



The Nobody Men

Ryan Crouch

The Nobody Men

by Ryan Crouch

These are my nightmares, divided in fifths.

The Nobody Men met in front of the little house with the orange door.

There they were still somebody, before each went their separate ways and failed at their separate things.

One of them loved and one of them hated, one of them gave and one of them took, one of them created and all of them destroyed. There is not much more to say about the Nobody Men, except to describe how each of them started, and finished, the way they did.

Cleotha wears blue.

Paris wears gray.

Mirna wears green.

Arden wears white.

Amias wears red.

And they all stand under the little house with the orange door.

Listen how Arden talks while Cleotha draws in the dirt with her foot. Watch as Mirna stays quiet and Amias pretends not to be nervous around her. Notice how Paris impatiently thinks of what is going to happen next.

Hear Arden pause for a breath and Paris direct his question to the group. See Amias snap back to reality at its change of pace and nod, turning and reaching into his pocket. Witness his shoulder connect with Cleotha's, erasing her drawing.

Amias returns and hands the little device to Paris who holds it up to his face and flicks it. A flame pops out and ignites the roll of paper in his mouth. Mirna's face opens into an 'O' of shock and disapproval. Amias awkwardly shrugs and Cleotha returns to her drawing, although it will never be as good the second time.

At the while, the little house with the orange door looks down at all of them, happy in their current state, although none of them realize it.

Part 1: Glass

Cleotha's laugh was a tinkle of a brook, a light thing that made those around her feel as if they were in some wondrous land where the floors were clouds and the ceiling an infinite stretch of sky. Her smile a warm summer breeze to waft away any sense of discomfort around her.

But somehow, no amount of warm summer breezes and tinkling brooks could ever melt the ice in her eyes, for a cold and critical gaze was what she used to look onto the world. It was with these cold eyes she took in and remembered everything happening around her, comparing events to each other in such a way as to pick apart every flaw and hypocrisy. In her mind, she painted an archetype of the world, one populated by scheming miscreants who put on masks of kindness to win without the appearance of ulterior motives. This mural became the foundation for her worldview, the justification for her thoughts and actions. The pictures she painted were tiny pieces of this vast portrait, frames capturing the ridiculousness of social interactions, the connivery of friendships and familial units. Her paintings were good, and she knew it.

She returned to the space she shared with Mirna, who told her there had been a call for her earlier that day. They had left a message.

Cleotha would check it later, for now sleep was more important.

The next day Mirna left early and Cleotha didn't care to ask why. She ate and set up her painting supplies by the window. It was here she remembered what Mirna had told her the previous night.

She picked up the landline and listened to the voicemail.

The voice from the other side sounded like someone who felt more important than they were, something not uncommon, she noted, with people dealing in the creative work of others. What they wanted to take: five of Cleotha's paintings, never before seen. What they wanted to give: seven thousand dollars, and a spot in a very large collection.

Cleotha set down the phone and looked out the window.

The thought going through her head was: "*Finally*".

Paris' entire life revolved around fun. His nihilism revealed itself in the way the ways he had it. He considered himself ugly, not realizing that confidence would have made him attractive, and untalented, failing to comprehend talent as a product of effort.

He tried guitar, and quit because his fingers couldn't seem to work accurately with the small frets and smaller strings. He tried drawing, but gave up because his people looked little better than stick figures and his landscapes little more than horizontal lines across the page.

He was smart and knew it, so he got through the public education system without much thought and effort.

Determination and reward were two words excluded from his vocabulary.

After graduating, he saw for the first time the whole massive variety of choices that were open to him, and how appealing none of them were.

The decision was made—the clock wound up, not by him, but by the meaninglessness that was his universe. Why bother with something that would take a lot of work when, in the end, it won't make a difference?

Since childhood, instant gratification had been instilled as the only viable form of entertainment. Early on it came in the form of video games; screens and consoles could seemingly hold and release more joy faster than any book and story his mother tried to get him to read.

There was one thing he truly enjoyed, even though he didn't realize it. The happiness which came with the orange sand and white diamonds under the sky, the satisfaction that came with the connection of the cowhide covered ball with the wood of the bat, was quickly overshadowed by his embarrassment and frustration; for some reason he couldn't ever seem to match the other boys, not comprehending or not understanding they had been playing for three or four times as long as he had.

So he returned to his room and did his homework when he had it, and played his games when he didn't. But that subconscious dream of orange sand under a blue sky, of cowhide cracking against wood never really left him. Not

even when school finished, the video games got boring, and he moved on to other, darker forms of fun.

Paris opened his eyes and instantly regretted it. Laying on his side on the bare mattress, he groaned and curled up into a little ball. He could think, but there was a mental roadblock preventing his thoughts from connecting to words or actions. “*Get up*” he thought, but stayed in the fetal position.

