirts with the word “Joseph, Oregon” plastered all over the front, Nathan had the story of all stories to tell them.

He would gather a small crowd in front of his cash register, stand up on a chair, and regale them about how the monster in the lake saved his life.

“I was trapped, no one around to help me, gasping for my last breath before the wake overtook me. And then she appeared. She was 20 feet long, and beautiful. She pushed me back onto the sand, before she vanished into the lake.”

He got into a pattern of telling that story upwards of 20 times a day to different customers.

Falls were less kind to Nathan.

“Nate,” a taller boy took the five minutes between classes as a chance to pour his

“Yes?” He almost flinched away from the words, as if his own name was a knife being driven into his chest.

“Tell us about your monster again,” some giggles rolled across the room.

Nathan sighed, “You know the story,” he stared intensely into his empty notebook, waiting for the minutes to tick down.

“I want to hear you tell it.”

He leaned back in his chair, “I was at the lake, and I went in too deep,” he could already hear the laughter growing, and his ears started to sizzle with embarrassment, “And something pushed me back to the shore.” He fiddled with his pencil, picking at the rubber eraser.
Most of the class was laughing now. They had seen the newspaper articles, and heard the tourists retell his story.

“Sure it wasn’t your mommy that saved you?” More laughter.

Nathan dug his nails into the yellow paint of his pencil, slouching deeper into his chair.

“Positive.”

The room silenced when a shrill bell tolled, and a tall woman entered.

Nathan could still feel eyes and giggles pull him down into the depths as insults and jokes rushed into his mouth and lungs. His feet dangled in the endless waters of mockery; he couldn’t find a savior this time.

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Tears fell down his cheeks, as he ran for the shore. He flailed his floatie-clad arms, and screamed for his mother.

His mother’s hat tumbled off and landed in her chair as she bolted out, into the water. She wrapped her arms around her son, and scooped his body out of the lake.

“Nathan? Nathan, what's wrong?” She pet his wet hair, as he sobbed into her shoulder, clinging to his mother with fearful desperation.

She wrapped a towel around her son’s shoulders, and placed him in her beach chair, gently pulling the floaties off his arms.

He gasped for breath, like he was still drowning. Heaving and coughing as tears and snot ran down his wet face.

“You’re safe now,” his mother reassures, “You’re safe.”
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**Jimmy and Wes**

Embers twirl up from glowing, cracked logs, carried up on the wind in an elaborate swirl. Their bright red bodies burn hot against the deep black sky; intertwining up and down and up again, entangling themselves within each other, before landing soft on crunchy grass.

A scuffed sneaker moves from a huddled position, and stomps the life out of the flicker.

A young voice squeaks, cutting over the snapping flames “These woods are where it happened, ya know,” his voice fizzles into a weak cough, as the young boy tries to suppress his voice crack.

“Jimmy, you’re full of shit,” the second boy declares. He’s wearing a big, red, puffy jacket, and hugging his own arms close to his chest to keep himself from shaking. While the fire keeps their fronts plenty warm, the night breeze blowing off the nearby lake assaults their backs and sides. It slithers under their jackets and up against their necks; each boy shimmies just a bit closer to the fire.

“I’m not full of shit, Sam, it’s true,” Jimmy’s voice whines, “My brother told me that his friend saw her ghost when he went to camp here,” he nods his head as his eyes scan the other two for a reaction; he’s searching their features for any fear, “she died at this camp” Jimmy peers to the third boy, currently sitting only a few inches away from Jimmy. Wes is a freckled, gangly teenager, staring at Jimmy with complete captivation in his wide eyes.

“Her name was Isabell… I heard that she went to the docks after a bunch of boys told her one of them had a crush on her and wanted to ask her out, but when she got to the dock to meet him, they all cornered her and laughed at her. One of the boys pushed her in. He didn’t know she couldn’t swim.”
Wes, curls his fingers into tight fists; his knuckles press into the mossy log he’s sharing with Jimmy.

“I don’t believe it,” Sam announces, “We’ve been going to this camp every summer since we were 6. If there was a dead girl walkin’ around at night, I think We woulda seen her by now.”

Sam and Jimmy are currently on their 7th consecutive Summer of attending Camp Elation. The two taller boys in the group grew up together as neighbors; ever since they were babies they’ve gone to every school, function, and camp together.

Wes moved in across the street from the boys just about three years ago. His family arrived in town a week before the school year started, and back then he was even more awkward than he was now. Wes didn’t talk to anyone for his entire first month at his new school; the first time he spoke to anyone was when Jimmy begged Wes to let him copy the homework he had forgotten to do the night before. Wes let him copy.

