

Dead Hearts - History and Fiction

By

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ABSTRACT:

The following is a **Fictional Work** submitted as a thesis in the spring of 2023. It centers on the fictionalized life and disappearance of Adrienne Hardy, a transgender teenager living in the mid-90s, as well as the decades-later (also fictionalized) investigation into the case by Casey Britton, herself a trans woman in the mid-to-late 2010s. The project was born from a number of goals, most notably to center trans women in a story with more than a few roots in the horror genre, in a way that doesn't other transness/lean into transphobia as much of the genre has/does. Additionally, much of the project centers on Adrienne's internet presence in early trans communities, all of those details are drawn from real queer resources and archives from/of the early internet; they strive to be as genuine to real trans history as is possible without being there first hand, in the hope, in part, of illuminating constantcy in the trans experience, one widely thought to have originated in the rather recent past. The thesis encompasses the novel's first 10 chapters/41 pages, with subsequent installments still in progress. The author can be reached at imahood5@gmail.com with questions/comments/concerns/queries/etc. about the writing that already exists and/or is still to come.

Keywords:

English/English major; Creative-Writing/Creative Writing Concentration; Fiction; Student Work; Transgender History; Queer History; LGBTQ; Internet History; Horror and Suspense; Folktale and Rumor; Investigative Fiction; True-Crime

I. For Adrienne

The lady at the desk narrowed her eyes when Casey reached for her room key. Even after she'd shown the woman her I.D., she felt the searching pressure of eyes on her form until:

“Casey Britton?” *Here it comes*

“Oh uh, yeah?”

“You went to high school with my daughter!”

“I-I did?” The stutter seemed like a small fraction of a larger effort on Casey's part to fold her body in on itself.

The woman though, didn't seem to notice and with the pride of a mother who believes she brought her children into conversation organically, she began to ramble, her very lips overjoyed at the chance to form the beloved syllables.

“...And then a few years younger than you would've been my youngest, Ally! Remember her?”

“Yeah! I, uh, well I think I do.” Casey's lie was a poor one and the woman's smile dimmed.

“You're tired.” It was a decree as much as it was anything else. “I'm sure some sleep'll help your mood. You let me know if you need anything, 'kay hon?”

Dismissed, Casey swallowed her questions about the shower situation and the food situation and really the whole situation, and turned to trudge up the creaky wooden stairs.

The room itself was unremarkable, though no-less homey for it. Wood-paneling adorned the walls, outdated now, but only a few years away from charmingly retro if they stuck it out. A microwave/fridge combo and a desk kept to themselves in the corner, while a bed frame made of

logs with the bark still on sprawled into most of the rest of the space. With an airy thump, she dropped her bag onto the bed then followed suit, laying on her stomach and pulling out her phone. In any other place, the room would've reminded her of hometown and relaxed her for it, but now, already here, she found the full weight of her choice bearing down.

Suddenly far too anxious not to be moving, she rolled back off the bed, careful not to touch the shoes she'd left on (*stupid*) to the hostel's clean sheets and began to unpack. Clothes and toiletries first, what little of both she'd remember to bring, then a brief break of a few minutes wherein she smoked in the bathroom and got paranoid about that same fact. Finally she was onto her second bag: the unwieldy rectangle had been earning Casey questioning glances all day but to bring it, to bring *her* had been worth it — more than, really, it was the reason for the trip.

Setting the file-sorter on her bed, she gingerly took her shoes off, this time before jumping back on, and popped the plastic box open in a practiced motion. Familiar contents stared back at her: Adrienne Hardy's life, her disappearance, and months, now years of Casey's own life too. Each piece conjured from the depths of the internet and made physical in the form of DNA test results, blood spatter analyses, fingerprint comparisons, pictures of knives cross-referenced with grocery ads, and finally, a photo. As soon as it was in her hands, Casey changed: reverent, small, almost afraid. With trembling palms she taped it to the wall with everything else, dead center. For a long moment, she stared at the photo, then, as if decided about something, she moved to the desk, turned to a blank page in her notebook, and began to write:

May 2023

Adrienne,

Hi,

It's me again, though you probably already knew that.

I did it, I moved back, just like I said I would. Somehow, following through on something's never felt more like quitting. But I got a job at the archives! Or, what's left of 'em anyway, so wish me luck there.

Um.

I found a picture of you. I'd been looking for a while and then finally, right before I was supposed to leave, I just, stumbled on an old yearbook photo. You looked great by the way, very Twin Peaks. But, I don't know, I just...I hope that's okay. I know if it's not, there's nothing you can do about it but, that's kinda the worst part — what if I'm just like the rest of them? Am I different just because I'm a trans girl too and I write letters I can't send instead of journaling? I like to think so, but sometimes I'm not sure.

I have this recurring nightmare where you're found and we meet and I tell you everything I did to track you down and you're just, appalled at the way I took what you left behind and planted myself there and I can't even say anything back because I couldn't have put it better myself.

Well, I just looked, you're still smiling, I guess you can't be too mad.

That was a joke.

Sorry.

I like to think I'm doing this for you but I'm not positive, that's what bothers me. Though, if I'm being really honest, I'm not sure it matters. Twenty-seven years is a long fucking time; you've spent as many years missing as not, and then some. That's what scares me most of all, not that your story ended but that it feels like it never did, it just feels like we all stopped writing and left you, frozen. To me, it's a fate worse than death. I have no guarantee you felt the same but, if there's any chance you did, isn't that enough?

Girls like us rarely get endings at all, let alone happy ones. We're edited out of early drafts and left on cutting room floors. But not you, not this time, not anymore. You deserve an ending, and if I'm being honest, some revision in the public eye. I want the story to be yours again, even if it's all I can give. I hope that can be enough.

I guess it'll have to be.