“*Food*”, “*work*”, and “*water*” all fell on fell on his body’s deaf ears, preventing him from finding the energy to shift even in the slightest. Instead he nodded in and out of an unsteady and uncomfortable sleep which swaddled him like the absent blankets.

Eventually, the hunger and thirst overcame the mental blockade and he groaned before standing. His head throbbed and he felt achy and weak around the joints. He shuffled slowly to the bathroom and splashed water on his face, taking a drink from cupped hands.

He looked at himself in the mirror. He saw the dark underlined eyes, the greasy hair, the large shirt draped over the thin body and didn’t like the image. He felt the fog, the tiredness, the foreign toxicity of the chemicals in his system, and hated the feeling.

“*Enough is enough*”.

Mirna’s phone buzzed and she lifted the device to see her mother’s name printed on the little screen. Silently excusing

herself, she stepped away from the Nobody Men and went back to her car. Driving away, she held the device to her head and listened as the familiar voice broached the familiar topic of her father, who was too busy to come and visit, who had showed boundless love and affection for her mother and left, his attention turned by a more attractive woman, a more attractive life.

The brakes pressed against the wheels and the metal box she was sitting in came to a rest, rocking on the wheels. A tall man crossed in front of her and gave her a look her addled and overworked brain interpreted as anger. She broke eye contact with the twinge in her chest and pulled over to the sidewalk.

Without the responsibility of driving to stop her, Mirna slammed her eyes and clenched her jaw, letting her mother's torrent of regretful angst wash over her—waves of words detailing how much life had been wasted on someone who up and left at the first sign of hardship.

“Do you know what he used to say to me?”

Mirna shook her head silently.

“He used to put flowers in my hair and tell me and say ‘Sarah, I promise on the grave of my mother and the heaven and the earth and all the stars, I will always love you.’”

Her mother's voice seemed guilty, as if she wished Mirna had never been born just so this situation would have never come about. “Don't make the same mistake I did.”

Her mother hung up before Mirna had the time to tell her about the date the following morning. She set her phone down and reached into her glove compartment, taking out and eyeing a wrinkled picture of a man with short hair and glasses. Her father smiled at her from the paper, and she was torn apart by the two conflicting emotions; the want to follow her mother, get rid of that guilt in her voice, strike back at the man who had caused it. For the other, the desire to love her father. One and the same, this person had both brought her into the world and caused the pain she felt in her mother's voice. He who she loved and hated at the same time.

Both were mutually exclusive and both existed in the same place, a hypocrisy within a hypocrisy that doubled back in on itself in convoluted and twisted patterns, impossible to discern.

So Mirna didn't.

Arden seemed to love to talk, and in a way he did.

It wasn't necessarily the act of moving his mouth and passing air through his vocal cords, or even on a more abstract level the passing of information from one person to another he was so drawn to. The real reason he talked so much was because it made him the focus of those around him. The attention drove away his insecurities and told him he was, in fact worth watching or listening to. That he did matter.

Such was the motive behind the extravagance of his gestures and the outlandishness of his stories. Maybe it was his parents who always fussed over the way that other people viewed their family or the little boy wearing blue jeans and an orange sweatshirt who had called him ugly in preschool. But either way, these ideas had been so deeply implanted in his head he never found himself without the biting urge to prove he was good enough for someone to go out of their way to be in his presence.

A comedian, he thought, or maybe a television host would be perfect. He would get paid for people to listen to him, how great could it be?

They got home to the apartment he shared with Amias. The drive back was swathed in silence. Broken only by the growl of the engine and clicking the changing gears made when Arden's hand moved the stick back and forth. Arden noticed how Amias stared out the window at the passing lights and wondered what was so interesting about lit bulbs, but refrained from asking the question out loud.

They walked up the stairs to their apartment and Arden got his keys back out of his pocket. The bolt falling out of place seemed to shake Amias back into reality.

"Oh before I forget," Amias said, in his mellow, almost-too-quiet-to-hear voice. "I found this today." He reached into his back pocket and retrieved a light-red piece of paper with the word "Open" followed by the word "Mic" printed on it in

bold black lettering. The date was three weeks in the future, at a local restaurant.

“Anyways, I saw it and thought you might want to know, you’re always talking about wanting to do something like that and I think you should, you’d be good at it.” The door swung open, and Amias trailed off and hung the last phrase out into the night air like an empty boat pushed into a tranquil lake before leaving Arden in hallway alone while his words echoed indefinitely through Arden’s head. The door stood ajar. There were a few seconds of silence while Arden read the paper.

Usually never at a loss for words, Arden looked up and managed to murmur “Oh, uh, yeah. Thank you,” before looking back down at the orange paper in his hand.