A few weeks into Wes’ first Fall in town, Sam and Jimmy’s moms encouraged them to invite their neighbor out to play baseball.

Wes’ mom cast him outside. Play with the other kids, or at the very least get some fresh air before you have to be coped up in a school all day. He sat on the stoop of his new house, slumped against the brick wall. None of his favorite toys or gadgets worked outside. The sun washed out electronic screens, and there were no outlets to plug into. He owned a baseball (never thrown), which he passed from hand to hand while he waited for his mother to tell him that he had suffered long enough; she would poke her head outside to let him know that he served out his time, he could reenter the house, and plug back in.
“Hey,” the shout startled Wes out of his pout, and he watched as two boys made their way over to him. One was short, with unevenly cut brown hair, cargo shorts that were a little too tight, and skinned knees. The other was taller, wearing a big t-shirt, and had floppy blonde hair.

The shorter one was waving a baseball mitt, as he jogged across the street. His friend followed behind, but was a lot more hesitant. He tried to grab his friend’s shirt to pull him back, and stop him from what he was about to do.

Wes felt a rush of nausea. His face got really hot as he sank back into himself. The school year hadn’t even started yet and the bullying was already about to start up again.

The brown-haired one was a little breathless, as he jogged to a stop in front of Wes’ house. His friend slowly coming up behind.

“Hi,” he repeated, he sounded excited, “I’m Jimmy, this is Sam.” Sam waved awkwardly.

“Hello,” Wes’ fingertips pressed hard into the ball in his hands, as he braced for impact, “I’m Wes.”

“Wanna play ball with us?”

The words hit harder than any insult would’ve.

“Uh,” Wes blinked.

Sam sighed loudly, “C’mon Jim,” he nudged his friend on the shoulder, and tried to get him to turn around.

Jimmy pointed to the ball in Wes’ hand, “We like to play, but it’s just the two of us. We take turns with the bat, but we could add you in.”

Wes’ face felt hot, but in a different way than before. He felt giddy and nervous. Still scared but excited. He shifted his weight, “Uh, yeah, sure,” he stood up - Jimmy was now looking up at him, “Let me tell my mom.”
Wes ducked inside his mother’s new house, he couldn’t see her, but he shouted out, “Mom, I’m going out with some other kids,” He strained his voice to ensure she heard him.

“Oh! That’s great, can I meet them?” Wes could hear her footsteps approaching.

“No, Mom, we’re leaving now.” He dipped out of the doorway quickly, and turned his attention back to his neighbors. “Uh, where to?”

They didn’t play real baseball, real baseball requires a team of nine.

Sam and Jimmy’s version of baseball required only two players; one to throw the ball, and one to hit it. They modified the rules just for Wes. and added catching the ball to their rotation.

“Yeah and my brothers been goin since he was 6 too, and he’s older, so he knows way more about the camp,” Jimmy retorts.

“Still Jim, I don’t buy it,” Sam leans back on his own log, resting his weight back on his palms.

“I think it’s true,” Wes smiles up at Jimmy.

Sam scoffs.

“This place is kinda creepy at night…” Wes continues, turning to look out towards the lake, “it’s really hard to see anything out there with such a bright fire.” They all turned towards the direction of the lake, and not one of the boys could see anything but grass and some miscellaneous stones on the ground. The lake is less than 60 feet away, but in this dark it's impossible to tell ground from water from trees from sky.

In the daylight, Camp Elation is nestled deep in the heart of The Elation Woods. The campgrounds are home to several wooden cabins, separated into two different sections on
opposite sides of the lake; one side labeled for boys and one labeled for girls. On the boy’s side of Elation is a small mess cabin, a shed for storing supplies for camp activities, a cabin for the counselors, several cabins for the campers, a dock, and a small boat house. In the boat house are mainly kayaks and life vests, coated in dust and cobwebs that accumulate in the off-seasons.

Directly in between the boys’ camp and the girls’ camp is a medical building. About a five minute walk away from the center of both camps. It’s not well kept, and rarely sees an injury worse than a scraped knee or bee sting.

The girls’ camp is a complete mystery to the campers on the boys’ side. During the day the boys can catch glimpses of people walking on the beach, or swimming in the water, and in the evenings they can see the smoke from the fire, but only the counselors are allowed to walk over there. Once in the whole history of Sam and Jimmy’s time at Elation has a boy been brave enough to sneak over. As they told the story to Wes, a boy they called Garcia fell in love with a girl he saw in the medical cabin, and promised her he’d sneak over to the girls’ camp in the middle of the night. Garcia returned to the boys’ camp the next morning, boasting about how many kisses he got.