-C

When she finally flicked off the lights, the room was plunged into darkness, almost. Coming up from the street, barrelling through the window, and creeping under the curtain, wisps of light splayed themselves on the wall; casting Adrienne's face in an angelic glow. Here, now, all of Casey's research looked less academic than ever before — the collection of graphs, timelines, and photos seemed less like research and more like a shrine, a morbid prayer made piecemeal, and offered back up to anyone who might've been listening.

Home Video I

With a click and a soft whirr the VCR accepts the tape. For a few moments, the TV is stubborn enough to hang on to its solid blue square, then it goes dark, fills with static, and the tape begins to play.

6/6/1995 - 8:58 A.M.

The shot's a little off-center and a little out of focus too, but even with the graininess of the era's film, the subject's easy enough to make out: Patrick Hardy, Adrienne's older brother stands at the end of a driveway, a small heap of bags at his feet. A cigarette rocks lazily between grimy fingertips, temporarily ignored; evidently, he's mid-sentence. The camera's mic kicks on just in time to hear the end of the thought:

“...bought an RV to chase the Woodstock high — Stella's allowed to borrow it if we're...careful.”

Another voice answers back from behind the camera, low but feminine; tentative but practiced, “Let's hope Stella's dad doesn't mind the smell of weed then.”

“Addy, it's a *camper* from the *seventies*, it *already* smells like weed.”

Adrienne mumbles something too quietly for the camera to pick-up and it falls instead to the lesser-checked annals of history.¹

Restlessly, Adrienne pans the camera down her street and it's almost a well-composed shot if you don't mind some shaky camera work. Uniform houses line the road on either side. Across the street, a woman with a staunch commitment to leg-warmers walks her dog like a drill

¹ If you listen close you can sorta hear the word 'semen' but that's the subject of some debate.

sergeant. If you listen closely, you can hear Adrienne humming “Manic Monday” under her breath.²

“Pinecairn, right? That’s the name of the place?” It’s Pat that breaks the semi-silence.

“Mm hmm!” The camera bobs as Adrienne nods.

“Got it.” A beat. “Hey, what’s a cairn?”

“Like a stack of rocks I think? Explorers used to use them as landmarks... or something.”

“How do you-?”

“I read!”

Pat scoffs at this, but not in a truly mean way, “Bullshit.”

“Okay yeah I looked it up, damn — still had to read it though”

“That’s the sister I know...” For a moment, the unanswered question hangs in the air.

Adrienne begs it to stay that way, but she isn’t so lucky. “...So how’d you find this place?”

For a split second we hear a sharp intake of breath from Adrienne, inaudible to everyone but you, the camera’s mechanical ear immortalizing the moment of dropped composure. Then,

“Oh, uh, you know how it is. I stumbled on some camping forum and found a thread of places nearby and-”

Pat stares at her, immediately doubtful, “*You*, were on a forum, *for camping?*”

Even without a view of her face, forced nonchalance drips from Adrienne’s words. “I mean technically it was more a hiking forum but then you said you wanted to go camping and-”

“Addy, you fucking hate hiking.”

“Jesus, Pat I can change my mind.”

He mumbles something, the camera doesn’t catch it but Adrienne does, she scoffs and turns away for a few moments. A silence yawns between them, seemingly expansive until:

² The film’s content and time-stamp tells us this morning was neither, but you don’t hold it against her.

“Hey so, um, about last night, are you still having those-” We can’t see Pat’s face, but the concern in his voice is painfully clear.

“I’m fine, Pat. Just a stupid dream about school stuff. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Oh you didn’t — I was um...” His voice gets quiet with mock-shame, “Playing *Doom*.”

Adrienne laughs a little at this and seems to soften, “Fucking nerd.”

“Well at least *I’m* not playing *Chrono Trigger*, again.”

Adrienne whirls on him, nearly dropping the camera in the process, “Okay no, *Chrono Trigger* is a masterpiece and you’d understand if you played it!”

“Okay okay; I will, I swear.” Pat chuckles, then his voice grows serious again, “Hey I want you to know you can always like, talk to me about stuff, even when I’m away school I’ll-”

“I- I know Pat... Thanks.”

Silence again. We hear Adrienne take a deep breath, when she speaks again, her voice shakes a little, “I- I had another nightmare. I was-” Fate intervenes in the form of a beat-up RV rounding a corner at the edge of the frame, rocking slightly with the force of its momentum. With all the relief of an addict enabled, Addy’s voice changes: “Stella’s here!”

Pat starts to say something but Adrienne’s already walking to the edge of the driveway. The blur of a concerned expression is the last bit of him we see before Adrienne walks past and he’s lost to the shot.

The RV’s a piece of shit. It’s a judgment that’d feel harsh if it wasn’t also a direct quote. When the van pulls up to the curb in front of their driveway, Pat wolf-whistles at his girlfriend behind the wheel, jogs up to Adrienne, and whispers exactly that.

She apes mock-offense, “Patrick!” She gasps, “That is your girlfriend’s RV (fortheweekend), show some respect.” He smirks as Stella cranks the window down and waves.

“Hiiii!” She’s, beaming with no small amount of pride, “Hurry up and get in, the engine goes out of I idle too long”

Pat whispers to Adrienne, “Well that’s just lovely” and we hear her giggle.

We’re treated to a first-person perspective of the pair tossing their bags into the storage spaces under the van’s floor, the kind of detail anything but a home video would’ve edited out. Then, Pat and Adrienne walk around to the front of the RV, where she pauses for a moment while he gets in, rambling to the camera as she does:

“I’ll give the happy couple a sec to do reunion-ing in privacy...It’s better that way.”

There’s a brief stretch of silence, save for the engine’s sputters before she speaks again:

“Y’know, Stella’d probably get away with it if she ran me over right now.” She pans the camera up and down the street, “No witnesses and-”

“Addy? You coming?”

“Okay. One witness.” Adrienne murmurs to the camera as she circles around to the RV’s door.

Stella speaks again when Adrienne walks in the RV, “Hey girly!” We don’t have to see her face to hear the smile in her voice.