Amias barely remembered the events of the day as he laid down in his soft sheets, except for Mirna and their plan for sandwiches the next morning. Now he thought about it, they had always somehow clicked. For the entire time they had known each other he had been shocked by their shared interests and values but it was only after their long conversation a few weeks prior he had started feeling a tightening in his chest at the thought of her.

He awoke and groggily looked at the clock beside his bed. He stared at the beady numerals displayed for a full five seconds before their significance sunk into his sleep muddled brain.

Quickly he swung his feet out of bed. Fantasies about the infinite possibilities ran through his head as he showered, brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and put on his clothes without giving any a single neuron of thought.

Part 2: Sparkle

They hunched down against the wind, keeping their eyes directed at the asphalt three feet in front of them. They never looked up, only caring about where they were going and what time they were supposed to be going there.

Watch how each of them is only going for themselves. Selfish enough to hold up the entire lane of cars behind them for a few extra seconds on their phone. Petty enough to raise their middle finger at the people who honk at them.

Cleotha laughed inwardly at the joke only she would enjoy. These people, these selfish, hypocritical, shallow people were the very subjects of her work. She would stand on the weak shoulders of their everyday lives and reach the fruit of greatness. Dribbling it's sweet juice all over there complaining faces as they jealously looked up at her and wondered how she got there.

The funny part was each and every one of them would have lived the method of her success every day.

She almost felt bad for being so derisive, but not really. Deep down, each of them were just as bad. Each of them would tear down the one walking next to them in a heartbeat should such an action give them the slightest gain. All she was doing was pointing it out.

Her blue eyes sought out a group of friends, talking and laughing. One of them stood apart from the group. He kept turning away from the rest of them as they made their way

down the street, checking the box in his pocket instead of engaging with his friends.

Somebody who had someplace better to be.

She laughed inwardly and began to paint her mental picture.

This was going to be good.

The sky seemed backlit. The clouds scuttled across it, defined as starkly as drops of oil in water. The orange light filled the world like a tangible object every now and again, fading as the sinking star was blocked by a gray mass of evaporated water, only to intensify again as the sun was left to fall alone in a field of blue.

Paris tapped the tip of the bat against the corner of plate and squinted against the afternoon sun. A man stood on the mound, hunched over and watching Paris. His person reduced to a black blob by the light behind him.

Suddenly the black blob burst into action and the ball flew towards Paris. He swung and smashed his metal rod into its path, sending it sailing far into the sky where he lost track of it in the forest of light beams.

He didn't stop to watch it go, but instead dropped the bat and took off along the white line running off to his right. His breath sucked down his throat, carrying the taste of grass and sand, before being shot back out into the world by the reflexive action of muscles deep within him. The grit

crunched under his feet as he put one after the other, over and over again.

One day after another, it had been three weeks since he looked in the mirror and thought “*Enough is enough*”. The first had been horrible. Minutes and hours swelling into years and decades while he lay sweating and groaning in his sheets as joints ached and his brain fired chaotically. The hardest thing he’d ever done was taking his stashes one by one, each representing hours and hours of chemical fun, and flushing them down the toilet. By the second, he had realized the value in the distraction which came from leaving the room, going out into fresh air. A run every time he felt a twinge of desire, and games at one of the local park’s diamonds every other day allowed him to fill his time with activities with thoughts and feelings apart from those which let him down the dark paths of the past.

He didn’t drive home, instead taking the time to walk, letting each breath of clean, natural air clean his mind and body. The clouds moved in the sky as the wind moved in trees. Cars passed every now and again. Leaves crunched under his feet and his bag weighed on his shoulder through the sweaty shirt he was wearing.

The door to his newly cleaned apartment opened, the bag hit the carpet with a thud. Paris went straight to the bathroom, removing his clothes as he went.

He stepped into the shower, letting the warm water caress his shoulders and back, harsh and relaxing at the same time.

Suddenly, a force went upwards inside of him, powerful as a magma upwelling, and he started crying. Thick tears mixed with the shower water and dripped down his face, catching in the shadow of facial hair on his chin. He hung his hands against his shoulders and turned his face to the ceiling, weeping.

The world felt beautiful. *He* felt beautiful.

For the first time he could remember, he was happy.

The nervous knot in her stomach twisted its tendrils up through her chest and into her jaw, where her teeth rubbed against each other with a noise which she could hear conducted through the bone and tissue of her head.

Her fist clenched and relaxed as turned a corner in the path to see Amias standing next to a bench, holding paper bags containing bread-wrapped meat and vegetables. He saw her and smiled. They sat on the bench and she tried to take a deep breath.

“How’s it going?”

It took her a second to realize it was a question he had put into the air between them. She turned her head and saw he was looking at her from behind his classes.

“Oh, good. How about you?”

“Better now.”

The words washed over her like water from a cold spring, taking the heavy knot in her stomach and dissolving it. She felt like she physically sunk back into the seat even though the tension had been purely intangible.