“Wes you’re just agreeing because it’s Jimmy,” Sam throws his hands up, before folding them across his chest in a huff, “You always agree with Jimmy.”

Wes’ cheeks redden, “I don’t always agree with him, I just think it makes sense,” he stares into the flames to avoid meeting the eyes of either of his friends, “this place is kinda scary at night…’n I dunno, if it were haunted, I think it wouldn’t shock me.”

The boys linger in silence for a moment. All three of them watch the embers jump off the flames.
All three boys nearly fall to the ground when a loud splash comes from the lake; it sounds like something heavy was thrown off the dock. Maybe someone was pushed. The neighbor boys dig their scuffed sneakers into the dirt and grass, as they shuffle back into their seats; all three pairs of eyes are staring into the dark, scanning the field in front of them with held breath.

Wes’ arms latch to Jimmy, wrapping around his bicep and clinging on tight.

“Did you hear that?” Jimmy looks from the lake to Sam. Sam’s mouth is resting open, before he lifts to his feet. The taller boy’s knees wobble before he steadies himself. He takes a small, half-step closer to the darkness.

Sam clears his throat and runs a sweaty palm down over his jeans, “It has to be someone from the camp… swimming or something,” his voice gives away just how dry his throat has become.

They wait in silence for the sounds of campers. They strain their ears trying to hear voices, or laughing, or more splashing.

They hear nothing but their fire.

“Jimmy…” Wes looks behind him slowly to make eye contact with his friend, “We should go back to our cabin…”

“Yeah, Wes, I think-“

Jimmy is cut off when a shriek echoes through their ears and rattles their skulls. The ribs in their chest shudder, as the shrill sound shoots through their bones, traveling from the tops of their head, to the pads of their feet. The frequency permeates their organs, settling into their stomachs in the form of a heavy pit.
The scream is still echoing through the valley as the boys launch themselves to their feet. Gangly limbs stumble and flop over each other as they abandon their roaring fire in search of safety.

The stairs leading up to their cabin screech as all three throw their bodies up towards the door. Their flickering porch light illuminates their terrified faces as they wrestle to get their cabin open.

They slam the door behind them; Wes and Jimmy press their shaking bodies to the rotting wood to keep it closed.

A deep silence sinks into the cabin.

They hold their collective breaths and listen.

The small overhead light in their cabin emits a quiet buzzing sound. It randomly brightens and dims; the bulb needs to be replaced. There are a few mosquitoes fluttering around the plastic light cover. Their little bodies make thunking sounds as they ram themselves into the brightness.

Sam is the first to allow himself to breathe. Gasping for oxygen as he buckles over. His shaking hands land on his shaking knees, before his legs give out and his palms land heavy on the floor. He retches, and hunches his back. Coughing as he slowly falls to his side, clutching his knotted stomach.

Wes and Jimmy don’t move from their post, but they allow themselves to breathe. Heavy, erratic heaves chase away the oppressive silence.

Jimmy flinches. Glancing at the sudden sharp pain that came from his hand. Small baubles of blood begin to form as Wes digs his nails into his neighbor’s palm. The blood gathers
itself up, before losing the strength to hold its form, and begins to streak in thin lines down
Jimmy’s fingers.

“Wes…” he whispers, using his other hand to gently wedge himself free, “You’re hurting
me…”

“Sorry,” The shorter boy releases his grip. His fingers immediately dig into the pale skin
around his own fingernails.

Sam lifts his head first, then he sits back on his heels. With a grunt, he pulls himself to his
feet. “Goodnight…” he simply mutters, before exhaustion yanks his already limp body into the
ancient, wooden-framed bed.

“You’re just going to sleep?” Jimmy can do nothing but blink in shock.

He wishes he could find the same relief.

———

“Hey Wes…” the cabin has two bunk beds; one on each wall. Sam and Jimmy share one, and Wes sleeps on his own.

“Yeah Jimmy?” The freckled boy whispers back. All three boys silently agreed to keep a
light on. It was just dim enough that the neighbors could see each other’s silhouettes as Wes
peered over the side of his top bunk, and Jimmy shimmies out from his place on a bottom bunk.

“Can you sleep?”

“No.”

The planet outside of their little cabin begins to fade at the edges. Everything falls away
until there’s nothing left of their worlds other than these two bunk beds.

“Can I come up… and sit with you?”

“Yes… sure, Jimmy.”
Jimmy slides off his sheets, and the floorboards creak as he slinks to the other side of the cabin. He heaves himself up the ladder, before landing with his legs crossed at the foot of Wes’ bed.