Adrienne pans the camera through the cramped space, it’s a sea of wood paneling and duct tape trying its best, with an ill advised shag carpeting on most of the floor. Pat was right, the RV is *definitely* from the seventies.

It’s only when the camera reaches Stella’s face and Adrienne begins a slow zoom that the young girl replies, “I think you’re illegally parked.”

“Shit.” The volume of the older girl’s voice drops, “Don’t tell the others, yeah?”

Briefly, we see Stella pull the gearshift into the D position before, dizzyingly, the camera swivels, and we see Adrienne’s face for the first time, makeup carefully applied to soften it’s angles and a thick layer of eyeliner and shadow both between green eyes and a mop of brown curls. She holds a finger to lips, looks directly at the lens, winks, and the screen goes dark.

II. The Exposure

She'd been fifteen at the time, just a little younger than Adrienne had been when she vanished. Her hair was shorter than she wanted, her chest smaller, and her name all wrong, although she hadn't realized it just yet. It was a Tuesday, one of those illicit spring days February smuggles in amongst the gray and Casey was hiding out from gym class with a friend (tenuously) who'd had the same idea. That's where, under the bleachers and over a joint, she met Adrienne for the first time.

Smoke outed itself in the slats of sunlight filtering through the benches everytime Evan exhaled. Casey watched the miniscule shapes form and disband in an instant — art, but only if someone took the time to look.

After one such occasion (and the requisite cough) Evan cleared his throat, “You hear about that new show?”

Evan was a lightweight, who isn't at that age, but his voice rasped and Casey was merciless, at least in her head. *Jesus, he's already stoned.*

In reality she was slightly less so: “You're gonna have to be more specific, Ev.”

“Dude, c'mon” He was aghast. “The one based on the fucking like, campsite killings.”

She stared blankly at him.

“Dude. The ones *here?!?*”

Oh. Yeah. Those. In spite of herself, Casey leaned closer. The story was common knowledge, but not hers just yet, her family having moved to Pinecairn just after the town resolved to scrub the blood from its past. Still, the stories had a weight, a shape, secrets always do. It was nothing short of maddening to be kept in the dark.

“So, what actually happened?”

Afterwards, she'd try to attribute a gravitas to the moment, some clarity that came with unearthing a story that had danced around her for the greater half of her life, but really, she was just stoned. Evan didn't know Adrienne's name so she didn't either. Not yet. A cruel twist in the regurgitation, but the pieces remained the same: four college kids and a highschooler from out of town on a camping trip; days later, park rangers find a bloodbath at the scene, two of them dead, another in shock, and her, nowhere to be found.

"...Nobody knew what happened until they found the knife a few days later, soaked in the dead chicks' blood and covered in the prints of the guy who ran away." *You can skip this part if you want, he didn't know.*

"Why would he—" *Neither did she — I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.*

"Well see, that's the kicker. He was a cross-dresser." Evan sat back like that explained everything but Casey wasn't satisfied.

"Evan."

"Yeah?"

"AND?"

"Oh uh," called to be a storyteller again, he was flustered; "They say he was losing it. Going mad with like, jealousy. They had what he never could, or something like that."

Evan's eyes had taken on a sick gleam, some gross pleasure he was taking in the way he painted her made Casey uncomfortable, even then, but she had to know more.

"So then what happened?"

"That's the craziest part, they never saw him again." *This guy sucks.*

Casey felt sick, she barely knew Adrienne, but she knew enough. Already, the back of her closet was a mess of shop-lifted bras, ill-fitting skirts, and dollar store make-up — the solitary,

late-night wearings of which were already her most shameful secret and the highlight of her every single day. *Girl I get it*

In that moment, Casey loathed Evan, for how he'd told the story, how he'd cast Adrienne within it, and how he'd made her complicit in the telling. In the absence of a young girl, they made a monster of the space she left behind — this was the legacy they gave them, both of them, soon enough. The monster and her shadow, wandering forevermore.

From <http://ar.geocities.com/adriennet/archive-june> (defunct)

June 2, 1995 - The Car Ride from Hell!!

Car rides suck.

I mean, not always... I *guess*. Mrs. Solabat at school would say sweeping declarations are immature and undercut the authority of my “writer’s voice;” but Mrs. Solabat also tells me to write what I know and right now I know that the road was fucking bumpy and my tummy (still!) hurts and Pat played his car mix for WAY too long (a national tragedy), AND he was right, the whole van smelled like someone *really* wanted to see what a moldy nug looked (and they’re gross — by the way).

Sorry.

I guess, maybe, that was a little immature — but don’t tell Pat I said that. And *definitely* don’t tell Mrs. Solabat, tho I’m pretty sure she thinks GeoPages is a book about rocks.

Anyway, hi gals — It’s good to be back :-)) I know Pat says GeoPages lacks some functionality and don’t get me wrong I *love* Usenet, but if I’m just rambling and especially if I want those rambles to look like, cute, it’s geopages all the way. Actually, I was thinking maybe I’d reformat my menu letters when I got the chance — I feel like we all kind of got over our sparkle phases, but like, it’s so comforting to see them now, I’ll leave ‘em up a bit longer. And oh yeah I’ve been trying to decide if I like emoticons better with or without the nose? Like :-)) vs :) y’know? idk, depending on my mood I think the second one either looks kinda creepy or it looks kinda like Kermit and I love the latter but not the former so sound off below/in IM’s cuz I’m torn.