The sandwich bags lay between them, empty. The time between her sitting down and finishing them seemed such a blur so as have not happened at all. Amias gathered them into a ball and took them to a trash can nearby. A man walking a dog passed them and nodded.

There was a no twinge, no question in her head as to what she had done wrong, the extraneous misinterpretations behind his look were gone. She smiled and nodded back at the stranger in the place of what would have previously been a shy turning of the head.

She stood up going next to Amias, feeling like she was standing straighter than she ever had. He grinned back and, in an action which shocked even her, she took his hand.

He held up their intertwined fingers up and looked at them, as if unable to believe the pattern created by their overlapping digits was real. For her whole life, she had been floating, tossed by whatever wind the world decided to throw her direction.

He put it down at their sides and made long eye contact.

Not a word needed to be said.

Their contact was like a rope tying her feet to the ground, the constant panic that came with worrying about

which path she was going to be thrown down next fell away like an invisible cloak.

She felt a buzzing in her pocket. She retrieved it with her free hand and saw it was her mother. Her thumb hovered over the button to answer it, but she paused and put it back where it had come from.

He squeezed her hand. For the first time in her life, the storm in her brain calmed.

She felt solid.

Arden paced back and forth. His caffeine-accelerated mind running through ideas faster than he could run over and write them down at the notebook laying on the couch.

The vibrations pumping through cables plugged into the sides of his head drowned out the sound of his steps and his pencil on the paper.

His sense of time was distorted, pushed out of his head by the ideas he reflected onto the paper with the lines of graphite.

What he was creating was good and he knew it. He could see the objective quality of the things he was writing and planning as if he was looking at himself from three feet behind himself. If an idea was bad, he threw it out and moved on to the next. The goal, the reason, the motivation was imprinted clear on his brain as if scratched on his retinas—visible wherever he looked: “Be the best” was written on the walls, couch, and carpet. He imagined getting off the stage

receiving the applause, the congratulations of the audience. In his head he was recognized on the street by a stranger, hugged by Mirna and Cleotha, high-fived by Paris and Amias. The thought made him salivate.

Anything less would be perverse; a want so *wrong* the very possibility made him dizzy.

With each completed notion he ripped out the page it was written on and tossed it on the floor until the notebook's fruit ran dry.

He lay in the confetti of inspiration which littered the floor and felt the plan taking shape in his head. He dug through the papers without actually reading them, letting the roughness of the paper occupy his hands while his brain worked.

It all came together like a puzzle, for the moment a machine whose workings only existed in his head.

Soon enough it would be out in the world.

And it was going to be the best.

Amias walked next to her. Their hands brushing with every swing of their arms. In a way, it was more intimate than constant contact—the tiny length of the touch and the ensuing leap in his chest making the moment that much more valuable. The instant of connection contrasting the long, vacuous period before the oscillation of their arms brought them together again.

The air was the perfect temperature to be refreshing without being cold. The cloud cover just thick enough to be present without being overbearing. He took a deep breath, trying to appreciate how nice this moment was. This one second within the whole of his life.

The last three weeks had gotten him here. From Mirna's first agreement to meet up with him for sandwiches and a walk as "a date, I guess" to their dinners and movies. Twenty-one days felt like two, compressed in his brain as the pattern of light and dark stitched together into a string of moments and feelings, colors and patterns. The green of Mirna's eyes as she looked back. The red of the rose he handed her on their third date. Her voice as she told him how happy she was. Each instant a new palette of never-before-seen colors. Each event the turning of a jewel to discover a new facet, more vibrant and beautiful than the last.

They passed the same bench they had met at and continued on until they reached an open spot where the grass waved in the breeze and the clouds lazed by overhead. The flowers lining the path danced their tango, in lock-step with the air moving through them.

Amias gestured at the field and Mirna nodded. He spread the blanket he had carried under his arm in spot in the shade and they sat down, enveloped in the same peace which covered the world. Surrounded in a in a layer of soft noise which conveyed a sense of quiet better than silence itself.

All the while they didn't speak.

They didn't need to.

They lay in the cool shade, caressed by the breeze.

Amias let his mind go. Nothing mattered now. No job or activity was going to make him happier than this so he let it all escape from his mind. The minutes passed like years—too slow in the moment but too fast in retrospect.

His gaze wandered from the clouds to the trees to the flower bushes and an idea flashed into his head.

Without saying a word he patted her shoulder and got up. He felt the air run through his hair as he jogged over to the flower bushes and instantly knew which one to pick. The light-red pedals waved in perfect sync with each other.

He found the most perfect and picked it, careful not to damage the little sun staring up at him.

He walked back and smiled at Mirna when she looked at him, wondering what he was doing. Her hair swirled in the breeze, but she let it.