Wes is sitting across from him, hugging his pillow to his chest.

“It could’ve been anything, ya know…” Jimmy starts, “Maybe someone was just messing with us or something, I don’t know.” He rolls his shoulders, turning his head to the right until his neck lets out a satisfying pop.

“Yes…” Wes nods in agreement.

Jimmy shifts on the thin blanket, “Maybe we can check out the dock in the morning… see if there’s anything weird going on, ya know?”

“Yeah, Jim, that sounds like a good idea.”

Both of their eyes flit around the cabin, shifting from the sheets to the walls to the ceilings to the floor to Sam, sleeping across the room.

“Wes?”

“Yeah, Jimmy?”

“Could I sleep up here tonight?”

Wes lifts his eyes to stare into Jimmy’s face; Jimmy does not look up.

“You wanna switch beds?”

“No, like… can I stay up here with you?”

“Oh.”

Jimmy’s ears start to turn hotter and hotter with every passing second of silence that Wes let’s him stew in.
“Yeah Jimmy… you can stay up here with me.” Wes’ freckled hand lands on Jimmy’s knee and pats his bare knee; it's all the comfort he can think to give in this moment.
Nathalie

I don’t remember getting ready for bed that night, but if I had to take a guess I probably started my routine around 11. I would’ve shut down my computer, got up from my desk, put on slippers, and went to the bathroom. My favorite slippers are pink, and have a fuzzy trim. They’ve matted down since then.

Once I got to the bathroom I would’ve brushed my teeth, washed my face, and put my hair up. I prefer showering in the mornings, but I liked having some time to take care of myself right before heading off to bed.

I turned the sink water from hot to cold, and poured myself a glass to keep on my nightstand.

The next thing on my usual to-do list is to lay in bed. Stare at my phone and force myself to feel tired. I can’t remember if I took any sleeping pills that night; I think I just watched something mindless, which helped me pass out faster than any pills could.

I have no idea how long I had been asleep for before I woke up to a blue light blinding me. My eyes felt so heavy and completely clouded with pale blue. I remember a painful pitch squealing in my ears. I tried to slam my palms against my head to protect my hearing, but my arms wouldn’t move. My whole body wouldn’t move. I couldn’t even turn my neck, all I could do was squeeze my eyes shut to try to save them from the burning light.

The blue felt like it was wiggling its way through my head, down my throat, into my lungs and stomach, filling every vein, artery, and capillary I have. Pressure built in my body until finally, it all popped. My entire body crunched inward, and the last thing I remember before passing out again was feeling my back lift off of my sheets.
All I could feel was a space so cold that it hurt. It felt like trying to walk against a blizzard, without the snow and the wind. My senses felt overwhelmed; I couldn't smell or hear or feel anything other than cold. When I finally pried my eyes open, my vision was clouded over with that same blue light, it was all I could see.

Once the cold settled into my bones, I could finally feel something else. Eyes. I felt eyes boring into my body. Millions of sets of eyes focused on nothing but me. Terror leached into my brain as the bombardment of sensations forced my body to face the reality of my situation. The adrenaline, the blood, and the panic all rushed my nerves until I felt like I was practically vibrating, but I couldn’t even move my finger.

I remember trying to flinch when I felt some kind of leathery touch against my bicep. I squeezed my eyes shut again and silently prayed that whatever was touching me would stop. As I felt the touch squeeze my arm harder, I forced myself to pry my eyes open. I lifted my gaze to look at what was violating me. It looked like the shape of a human, stamped out in front of brilliant light. As their features came into focus, it looked so perfectly human that it seemed like an imitation. Long blonde hair hung above my face, as she stared directly into my eyes. Her smile was unsettling. Perfectly white teeth, with the corners of her lips so curled she seemed pulled unnaturally wide. Behind her stood two beings. They looked like tall, blond men with handsome, identical faces, with the same uneasy off-ness to their expressions. All three wore tight, silver bodysuits.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” She smiled with all of her teeth. Her voice rang through my head and shot through my body like a bullet. I could feel her pinging through every bone in my body, before a nauseating pain landed in the pit of my stomach, and I watched her get smaller, as if I were starting to spin backwards. I lost consciousness again.
When I woke up, I was back in my bed. I threw my body out of bed; I honestly wasn’t expecting my movement to work. I hit the floor hard. I scrambled away from the location of my kidnapping, and hugged my knees, gasping for breath. It felt like I had been starved of oxygen; no matter how much air I sucked down, it was never enough.