But, yeah, so the car ride wasn’t great! The RV itself was small but pretty homey once you shut-out the smell. Wood paneling’s on everything that couldn’t hold a cushion — except

the rug, that's shag, duh ;p — We got in and Pat put on his music which normally is fine I guess but God, whenever he drives it's like he's a different person. It starts with this Tia Blake tape but it's not even the whole tape, he just finds "Plastic Jesus" and plays. It. On. Repeat. >.< On the bright side Stella was with him today and she gave him like an hour of Ms. Blake then cut him off and put on Blondie which was more than okay with me (Debbie Harry if you're reading this I'm free every night) so I was sitting near the front listening to them talk and that's how I overheard the Kohlers are coming camping with us too and I was like:

Greeaat :'-) (I'm going with the noses for now I've decided)

I don't think I've really mentioned them before, probably because I try to write about things I *like*, but Pat hadn't seen them since they went back to school for the spring and I'm really trying to be a good sport this time so :/

I should probably explain — they're family friends. One of those couples my parents met way back when they liked their lives. Then, when both couples had a boy at the same time, it must've felt like divine approval, what a rush. The only problem Mr & Mrs Kohler had to go and have twins and ended up with a daughter too, Annie. So like, right away my parents started trying to have a girl, but not trying very hard I guess because it was another two years until they had me. I've tried to tell them that after all this time they *were* right about the girl part and we can all laugh about it now, but they didn't think it was as funny as I did. Or at all. Fuck.

Growing up, I literally worshiped Pat and Aidan, my cool older brother and his cool friend. They found *Metroid* AND *Streetfighter* before I did, which Pat will not let me forget >:-) but also it made my life like a billion times better :-) It's like, the only kind of manhood I ever *really* wanted a part of was theirs but, two years younger and prone to crying, the closest I ever got was always a few steps behind.

Annie mostly kept to herself. I mean, I guess that makes sense, we def weren't very inviting, covered in mud and using sticks as lightsabers; she always kept us 'boys' at a careful distance. Of course, she's not the only girl anymore; or like, she never was, but they didn't know I was TG/TS³ 'til like last year and that's not exactly their fault, yk? What makes me sad is that it *still* feels like there's a gulf between Annie and me. Like I can just tell that in her eyes *she's* a girl and I'm *still* something else. But hanging out with Pat and Aidan feels weird too! All I can think about is how badly I wanted to grow up to be like them. I mean, Pat and I still like most of the same shit (he's fucking wrong about Green Day though, they shred) but *he's* actually starting his life and *I'm* burning through my allowance buying crappy herbal supplements I *hate* for trace amounts of estrogen. Sorry, I- it's just hard not to feel like I'm running; like I gave up.

³ Transgender/transsexual - in the 90s, the distinction between the two was a bit more common-place; the latter implying a desire to transition medically/surgically — Adrienne, in the latter camp but unable, at the time, to take many substantial steps towards it, used both, often simultaneously.

Home Video II

A quiet click is the only warning the TV gives before switching on; static dancing like ash in the air. There's some clicking and whirring again, as the VCR triple checks, yep, the tape's there, then, finally, the static coalesces into form.

6/6/1995 - 9:43 A.M.

The RV again; this time in motion. In the corner of the frame, behind Pat, grass whips by outside. Tia Blake's "Plastic Jesus" plays in the background, under what sounds like an intense conversation.

From just behind the driver's seat, Addy, presumably, has the camera trained on Pat in the passenger's seat. Once again, he's mid-sentence. "-but really after this you can play your music yeah?"

Addy hops to the other side of the RV's center aisle just in time to get Stella's face in frame as she responds, "Fuck offff, you said that last time."

"Okay but I mean it this time." (Another aisle hop by Addy)

"You fucking better, this time it's documented" She calls back, "Right Addy?"

From behind the camera Addy lets out a "Hell yeah!"

Pat turns in his seat, sees the camera, and massages the bridge of his nose, "Good Lord — *this*" He gestures at the scene "for Debbie Harry?"

Stella's face gets deadly serious, "For Debbie Harry? Anything."

Adrienne lets out a whoop from behind the camera and Pat tries a different tact,

"But it's my *Road. Mix.*" He waves an arm at the windshield; they are, in fact, on a road.

"One song isn't a mix, Pat! We've been over this."

Pat's sigh is long and indulgently dramatic, you don't have to see Adrienne to feel her eyes roll.

Stella cuts in, "Okay but why that song though? I know for a fact you're agnostic."

Pat lets out a rehearsed chuckle, delighted at the question, "Babe, When you break 55 miles per hour, *everyone's* a believer."

From off screen Adrienne cuts in again, "I'm not!"

Pat smirks, "Okay fine, everyone but the *true* punks then."

Adrienne flips him off, hand in front of the camera to immortalize the act.

Pat starts to say something else but Stella interrupts him, "There they are!" and Adrienne points the camera back out the windshield. They're in a neighborhood again, uniform houses standing vigil around them. Addy accidentally makes eye contact with a stout dad watering his lawn, and quickly looks away. On a nearby driveway are two figures with their own loose pile of bags. Stella slows down until they're stopped at the driveway's end. With far less fanfare than Addy and Pat, Annie tosses her bags under the RV and moves to get in while Aidan walks around to the driver's side window, the camera following as he does. When he's there, he leans on the door, knowingly smarmy, and motions at Stella to roll the window down. She mutters *something* the camera can't quite catch⁴, but obliges,

"Stella! It's been a while — nice ride."

"Hurry up and you'll see her move too; shit'll blow your mind."

"Y'knowww, I actually wanted to ask, I'd be happy to uh, drive if you wanted." Stella scoffs but he keeps going, "Not to brag, but I'm licensed now."

Pat cuts in, "Didn't you fail the test like, three times?"

⁴ This clip actually went viral for a few days in the early 2010s, one of those things where half the people that heard it heard 'dillweed' and the other half heard 'dickseed,' like an audio version of that white gold/blue black dress thing, but it didn't last — it never does.

“Irrelevant! Dude, I’m like-”

Stella cuts him off, “*Dude*, the engine dies if I idle too long; you’re *literally* killing us the longer you’re out there.”

Aidan gives Stella finger guns and starts walking back to the door, but doesn’t stop talking either, “No worries queen, you take the first leg and I’ll jump in for the second one. I’ve been driving a lot, I’m getting really good”

Pat jumps in, “Jackass, You’ve been playing *Need for Speed*.”

“Yeah, but I’m getting fucking good at it!”

Stella turns to meet his eyes, “You terrify me sometimes, do you know that?”