“Beautiful.”

He sat cross-legged behind her and she twisted around to see what he was doing. He nodded back towards the field and she turned back around.

Gently he took her hair and wove the flower into it, just over her ear.

He finished and adjusted it. Then he leaned and, said his first words in over half an hour.

“I will always love you”.

Part 3: Shatter

Cleotha set the easel up and put the canvas on it. Her charcoal made a mark on the canvas; a rectangle in the exact center around which everything else would revolve. She took a brush and filled the rectangle with orange. The archetype in her head was clear, her wet brush poised, its tip just millimeters above the textured surface. Everything was going according to plan. The self-important man on the phone was going to take her work and make her succeed.

There was a knock on the door.

Cleotha closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of frustration.

The knock came again.

She set the brush down and stood up. Her fists opened and closed as she moved to the door, the tendons straining.

She yanked the door open after pausing for a second with her hand on the doorknob. On the other side, Paris, Arden, and Amias waited in the hallway like three pathetic children who had nothing better to do than disturb their parents.

“What!”

She watched as the shock from her anger passed over them.

Arden looked at the other two as if asking permission to speak.

“We wanted to know if you wanted to do anything. You weren’t answering your phone, so we... Got worried.”

“You got *worried*?” She laughed as she said it.

They looked at each other. Arden spoke again. “Yeah”.

Something cracked deep in Cleotha, the keystone in the wall built up between her contempt and the rest of the world collapsed.

“Is this what you do when you’re bored? Go and annoy the first name who pops into your head? Stop and think for *once*. Did it ever occur to you that I might have something better to do right now?

You have a real-life stand-up comic right here. Put on a show why don’t you? Keep your friends out of my hair.

Or why don’t you go shoot up with Mr. Junkie over here? You hear he can down a whole bottle of scotch without feeling it? Real valuable life skill right there.

Just call up Mirna and go off where you can project your insecurities onto her and feel better about yourself for a few minutes? Oh, she’s not answering? Cry me a river.”

The sound of her last word hung in the silent hallway for a moment which stretched into eternity.

As one they nodded and walked away in complete silence, leaving her in the doorway, alone.

Then it hit her. Like a bullet passing through her brain. She closed the door and stepped back into the room without any thought given to what she was doing.

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Those innately average, intuitively unintelligent people were never going to speak to her again. They would never knock on her door, never call her, never give her another ounce of thought. Everything she meant to them was gone, burned, dead and buried. If they remembered her it would be as their arrogant friend who never really cared about anything outside of herself.

But she *did* care about them. More than she had ever realized. The spot where they had been was now a sore. The pain brought her attention to it for the first time.

The guise of apathy and arrogance slipped away. She was just a person, not more or less virtuous than anybody else. A human like all of them. Someone, selfish, hypocritical, and shallow girl, who had dug a channel on all sides, leaving her nothing but a desert island nobody could reach. She took the metal and plastic box out of her pocket to call the last person she had left.

Mirna had called her and left voicemail the night before, but Cleotha hadn't checked.

"I'm moving out. You probably didn't notice but I already took all my stuff. Good-bye."

She hadn't. Mirna's mug was gone from the counter. Her sheets from her bed. The picture of her mother from the table beside it.

Mirna was gone too.

The room spun around her and her mind spun with it. Cleotha let the device fall from her limp fingers. It fell to the floor and she followed. Slowly backwards, until she lay spread eagled on the ground.

She lay for hours, minutes, seconds, years. It didn't matter and she didn't count.

Finally, she got shakily to her feet.

The once great, all-noticing, all-knowing, all-loved Cleotha shuffled limply across the floor, her clothes hanging from her as if they had grown three sizes since she put them on. She reached the easel and the canvas. The brush had dried but the orange rectangle remained. Slowly, she put the brush into a cup of water and watched the dye swirl around the liquid, turning it a sick, muddy cousin of the vibrant orange.

She dried it and applied a new color to its hairs.

The brush hovered millimeters above the textured surface. But this time it wasn't a knock stopping it from smearing its contents over the canvas.

The mural of her worldview was gone. She had seen herself as fitting perfectly among its conniving familial units and hypocritical relationships and burned it, leaving a black vacuum in its place. She knew right then she was never going to mark another for as long as she walked the Earth. The self-important man on the phone would never get his five paintings, and she would never get the recognition from them.

She had nothing left.

Nobody.

Mr. Junkie separated from Amias and Arden on the sidewalk outside of Cleotha's building. Each of them silent, their voices stunned into submission by her unexpected tirade. He had gone on foot to meet them, using the opportunity to enjoy being outside, but now was forced to walk back through the long, quiet spaces, which his mind filled with his recollection of her words.

Mr. Junkie.

He hung his head as he went, so as to not be forced to make eye contact with anybody, shutting his eyes for long periods of time to block the feelings building up behind them.