I crawled on my hands and knees back to my bedside table. I tried to look at my phone to see how much time had passed, but my head was so foggy the numbers just floated across my vision. I rubbed my eyes and blinked and smacked my palm to my temple, just to try and clear my thoughts and memories. Everything felt so clouded.

The longer I sat on my floor, the clearer the picture of my room became. Little things seemed off. My bed was suddenly pushed at a slight angle, my window curtains were open, some drawers were open. My shirt was on backwards. Suddenly the reality of my situation slammed into my body, and sucked the air out of my lungs.

I didn’t even change out of my pajamas, I just grabbed a hoodie and my keys and I drove myself to the police station.

I had nowhere else to go.

It was late at night when I got there. Somewhere around 4am. The desk officer made me wait in the lobby while he got himself ready to talk to me. I remember looking at my phone, scrolling aimlessly. It felt wrong that everyone was still living and moving, while I was trapped in this moment.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” The officer looked so exhausted, as he positioned himself into a chair behind the front desk.

“Yes… I have to report a crime.”

“Alright, what’s your name?” He clicked his pen, and glanced up at me.
“Nathalie Springfield.” The police station was so cold that night. I could hear the fluorescent lights buzzing in the ceiling.

“Alright Miss Springfield, can you tell me what happened?” His words were compassionate but his tone was completely flat. He scribbled down my name.

“Uh… I think I was kidnapped? Someone was in my bedroom, and they undressed me… but I was in a different place, then back in my bedroom,” It sounded a lot less crazy in my head, “I woke up and there was a blue light, and this really loud, piercing noise,” I double checked my ears to make sure they hadn’t been bleeding, “And then there were these people but they looked… wrong.”

“Were they wearing masks, ma’am?”

“No, no, it was their faces.”

“Their faces, ma’am?”

“Yes… their faces.”

He sighed at me, “What about their faces looked weird? Did they have scars, maybe wearing tights over their faces?”

“No, not like that. They just… they looked human but they weren’t human.”

“Alright, ma’am, can you explain it to me again?” The exhausted desk officer rubbed his eyes; I watched him tap his pen against the corner of his notepad.

I sighed, “Look, it sounds insane, but I was kidnapped. Can’t you take me to a hospital or something? An interview room? Anything?”

The officer raised his brow, and leaned forward at his desk. His eyes moved from the top of my head down to the bottom of my feet, then back up again. “You look uninjured to me, ma’am.”
“No they didn’t hurt me physically,” I could feel myself growing frustrated. I knew something happened to me, he just wasn’t listening. “I don’t know what they did but they did something, why else would they take me from my room and undress then redress me?”

“Ok ma’am… where did they take you?” He emphasized the word “they”, digging in his blade of disbelief deeper into my chest.

“I… I don’t know. It was bright, and there were a lot of people there.”

“Like the subway?”

“No, not like the subway. I couldn’t see anything other than blue light… and I could just… feel eyes on me.”

The officer threw his pen down on his paper, and leaned back in his chair. “Ma’am have you had any drugs or alcohol tonight?”

“What? Why would you say that?”

He took in a deep breath, “We have a few options when someone comes in reporting something like this… we can put them in a holding cell and let them sweat out whatever it is they’re on, we can take them to the hospital and they can sweat out whatever it is they’re on over there, or I can just pretend I didn’t hear any of this, and we can both save ourselves the trouble tonight, alright?”

I was shocked to my core. I suddenly felt so dizzy again.

“I’m sorry for wasting your time,” I turned and walked out of the police station without another word to the officer. Maybe if I went back a different day, I might get an officer who would take me more seriously, but what if I got an officer who wouldn’t give me the choice to walk away.
I slammed my car door behind me, and let myself sink into the supportive hold of my steering wheel. I sobbed into the gray leather, as pale yellow light started to filter through the trees, and hit my windshield.

Once I couldn’t physically cry any longer, I lifted myself up and fell back against my seat. All I wanted was someone to talk to who would listen to what I was saying. I scrolled through my contact list, and came up empty. I scrolled all the way to the bottom, and not one on that list would answer a call from me at five in the morning.

I drove myself home.

My bedroom felt like it didn’t belong to me any more. When I walked in that morning, it felt like the whole room was covered in a thick fog. It made it impossible to breathe or think. I only went in there to get clothes, or extra blankets. I started spending nights on the couch in my home office. Some nights I didn’t sleep at all. I would log in to work, and just never get off the computer.

I tried to google what I experienced once. I found a lot of people saying I’m crazy, but more importantly, I found a few people who said they had experiences similar to mine. Most people said they were abducted by things that weren’t human, but I found a little group that described the exact same types of people. Tall, blonde, pretty people.