As Annie goes “Y’know, same actually,” Stella shifts the car back into drive and they’re on the road again.

As the twins settle in, Adrienne, moved back a row to keep everyone in frame, slowly zooms out. For a little while it’s almost sort-of quiet; Pat and Stella pour over a state map and the twins fuss over seats, Adrienne lets out a breath you didn’t hear her hold and seems to relax just a bit. Stella snakes the RV through neighborhoods, then town streets, up a country road, and finally, back onto the interstate.

Settled in, Annie takes out a paperback, fusses with it a little, then seems to change her mind, closing it and putting it back into her bag. She stands up, meets Adrienne’s eyes/eyes the camera lens (it’s hard to tell) then closes the distance between them. If the RV shaking bothers her, she doesn’t show it.

“Cool if I sit here? They’re going on about *Pulp Fiction* again and if I have to sit through that conversation again I’m making a break for the window.”

You don't have to see Adrienne's face to register her surprise, even the camerawork's flustered, moving just a split second too late to keep Annie centered in frame.

"Y-yeah, sure!" The camera shakes as she scootches over, trying to figure out how to hold it between them before changing her mind. "Hey, can you put this over there?"

She passes the camera to Annie, who sets it on the seat on the other side of the aisle, evidently forgetting to turn it off. From this new angle you can see the back of Annie's head and a little over half of Adrienne's face around it: currently, she's fighting back a deer-in-headlights expression. It's a mixed success.

"How're you holding up back here?"

"In the nicest way possible, your brother's music taste, um, suuuuucks," then, embarrassed she adds, "But otherwise not bad."

Annie laughs, "Oh GOD don't get me started — I've been trying to get him into Hole but some people hate good music."

Adrienne's face lights up, "That's what I'm saying!" and Annie laughs again.

"Hell yeah! Actually I saw them a couple months ago, they stopped within road-trip distance of my school, I couldn't not go."

"Dude!! That's awesome!" There's a beat, then "Oh my God, yeah, how was freshman year?"

Annie goes still, you can't see her face, but Adrienne's looks momentarily terrified until the older girl goes, "Adrienne. Don't. Ever. Take. College. Bio." Addy cracks up, relief written all over her face, "Girl, they only let me in bio classes when they need a debate topic." Annie lets out a sharp, almost barking laugh, then freezes, suddenly afraid she's laughed at something she

shouldn't have. Adrienne meets her eyes with a reassuring look and Annie giggles again, her shoulders lowering with tension released.

Before long, she's talking again, "So, you think this place has a bar scene?"

"You're wondering if our *campground* has a bar scene?"

"There's probably a town nearby!" She pauses, "*Is there a town nearby?*"

"There is! It's called like, Pinecairn, I think?" Her feigned uncertainty is woefully unconvincing; Annie eyes her for a split second, then moves on.

"So not like, bustling with nightlife, then."

"I- I guess not — I didn't really think to look, I'm sorry, I'm not much of a partier."

Annie softens, "Hey it's all good girl, no worries — it's not like I didn't bring booze."

There's a beat, then: "The partying thing'll change, don't worry. College was *made* for single girls like us; boys are gonna fall at your feet." Addy's eyes go wide, she's been out long enough to know what the conversation really means.

"I- thanks Annie," She sighs, "that means a lot."

Annie smiles at her, "It's the truth, babe, I wouldn't say it if you weren't cute."

Adrienne's face goes beet red; for a split second there's a heroic effort to hold the girl's gaze before she falters, looks down, then out the window.

Whatever she sees you're not privy to it, but before long her back stiffens at the sight.

"Guys, is that smoke out there?"

Aidan's head pops up from behind the seat in front of her, "Addy, that's smoke *in* here."

Up front, Pat chuckles then starts coughing, passing Aidan a thick joint as he does. Smoke curls off of it like a river coursing skyward.

He holds it out to the girls, "Ladies?"

At the same moment Annie goes, “Dude, it's literally still the morning.” Adrienne starts talking “Sorry, I saw the reflection of smoke in the window or something and-” She looks up. Aidan’s still smiling at her, still holding the joint out, not a hint of comprehension in his red-rimmed eyes.

Adrienne sighs, “Yeah okay.” And takes the joint and a long pull before giving it back. Awkwardly, she tries to exhale *away* from Annie but she coughs a little instead and Annie smirks. The younger girl blushes again and looks away. For a while, nothing happens, or at least, no one’s conversation’s loud enough for the camera to hear. Treetops pass over Adrienne’s head where she looks out the window then, suddenly, she screams. The sound pierces the scene; words at first, a panicked “LOOK OUT!” that devolves into a guttural shriek. No one’s near the camera but it goes fuzzy all the same, static blooming over the picture, swallowing the outburst of the others’ voices until the whole screen is a blur; a smoke screen. This lasts a minute before the picture slowly starts to come back into focus: movement, and something running, four legs come into form then, with a pop, the screen goes black again.

From Adrien.net on Geocities (defunct)

June 6, 1995 - The Car Ride from Hell!! - cont.

Shit, I'm off topic again — what's next? Oh. Yeah, the last bit of the drive... Fuck. I-, I don't wanna think about it more than I have, but I *need* to put it down somewhere, right? — I know what I saw. I *know* what I saw.

That's what scares me the most, it's been hours and I'm still positive. The others can tell too, I know they can, but I know what I saw; I have to know what I saw.

The drive had been going so well :'-(Annie was sitting with me; I think, maybe, I was too hard on her; I think too that I want her to kiss me, like, really bad. But if that was *ever* in the cards it certainly isn't anymore aksdjfkl URGHH.

But, I know what I *saw*.

Fine.

Annie and I had been chatting, and she'd called us girls. Us! Girls! Together! Admittedly, she was mostly saying how us 'girls' are just soooo popular with the boys but...she said us. *Us*. I didn't know what to do with myself. Us! Girls! Together! God, being TG/TS and young, it's like you put yourself in peoples' hands and beg they don't drop you, even if they could, even if they want to. It's a low bar but, when someone meets it, God you nearly fall apart.