Pointless and useless, Paris walked under the cover of the smeared grey clouds pre-darkening the world.

Maybe she was right.

Real valuable life skill over here.

Was that all he was, all he'd ever be?

Mister Junkie. The skinny guy with the too-big clothes and the too-long hair. So much potential, gone to waste.

He could imagine what people would say at his funeral.

"Paris Adelram. Nice enough-kid, could have been somebody, but..."

"He couldn't hold a job, but could finish a whole bottle of scotch without feeling anything."

He hoped people would cry.

Probably they wouldn't.

Before realizing it, he was at his apartment, in front of the door, inside.

He fell into a chair and put his head in his arms.

Real valuable life skill.

Real valuable life.

He started to cry, hard and long the sobs came. Over and over again, like the beat to some twisted, pointless song.

After an unmeasurable length of time he looked up. There was a cup on the table. An empty water glass he had before walking to meet Arden and Amias. The top was perfectly round. The glass perfectly clear, sparkling from the light above.

Beautiful.

Time to destroy something beautiful.

He stood up, the tears still streaming down his face. The glass indignantly sat below him. Its round opening staring up at him. Challenging him.

The sparkle on the glass flashed as he hit it and watched it fall.

Down.

Down.

Crash.

The momentary itch was scratched and for a split second he forgot the things Cleotha had told him.

But only for a second.

His hands tightened until the tendons stretched taut and squeezed his eyes shut.

In his mind, Cleotha's twisted rant continued on far longer than the real version ever had, his imagination adding to it in new and ever more painful ways.

What does your mother think?

How about your father?

When was the last time you spoke to them you?

His desk was in the other room, covered in papers. He took a handful and ripped them to shreds. The confetti fell around his feet. The rest were swept off with one motion.

Yeah, keep ripping those papers, that'll show 'em.

His hands destroyed just to make his head shut up for a second.

Your tombstone will read: "Disappointment".

If anyone will pay for it. An unmarked grave, that's your destiny.

The desk drawer slammed open and everything froze.

The tears stopped.

Paris' heart awoke in a flame of desire. Not unlike the feeling when he stood next to his crush during a school dance except his time the flame was cold. Hard and inflexible in its craving.

The plastic bag and its contents, forgotten in some previous stupor, hit the surface of the table.

Pieces of glass crunched under his feet but he didn't care.

He reached for it, his hands shaking, but stopped. Was today the day he threw it all away?

The bathroom door slammed and he splashed cold water on his face. His heart was pounding.

He took his phone out of his pocket. Amias' name popped up and he called. Paris put it up to his ear and looked at himself in the mirror.

Amias answered expectantly before the first ring had finished.

"Hello?"

Paris saw red eyes and messy hair, the stubble on his face dirtying his chin. He remembered the feeling after his runs, the sense of peace, beauty.

Time to destroy something beautiful.

Paris put the phone to his ear and Mr. Junkie left it on the sink.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

The floor of the apartment looks like the ground in an alley, covered in pieces of glass and shreds of paper.

PARIS/MR. JUNKIE teleports to the table and looks at what lies on it.

MONTAGE - THE NIGHT

--He steps over the mess to get to his living room.

--He falls on the couch.

--He stares at the wall.
--He turns on the TV and stares at it.
--He lays on the floor and looks at the ceiling.
--He looks out the spakly window.
--The lights leave multicolored streaks as they move past.
--They are so pretty.
--So pretty.
--Pretty
--P-R-E-T-T-Y
--If you say it over and over again, 'Pretty' sounds like gibberish.
--What about P, R, E, T, T, and Y in that order conveys beauty?
--But they are so *pretty*.
--His car hits the wall.

The walk back went in slow motion, every sound dampened, every feeling numbed. The steady clamp on her heart was back. All Mirna could remember was Amias saying "I will always love you". The flower tucked above her ear burned against her scalp. She wanted to tear it out, to forget what he had done and never think about it again. But instead she was subjected to this interminable walk down the path.

He pointed out the bench they'd first sat together on.

Not now please.

She didn't say it but she thought it.

Amias drove away and she sat in her car. Staring at his car until he turned out of view. The second it did, she tore the flower out of her hair and ripped it to shreds. The little green and orange flecks floated in the air, gradually settling downwards.

She took a breath and dug in her glove compartment for the secret wrinkled picture.

Her thumb rubbed over her father's smiling face. A little piece of orange pedal came off her finger and stayed on the picture. She felt the texture of his printed glasses, his inked hair.

In her mind's eye she saw the sun glint off Amias' glasses and the wind ruffle his brown hair.

Don't make the same mistake I did.

Mirna added little pieces of the picture to the detritus making its way to the floor of the car. She went to her apartment.