I learned from other believers that they had plans for the people they abducted, they chose each of us for a reason. If I had been able to stay awake, I might know why they chose me.

I learned they weren’t human. I knew they weren’t human, but everything online just snapped all the clues into place. They were aliens.

I got a call from a friend a few weeks after my abduction.
“Hey, Nat, no one’s heard from you in a while, was wondering if you’re alright and see if maybe you wanted to grab some dinner?”

“Hey Jordan,” Jordan and I went to the same high school. He took me out on a few dates, but that was years ago. I was pleasantly shocked to hear he was still thinking of me, “yeah, I’m alright. Some dinner would be really nice.”

“Awesome! How’s tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then.”

“Great, I’ll pick you up at 6.”

He ended the phone call, and I stared at my computer screen. I pressed the power button, and let it shut down.

I suddenly felt overwhelmed with the concept of wearing something nice. I hadn’t worn anything other than pajamas in nearly a month.

“Hey,” I let myself into his passenger seat the next evening.

“Hey,” he smiled at me. He looked different than when we were teenagers. His hair was darker than it used to be. He seemed taller. Maybe it was just that he looked more confident.

“Where are we going?”

“Nowhere fancy, a small Italian place.”

The restaurant was dimly lit, with round tables covered in white table cloths. The dim lighting seemed less like ambiance and more like a clever trick to hide imperfections in the decor.

We sat down at a table near the back of the dining room. “It’s nice to hear from you, it means a lot,” I told him.
“No problem, I was just thinking about high school and I realized I hadn’t heard from you in a while. You kinda fell off the grid,” he laughed.

“Yeah, I’ve been avoiding most mainstream social media, way too easy to track you on that stuff.”

He laughed again, like I was joking. “Yeah, I guess so. It’s nice for catching up with people though.”

“I suppose. I prefer more protected forms of communication.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I spend most of my time on more secure forums that aren’t monitored by corporations.”

He laughed again, a little quieter this time, “Maybe I’ll have to get into that, then.”

“You should, it’s an excellent way to meet people with common interests while also maintaining your privacy. I can recommend some great forums.”

“Yeah, you know, maybe another time,” he leaned forward, “How’s work been?”

“Oh I’m working completely from home now.”

“How’s that going? I could never make the remote thing work for me.”

“Well it works great for me. I hate having to go out, I don’t like being around too many people.”

“Right.”

“I’ve been having a really hard time trusting people.”

“Oh,” he looked up to meet my eyes, “Is everything ok?”

“Yeah, I’m ok now.”

“Did something happen?”
I stared at his face for a long, silent moment. I gathered up a deep breath, and I decided to make the leap. I hadn’t told anyone my story, in person, since I spoke to the police.

“I was abducted.”

“Oh,” his face couldn’t settle on an expression. He went between looking confused, concerned, scared, “I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“Thank you,” I released the tension in my shoulders. He was understanding me.

“What happened? How did you escape?” He reached his hand across the table, and curled his fingers around mine.

“Well, that night I was in my room, and suddenly I saw a super bright light. I was teleported onto an alien ship where they did tests and experiments on me to make sure I was the right fit for their mission.” I watched his face slowly fall.

He nodded, eyes still wide. His mouth hung open, “Uuh…” he was silent for a long minute. “Could you excuse me, I have to use the bathroom.” He took his hand off of mine.

“Oh, of course.” I smiled at him as he got up.

Our waiter came by to take our orders, and I ordered wine for the table. Drinks came. And Jordan was still gone.

“I can you come back in a few minutes?”

I slumped into my chair, tapping my fork against the table cloth. I let thirty minutes pass before I paid for the wine, and walked myself home.

I changed back into my pajamas, and turned my computer back on. Sliding myself into my desk chair for the rest of the night. table near the back of the dining room.
February 1975, New York

Carl Sagan publishes a piece in the New York Times entitled “Said the Martian Macrobe, ‘They Must Be From Earth But We Thought There Was No Life There!’” In the piece, he jokes about what kind of life the general public wants to find out in space, on other planets.

They want life that’s comparable to life on Earth.

They want recognizable life.

He discusses this through the lens of an up-coming mission to Mars, in which a lander will be sent to collect snippets of data from the surface of the red planet. In this piece he says, “When asked to picture what will be uncovered by the first few Mars laboratories, many scientists will admit the possibility of microscopic organisms, but will deny vehemently the possibility of macroscopic organisms—that is, beasts discernible to an unaided human eye on the surface of the planet.