So I'd looked out the window, what else could I do? Cry? In retrospect it would've gone better but I looked out the window and I swear; I *swear* I saw smoke in the trees, pouring out of them like water from a sponge. Aidan said I must've just seen the smoke from that stupid joint — I know I didn't, but what could I say? I took the joint, and looked out the window, trying not to see what I clearly could.

But then, the smoke wasn't alone anymore; a deer burst out of the treeline in a frenzy, its mouth open, its eyes wild. It *must* have made a noise but if it did, no one said anything; then it bolted. In seconds it was in a sprint, running parallel to our van, then passing it. Before I could process what I was seeing, it tried to cut across the road, veering out in front of the RV; I swear it looked back at me as it did.

That's when I screamed. I tried to get the others to stop the car but it was too late. A wet slap followed by dozens of little crunches enveloped me, like a watermelon seeded with pop rocks, and shattered. Stella slowed down, but it just prolonged the sound, a sickening squelch that only stopped when the RV did.

I looked up, trying and failing not to cry. The others stared at me. Shocked. I- I think we hit a deer, I tried to tell them. I saw it, I said, it's right outside, but they just stared. Pat looked torn, concerned but scared to indulge me. I stared back, begging him to see what I saw, to hear what I heard but he just looked at Stella, who hadn't stopped staring at me at me. I wanted to melt into the floor. I wanted the car to crash; I imagined flying out through the windshield, landing in a heap next to the deer, broken, but left alone.

Annie broke the silence; I'm not sure exactly what she said, something about asking Stella what she saw. I watched Stella's eyes, watching the answer, the mono-syllable that would call me mark me as crazy, birthed in her brain and tumbling to her tongue. We made eye contact and I watched pity unfold. She was like, ohh I'm not really sure, I think I saw a blur maybe — I kinda need a stretch anyway, I can go take a look. Then she looked at me like, you coming? I tried not to register how relieved Annie looked to have a reason to get up.

We went out the door near the passenger seat, she was already up there, and stepped out of the RV before I did so I was still in the doorway when I got my first look at the road — thank

God. Without something to lean on, the sight that greeted me; hell, the smell alone, would've sent me to my knees right there.

Viscera bloomed like flower beds at my feet, rivulets of blood ferried bits of skin and meat to the sides of the road like rose petals in a river; piling up where the concrete ended and blood was swallowed by hungry earth. Some detached, mechanical part of my brain thought of Ancient Egypt, irrigating their farmland with a grid of rivers. I swayed on my feet.

Stella paced, stretching her arms first, then her legs. Her shoes were coated in gore, smearing it onto her hands where she grabbed them to stretch her thighs. If it bothered her, she hid it well. She must've felt me staring, because she looked up and I realized I hadn't moved. She was like, you good? And that's when I realized, she couldn't fucking see any of it; none of them could. I felt a vast chasm bloom between me and the others, even Pat. I shivered, isolation sticky on my skin, then stepped onto the road.

Stella was still staring at me. I realized I hadn't answered her yet so I was like, Oh yeah, I'm okay, sorry about that. But she kept staring so I kept rambling like I guess they just hot-boxed the car faster than I thought they would and she *still* kept staring cuz it was a weak excuse and she knew that but then I guess she decided to let me off the hook cuz she was just like Ugh girl I know, leave the door open behind you to air that shit out. Then she kept walking like, C'mon, maybe we'll see your deer.

Every step had its grisly echo: bones snapped and veins burst under our feet but Stella kept walking so I did too. We circled the RV's front and she pointed something out, a custom plate her dad had bought or something. Whatever it was I couldn't make it out; the front of the RV was a mess of blood and bone, skin and fur. Something in me snapped, I was like, don't you see that? And I guess it came out harsher than I meant cuz she looked a little surprised but then

pointed to that dumb license plate again and was like yeah that's what I mean, funny right? She started walking again and I couldn't help myself. While her back was turned, I stopped in place, found a spot on the ground where the gore had collected in a thick clump, then I held my breath and steeled my stomach, reached down and cupped the fleshy mass in my palm. It was firmer than I'd expected, bits of sinew valiantly preserving the memory of whatever purpose it had so recently served. It was too late to fight what had already begun, I wound up my arm, and let flesh fly.

Like a year and a half ago, in freshman bio, we hatched chicks from eggs. Even after all the eggs had hatched, our groups *and* everyone else's, we had one that just wouldn't. I started coming in early to hold it, trying to incubate it more organically than the heat lamp could. My teacher tried to brace me for the worst, but the egg was warm to the touch. She's coming, I'd say, she's just late, fashionably late. I'm not sure when the chick became a girl in my mind; probably around the same time I did.

I stopped in after school once, to check up on it, and found the rest of my group already there, out of patience, out of time. I tried to stop it but I couldn't; The egg's warm I said, She's in there, really, she's fine, but they wouldn't listen.

They didn't even crack it themselves, someone just stood on a chair, counted down, and let it plummet.

They were right of course, the egg popped like a held breath when it hit the floor, bits of egg white flying up at us but no one noticed, no one could stop staring: lying on the ground was something between a yolk and a bird; yellow goop pocked with fine feathers and tiny flecks of bone. The egg had never been warm. It clicked in an instant. That stupid fucking heat lamp was.

I got a B- on the lab.

There by the front of the RV, watching venison soar, I remembered the egg, my cradled, slow cooked corpse. Blood tip-toed down my hand onto my wrist. A few feet away, Stella was talking again, something about the vanity plate *she* would've gotten. I'd like to tell you the next bit was an accident, but I think we're passed that, you and I. Stella turned around to make a joke just in time for the mass of flesh to careen into her chest. With a wet smack, it landed, lodging itself just above her collarbone. Some fell off, hitting the road with a wet smack, most of it didn't. Instead it began to slide, slowly, down her chest and through the low-cut neck of her tank top, streams of liquid dividing and pooling around the curves of her chest. With any other liquid, it would've been borderline pornographic, but here, now, it was repulsive. Stella stared at me, for a brief second, hope flared and I thought I'd gotten through to her, but the expression was all wrong, her mouth closed, her eyes expectant; it clicked then that she was just waiting for her fucking joke to land. I opened my mouth, trying to force out a chuckle. Instead, I threw up, folded over and retching. Stella closed the distance between us quickly, rubbing my back consolingly; when she bent over, I heard the wet plop of meat falling off her and threw up again.