Cleotha was probably out "people-watching" or whatever it was she left to do most days. She never was considerate enough to tell Mirna, who lay on her bed with her eyes open, mind racing too fast for her to even consider falling asleep. Her phone buzzed. It was Amias, wondering if everything was okay.

She left the phone on the bed. A few hours later she came back. He had called.

She watched TV all night and slept all the next day. Cleotha came at night and left again the next morning. They didn't speak.

She drove and worked and ate and slept, but she didn't answer her phone.

Cleotha was sitting across from her, eating the cereal whose box stood between them.

Mirna's phone sat on the table. It buzzed.

Amias.

Cleotha raised her blue eyes from the bowl which she had previously found so much more interesting than the person sitting across from her. The eyebrows arching over them raised when she saw who it was.

"You should answer."

"What?"

Cleotha got up and put her bowl in the sink.

"Get it over with."

The blue-eyed girl left.

Cleotha picked up her phone and looked at his name on the screen.

The knot tightened its dreadful grip as the guilt in her mother's voice dripped through her brain, congealing in every neuron and fold.

Don't make the same mistake I did.

The TV, her work, the food she ate, water she drank all felt tired, empty. Devoid of emotion and life.

The sun was high in the bright sky on the day she bumped into him. Despite its brightness it seemed to cast a cold grey light on the world.

They had to get groceries but Cleotha wasn't home, forcing Mirna to make an appearance in public. She parked her car and was crossing the parking lot.

"Mirna?"

Before she word had been finished, she knew who it was.

She turned slowly.

The wind ruffled his brown hair, his red shirt fluttered in the wind. The chain in her chest loosened like a snake uncoiling so as to be more ready to strike.

"Can we talk?"

She opened her mouth, but her phone rang before she could speak.

Like a synch clamping down with the force of a thousand tons the knot returned, the burning ball of hot nervousness spiralling inside her, shooting little tendrils through her body.

It was her mother. She saw Amias glance down at the device in her hand before looking back up at her.

He doesn't like you anyway.

Why would someone love you after you didn't speak to them for weeks?

Don't give him the opportunity to hurt you.

Her mind's eye panned from her mother, sitting at home in her armchair, old and frail, pale and lonely, to Amias, standing there in the parking lot, his eyes lost behind reflective lenses.

On one hand, the woman who had raised her, on the other, someone who appreciated her for what she was.

A simple choice complicated by years of upbringing.

He means well, look at him, he said he loved you.

So did Dad.

Both were mutually exclusive and both existed in the same place, a hypocrisy within a hypocrisy that doubled back in on itself in convoluted and twisted patterns, impossible to discern.

The tie was broken by a simple idea, a difference between the known and unknown, however bad the known was.

So she went with certainty.

Arden sat, unable to stand still. He bounced his leg up and down. The three previous acts had passed in a blur, too slow and fast. He fixed his hair, adjusted his collar, straightened his coat. His words played over and over in his head. He couldn't relax until he had gone through all of them perfectly. Then he'd do it again.

There were a lot of people sitting around him.

Bigger risk or bigger reward, depending on how he looked at it.

You could tell how much they liked the performance based on how enthusiastically they cheered.

Think about the congratulations.

He didn't want the applause.

He needed it.

Arden took a drink of water and relished as the cool liquid dripped down his throat. The panic momentarily subsided, but returned in full force when the sleazy looking master of ceremonies thanked the previous act and announced the next one.

It was a guy with a guitar who stood and sang a song about a kiss under a tree.

The performance was good but Arden couldn't bring himself to pay attention.

The man finished the song and nodded at the audience who clapped loudly.

Be better than him.

The Master of Ceremonies stood and made a show of applauding the guitarist.

"And next up," the man looked at the piece of paper with the list on it, "is Arrrddeeeen Campbell! Give it up for Arden!"

The people half-heartedly clapped Arden stood up, heart pounding and ears rushing.

Be better than the rest.

He made his way through the tables.

Be perfect.

He stepped up onto the stage.

Win.

He reached the microphone.

Cleared his throat.

And just like that, everything he had prepared; all his ideas, every part scratched on paper and fitted together in his mind was gone.

The room was quiet, deathly so.

They all looked at him, expectant, taunting.

No one was laughing yet, but he could see it in their eyes; the cruel humor found in the failure of others.

He cleared his throat again.

Their gaze covered him like plastic wrap, trapping his whole body in a layer on invisible material sticking to his skin.

This is what you want.

They're all looking at you, paying attention to you, make you worth their time.

He searched through the confines of his mind, but it was racing too fast for any search to find what he had come here to say.

But it had been so good.

It had been *great*.

But now it was gone, and had left him here to face the humiliation, the cruelty, the animosity of those who had come to this night to be entertained.

They would get their fun, one way or another.

Someone was muttering in the back.

Somebody else laughed.