In fact, there is no reason to exclude from Mars organisms ranging in size from ants to polar bears. And there are even reasons why large organisms might do somewhat better than
small organisms on Mars.”

NASA always argues that the thought of human-sized creatures on Mars is unreasonable. Carl Sagan “argues” against that.

Sagan doesn’t actually believe in polar bears on Mars, but by discounting the possibility completely, NASA might miss something just as large as a Martian polar bear.

But NASA doesn’t think cameras and pictures are scientific. Data and numbers are scientific. This mission to Mars is about science. It’s not about pretty pictures to share with the media.

But media attention means more funding.

And more funding means more data.

And what if? What if a Martian polar bear walked right past the Viking 1 lander? What would it do, without a camera to capture the moment?

So on the cameras went.

July 1976, Rhode Island

Three mops of hair tangle together, as the heads attached use grass as pillows. Their overgrown bangs invade the personal space of their rapidly moving eyes as the three stare upward. They squint, lifting their bodies off the ground to get a better look at what is either a fat firefly, or the glittering formation of Sagittarius. Their chubby fingers trace along imagined lines, carefully outlining the story of an archer who has the torso of a man, but the body of a horse. The children squeeze their heads together, and alternate between closing their right eye, then their left, as if peering out of only one eye will grant them a natural telescope.
Their archer’s arrow leads them left, following a trail of glittering crumbs towards the final destination of a bright orange dot.

It stands out against the brush-strokes of blue and pink sky behind it. But it’s hard if you don’t know it’s there, almost completely outshined by the overwhelming largeness of every other body that clutters the view. One hand, covered in plastic, neon bangles, with chipped purple glitter nail polish, shoots upwards towards the dot.

Summer’s knees bend, and her back lurches forward. Her one hand digs into the dirt, and as she rises, grass tumbles off her clothes. Her bare feet land square on the ground as she cranes her neck fully back. Nose pointed up, as she gestures in a panic towards the orange dot.

“That’s Mars,” she announces, her back is wet from dew, and covered in frayed grass blades. “I’m gunna go there one day.”

There’s a beat of silence. The hum of the fireflies overwhels the children’s ears.

Summer lowers her gaze, turning her back to the orange dot to look down at her two siblings.

The older pair tilt their heads towards each other, hair messing and mixing together as they adjust to make eye contact. They shrug. Eyes returning to their baby sister.

“Maybe you’ll find aliens,” Her sister smiles.

“Don’t forget us when you’re a famous astronaut.”

July 1976, Mars

Thirty six billion miles away from Summer’s backyard, Viking 1 Lander is making its first movement towards the red planet. The pilot-less ship’s original purpose was to collect raw
data on Mars’ soil composition with the hope being that would be the answer as to whether or not life truly could survive on the dusty surface. To complete this mission, Viking 1 came equipped with a remote controlled spade to collect soil samples, an air-tight storage space inside the ship, a thermometer, and means to record the temperature data collected. It also had a seismometer, but it unfortunately did not survive the long journey to Mars’ surface. What did survive the trip though, was the camera that Carl Sagan called for.

As Viking 1 is approaching, Mars is making its final turns to round out one of its 24 hour days. The sun beats down across the canyons and hills of Cydonia moments before it’s slated to set.

Light leaks down into a dip between the Arandas, and the Bamberg Crater, and strikes the side of an ovular rock, at just the right angle. Lips split open in the stone and the being sucks carbon dioxide into its stony lungs; the folds of which crack and scar, before expanding to their full size, and settling into their proper place with a deep exhale. Shadows from his raised brow cast down on his eyes, and he blinks dust from his eyelashes, nose scrunching up as sand crumbles away from his newly formed features; his granulated tears run down his cheeks.

He’s awake.

The shadows that brought him to life obscure his vision as he wiggles his restrained shoulders, trapped under years of sediment. He attempts to shield his eyes from the light, but the hard stone around his face keeps his jaw and cheeks set firmly in place. This moment of life won’t last. He knows this.

Maybe if he lived on Venus he could enjoy life a little longer.

He blinks. Which is about all he can do. It’s a shock every time he wakes up like this; he seems to forget that his hands are caught below stone, and his fingers aren’t available to brush
the debris from his eyes. It would be nice to brush the dust from his eyes right now. As he
squeezes and shakes as much as he can, he catches a glimpse of something strange floating into
his vision. It bobs and twitches awkwardly, as it makes a slow approach towards the red earth.
He flinches as a flash goes off. His few fleeting moments of life are captured for the first time.

He wonders.

What will the creatures who took his picture think of him?