I'm not sure how long I stood there, I'm not sure when the others started watching, but when I looked back up, there they were, lined up at the windshield like royals at an execution. Stella watched me watch them and when she spoke again, her voice was soft. I don't see your deer, she said, but we can stay out here if you want some time. I managed to croak out a no, more than ready to go somewhere else; anywhere else, and followed her back to the RV.

The others were all over me when I walked back in. Aidan clapped me on the back and was like Damn girl! You can yak! Annie smacked him for that which kinda helped a little ig.

Then Pat was all I could see, like, You okay? Are you good to keep going? Do you wanna go home? My reassurance wasn't very convincing, I know that, but we'd been on the road for hours, he didn't wanna backtrack anymore than I did so when I said no, he didn't push. I think we/re both scared that was the wrong call. Annie had a different question. I couldn't make out the exact words but when she pulled Stella aside and pointed out the window, I got the gist: what the fuck was even out there? Stella shrugged, the scarlet print on her chest rising in time with her shoulders. I looked down, nauseous at the sight, and realized we'd tracked blood in with us, crimson footprints stamping the shag where we'd stepped. I tried not to cry. Quietly, I made my way back to my seat, and the others, as if dismissed, did too. Annie didn't sit next to me this time.

The car shuddered when Stella turned the key, a prolonged, uncontrollable tremor that knocked drinks from their perches onto the carpet below. The stink of cheap beer mingled with the stench of weed and now, the sour-sweet smell of aging blood. My stomach turned, for a moment, I thought I'd throw up again but the threat was an empty one, my stomach had nothing left to give. Gratefully, I accepted a water bottle from Pat, gargled some water and rolled down a window to spit it out, then greedily sucked down another half of the bottle. For a moment, I thought about pouring the rest on my hands, already crawling where the deer's blood had started to dry, but the RV was too small, someone would see and I had no excuse. Instead, I waited, unwilling to touch anything until the blood had dried enough not to smear. For a while I was quiet, waiting out the dry itch blooming across my skin, watching the smoke slither out of the trees.

III. The Town

Pinecairn, NY — From its tallest hill, you can see every prosaic inch. Ten feet wide and endlessly deep; you could spend a lifetime searching for its depths and only chip your nails on the shell. It's the town that swallowed Adrienne Hardy whole and, decades later, it's where Casey Britton picked up her trail.

Geographically, the town's far enough upstate to be largely immunized from tourism coming from anywhere but further upstate (and, occasionally, Canada). The result is a town almost stuck in time, and a population fiercely defensive of that fact. Churches hold fish fries in the weeks leading up to Easter; the park hosts a summertime jazz series where teens and tweens perform from a lone gazebo; it's the kind of idyllic self-contained community you go crazy for if you fit the mold, and that leaves the rest of us on edge. What this means then, is that those streets Adrienne and Casey shared barely changed in the interval between them. Even now, Casey half-expected to see Adrienne everytime she looked out the window. Without Rochester's meager cityscape so nearby, she doubted Pinecairn would've changed at all.

They moved when the younger girl was twelve. The Dot-Com burst left Dewey Britton out of a job, Pinecairn Power seemed as good a place as any to start a new one, and his wife found work as a youth pastor. The only transplant to go less than smoothly had been Casey's own, by twelve she was already a tightly wound collection of limbs and fears, locked out of her body for reasons she wouldn't begin to understand for years more. For a brief moment, everyone thought the gangly-preteen had avoided the new-school anxiety, but they soon realized her inability to be quiet *was* the anxiety, and by God would it make itself known.

Her saving grace then was the land itself, tucked away like a secret at the marshy edge of Lake Ontario; surrounded by trees and fenced in by the lake. At night, the town's the only light for miles. The lakeside hamlet transformed in an instant to a lone island lost at sea.

In that regard, she couldn't *really* have ended up anywhere better. Even now, Casey's yet to find a town that loves its history *and* its folklore the way Pinecairn does. For most of the town's history, a newspaper kept the two separate but during the recession, a big publication bought out the smaller press in the name of "stability" and that all changed. For all intents and purposes, the town's history hadn't been written since — in a cultural circling of the wagons, (nearly) everything to that point, fact, fiction, and folklore was combined and canonized, every court case, neighborly feud, and thing-that-went-bump-in-the-night, archived and enshrined; frozen in time and carried away. Everything, save for one teenage girl.

For young Casey it was a goldmine under her feet; the further she drifted from her own life, the further she fell into those past; so barely concealed, all she had to do was keep her eyes peeled and look around.

When I say it like that, it makes one girl finding the other sound nigh inevitable; maybe it was. Despite not inconsiderable efforts on the part of the town's record-keepers, it was only a matter of time until Casey stumbled into the empty space left by the only one of its stories Pinecairn tried to hide.

There *had* been a time, once, before Casey's and before Adrienne's too, that the town's reputation had been different. A small group of activists, fresh off the heels of the Stonewall Riots had moved upstate, hoping to set a precedent for queer resources in rural areas. Rochester's local paper had even run a story on it, not a very flattering one, mind you, but worth the effort of digging up for it's lone photo: even grainy, dated, and done no favors by the photocopier, if you

looked closely, you could still make out the faces, similar to Casey and Adrienne's in all the right ways. If Casey had to guess, and she has (often), *that's* what brought Addy to Pinecairn: Rochester's sizable queer community, only miles away from their campsite, tucked just below the surface. For now, it's just a theory, but Casey stands by it; she knows firsthand how far girls like them will go to see a familiar face.