The MC stared at him expectantly.

His hair was back in his eyes. His heart was exploding out his chest.

He could think about everything except what he had planned to say.

The room began to spin and fall away. The audience, stage, microphone, MC all intertwining together to become a mess of colors which turned to static and faded to darkness.

Arden Campbell knew he was collapsing, but his mind was too detached from his body to care.

She put the phone to her ear and Amias knew it was over.

He had been dreading it since the one day in the park, but some part of him had been denying it, thinking it would somehow work out even as the silent days added up. Some tiny piece white-knuckled the edge, praying the person who pushed him off would help him back up.

Practically, he had known it was going to end, but had hoped it would have been in some other way than in the parking lot grocery store, with her choosing to answer her mother's calls over speaking to him.

She hadn't said anything of that nature. She hadn't said anything at all. But she took the call from her mother and stopped either one of them from saying anything to the other.

He could tell the choice had been hard, the period where she stood there, glancing from phone to him stretched on enormously, elongated by the weight carried by such a simple gesture.

At least she gave him that.

When she held the phone to her head, the color seemed to drain. Spiraling away like water down a drain until bone dry monochromality was all left. She nodded and made a comment about the groceries. Her mother said something. All he could hear was metallic muttering. Mirna took a deep breath and answered a definite yes.

Then she hung up.

“I’m, uh, moving in with my mom.”

He made long eye contact. Wanting say everything, but coming up with nothing except: “Ok”.

She nodded and looked at him.

He felt the hot trail of a single tear drip its hellish path down his face. He didn’t want her to see it but craved for her to notice.

Then she slowly walked away, and left him in the parking lot.

Alone.

He lay on his bed and remembered. He had driven the longest possible route back to the apartment he shared with Arden, but his recollection of the trip was already hazy. Crystal clear were the flashes of memories passing through his mind, the sound of the wind through the trees as they

walked, the way she had smiled when she took his hand for the first time, the feeling he had when he first realized how much he liked her.

It was all withering away now and he could feel it. Every memory would be gone, diluted with the solvent of time until there was nothing left. That was the worst part, knowing he wouldn't remember.

So he ran them over and over and over and over again in his mind, trying to etch them, emboss them into his brain.

The rustle of the wind.

Her smile.

The feeling.

At this moment he would rather forget his own name, everything about himself if it meant these three things would shine like a star in the empty space of his memory.

Eventually, thirst overcame his mental blockade and he shuffled slowly to the living room. A glass filled with water seemingly on its own and he leaned against the counter. Having something mindless to do with his hands felt good; it left his brain to play the little clips again and again.

The rustle of the wind.

Her smile.

The feeling.

An orange piece of paper was on the table. He went over to it and realized it was the sheet he had handed Arden in the dark outside their apartment the day before Mirna had taken his hand.

Most of Amias focused on the events of the ensuing three weeks, but a small part registered this very night as the one printed on the paper.

He went back to his room and remembered.

Arden sat across from him, chewing his food. He kept his eyes locked on the table. This was the first time Amias remembered him leaving his room since his performance, three months earlier. Arden didn't talk about it, or much anything else, and Amias didn't ask.

They didn't talk, but neither wanted to.

A group people passed their table. One was spacing out, but the others looked back at Arden with recognition and snickered. Amias gave them a dirty look but they had already turned and continued on their way.

He had forgotten the sound of her voice, and long sleepless nights in tight concentration did nothing to conjure it back.

He wasn't able to remember the texture of her hand.

The feeling had twisted, mutated into a cold resentment. Amias guessed it would fade, but hoped it wouldn't. Anything was better than nothing.

They finished their food and stood up to leave. The sun was bright, shining down on a clear day, smeary clouds just prevalent enough to give the sky depth floated aimlessly above.

Amias saw it all but didn't enjoy its beauty, a certain greyness lay under, and yet superseded it.

They went home. Arden wordlessly went to his room and Amias went to the fridge, opening it to reveal a bottle filled with brown liquid.

Everything was empty.

Colorless.

The Nobody Men never met in front of the little house again.

One of them loved and one of them hated, one of them gave and one of them took, one of them created, but each was destroyed by their cardinal sin.

If they had met, they would have stood outside the orange door, listening while Cleotha talked and Paris sat in his wheelchair staring apathetically at the dirt. Watching as Arden stood quiet and Mirna nervously waited to get back to her mother. Noticing how wasted Amias was.

Cleotha would have worn white.

Paris would have worn blue.

Mirna would have worn red.

Arden would have worn green.

Amias would have worn gray.

Every one of them loaded a gun and handed it to the universe. And because of it, they drifted apart, like the smoke off Amias' hypothetical cigarettes, meaninglessly withering away into the night.

All the while, the little house would have looked down on all of them, except now there are boards over the windows and planks across the orange door.