April 1978, Rhode Island

Viking 1 brought its pictures, soil samples, and temperature graphs back to Earth. In the
upcoming weeks, NASA would publish every single one of the pictures to the public, with a
stipulation. The cameras that went on were not the best NASA had to offer, and the published
photos were entirely in black and white, with several spots of missing data.

But there he was.

A face in the soil.

The public buzzed about whether he was a fallen statue, a dead body, maybe a signal to
the passing ship. Whatever it was, it had to be something.

At the peak of the excitement over his face, the results from testing the soil samples were
released.

Positive for signs of life.

Kind of.

It didn’t come back negative, and that’s what mattered. The tests show that the dirt might
have been home to living microbes.
Microbes are little balls of life before life. Given a few billion years and full civilizations can be built from these little microbes.

The tests performed involve scooping up a ball of dirt from Mars, and while sealed inside the ship the dirt is sprayed with chemicals to kill any potential life hiding inside. Once back on Earth, NASA scientists examine the mixture for death. Where there is death, there had to be life.

Exactly one test came back not negative.

The picture of a face on Mars, next to positive (kind of) signs of life in the soil shot through the American psyche like a rocket.

Suddenly, we weren’t alone.

———

The young astronaut-in-training lurches herself up onto her mother’s breakfast bar, so she can see over the counter and watch what’s on TV. He’s plastered on her screen, next to two stiff news anchors. She adjusts herself on the stool, and shifts up to her knees, leaning forward on her elbows in order to get a better view into the eyes of the face.

The camera had altered some of his features. The poor quality of the camera created small black dots of pixels that were missing their data. These pixels gave him a nostril, and freckles. The contours of his jaw were decorated with the tiny black dots. His red skin was blanked out, turned into a dull gray. But it was undeniable. A face. When Summer's mother gave her a copy of the paper, she traced his face with her finger, cut out his picture, and hung him up on her wall so she could study the details of the shadows outlining his eyes and lips.

He could answer all of her questions.

November 1978, Rhode Island
Summer’s school binder is decorated with black and white photocopies of blurry planets. Once, after school had ended, the librarian snuck Summer back into the teacher’s lounge and showed her how to scan the images out of her books. She kept getting in trouble for having books out during lessons, and figured storing the pictures next to her school work might be a decent compromise.

“Summer is a lovely student, but her organization could really use some work. She focuses so heavily on her space books that it’s hard to get her engaged with the lessons.”

Her binder is a mess. It barely clings to loose papers and random scraps.

Her pictures, however, are pristine.

She tucks them neatly into plastic protectors, the only marks on the pages are her name and classroom number, written cleanly at the bottom of every image. It’s a safety measure, in case the papers slip from their protective casings and someone else picks them up. Hopefully whoever found them would be kind enough to bring them back to where they belong.

“She’s passing all of her tests, but she rarely turns in the homework and barely gets through the classwork. She’s clearly smart, I just need her to work on her focus.”

She hands her mom her report card, covered in red pen, and flops onto her living room couch.

Her mom sighs.

“Your teacher says you’re not focusing in class.”

Summer nods, and crandles her binder in her lap. She runs her pointer finger over the circular edges of the planets.

“Think we can work on that?”
She nods again.

“Alright Summer, I’m counting on you.”

June 1979, Mars

It takes 24 Earth hours and 37 Earth minutes for Mars to make a full turn, and for Cydonia to face the sun again. 687 days to get the perfect angle for him to crack back to life. Every 24 hours he gets a few short minutes to watch, and breathe. A few minutes is never enough to watch the blue dot of Earth streak over his sky. He wouldn’t know what to even look for if he had more time to study the stars.

He never forgot the little bobbing metal lander that floated over his head before it hit the ground in a puff of red smoke. He theorized, while he could, what it might mean.

And he theorized about its makers.

Of the people who saw his features.

How weird they must look, with untrapped arms to build shiny flying machines, and free legs to walk across the surface of the planet he can never escape.

January 2001, New York

Summer was sweating over piles of contracts when she heard the news. A new shuttle, with a better camera, went back to Cydonia.

It took a picture of the face.

The rock.
The face never saw this new camera. They just missed each other by a few short hours.

Nothing. Just a rock between two canyons.

No intelligent makers, no forces to ask questions to, no creature trapped in dust to project her hopes on. Just a rock captured at the perfect moment.

She fell into her desk chair, and lifted the picture of the face. She held a crumpled clip-out from an old newspaper next to a chunky computer monitor. Their outlines matched; she could even see the indent of an eye, the bump of a nose. But no nostril, contours, no mouth.