For Casey, the first couple weeks back in Pinecairn passed eerily quickly. Mental road maps, short cuts from highschool, even the associations her mother had drilled into for each of the *many* church-related bumper stickers she saw: they were dusty but intact, shockingly so. A routine emerged quickly enough to unnerve though, at least part of that was due to her own high-obsessive prep.

The big cities and the illustrious publications they housed, Casey found, had little need for an amateur journalist of nearly thirty who *still* hadn't gone to grad school, especially one whose commitment to "objectivity" was so tenuous. Fortunately, the Baker-Kanyon Historical Collection, operating a scant thirty-five hours a week from the Pinecairn Public Library's sole air-conditioned room, had no such qualms — she interviewed over the phone and started work a couple days after arriving in town.

Her boss and sole-coworker was an older woman named Miriam. A short, stout form ferrying perpetually wide-eyes, infamous among the library's staff for their uncanny powers of observation — even, most shockingly, in those rare moments where her trusty, thick-rimmed bifocals *were* 't perched on the bridge of her nose. Her knowledge of the town was encyclopedic and her commitment to that knowledge was staunch. Almost immediately, Casey admired and feared her in equal measure. The majority of the time, quiet cloaked the room they shared. One

interrupted, most often, by patrons coming in, looking for the original name of a street or the original owner of a plot of land, requests that Miriam fielded with, as far as Casey could tell, genuine pleasure. Occasionally though, the silence was broken by Miriam herself with some story to tell; Casey lived for these moments. To hear Miriam tell a story was to see its inhabitants, for a brief moment, as real people, shockingly alive in the mannerisms she gave them, and the historical impact she'd go one to espouse. Time seemed to fold around Casey in those first few weeks, the denizens of decades, even centuries past feeling realer to her than the former-classmates she avoided on her daily treks to work.

It was a feeling, she had to admit, likely bolstered by her obsessive commitment to Adrienne's case. The first time Miriam trusted her enough to close up on her own, Casey had stayed late by hours scouring rolls of microfiche for the activists' article and its all-important picture. Only sneaking back out at the sound of the custodian's early morning arrival. Back at the hostel, she *still* hadn't gone to bed, instead hanging her new photo next to Adrienne's. She watched them as the sun rose, imagining the women from one frame crossing into the other, keeping Adrienne company when her back was turned.

In reality, no one knows what happened to the activists either, even Miriam. The papers don't mention them again, even their own newsletter simply stopped releasing. By the time Adrienne showed up, Pinecairn had *already* decided how it felt about women like her. Everything that had happened one blood-soaked weekend in '95 was just their long-awaited excuse; the legend's content secondary so long as it could justify a foregone conclusion. Casey wouldn't ever forgive them for that, but there, at least, the feeling was mutual.

Home Video III a.

Static and more static. Then, after enough snaps, crackles, and pops and fill a cereal box, the image finally, finally begins to coalesce again.

6/6/1995 - 3:57 P.M.

The RV again. Even without the timestamp the passage of time is readily apparent; Pat's driving now and Stella's in the passenger seat, smoking with a self-satisfied look on her face; in the background, someone's playing a Tribe Called Quest and the pair are nodding along. Then, as if on cue, Pat speaks up, "There she is! Pinecairn, NY, just a few miles away." A low voice behind the camera, presumably Aidan, whoops and spins the camera around. A couple rows back sits Adrienne, alone. Evidently she's lost in thought, scratching at her hands absentmindedly, her eyes a thousand miles away. Aidan clears his throat and she jumps just a little then looks up, spotting the camera. Self-consciously, she lowers her hands, sitting on them like a kid caught breaking the rules.

"So what do you think? Just like the pictures?"

Adrienne leans out of her seat, looking out the windshield for the first time in a while, she squints as if trying to make something out, then, "Oh! Um, yep! That's her alright." She looks pained, he can't tell why but Aidan knows that much, he turns around again and faces the camera back out the front. Pat starts talking again,

"Anyone mind if we stop in town for some snacks? I brought some but...I'm not sure they're gonna last the trip." The camera turns slightly and we see Stella again, high and with her

hand in a chip bag. A moment goes by before she notices the camera, but only a moment, she pulls her hand out of the chip bag and flips the camera the bird.

“Hey, you fools smoked first, I’m but a follower”

Pat smirks, “Yes, yes you’re ever-blameless sweetie, I know,” then he looks back at the others. “Any of you know what the fuck a “Wegman’s” is?”

At this, Addy speaks up, “It’s a grocery store, they should have snacks.”

“Doesn’t *sound* like a grocery store.” Pat mutters but gets into a turning lane all the same.

Addy looks back out the window, evidently recognizing what she sees.

“Hey! That’s the library!”

At the very same moment that Aidan starts boo-ing, she asks,

“Can I stop in while you guys shop?”

Pat’s brow furrows, “Addy I don’t think we’re gonna be very long, are you sur-”

“I’m the only one without a fake, if yall are buying booze I’d just slow you down.”

Stella laughs, “Damn Addy, hit ‘em where it hurts.” just as Pat acquiesces, “Yeah, okay.”

“Yesssssss. Thanks, Pat,” and she’s off like a shot as soon as they’re parked. Pat watches her walk away for a moment, then turns off the RV. He whistles as it shudders into stillness, then grabs his wallet, and turns to give his girlfriend a kiss in the nose, saying “I’m guessing you’re staying in the car.” At the very same moment she declares her intent to do just that. He chuckles, turns to face the others, and stops.

“You guys good?”

Aidan turns the camera, Annie’s next to him now, a steely expression on her face. You don’t need to be a mind reader to know Aidan’s expression matches.

“*Dude, is she?*” Annie gestures her head in the library’s direction.

“What do you-” Pat’s incredulous until he’s not, “Hey. Not fucking cool.”

“Oh so we’re just gonna ignore her fucking seizure?”

“It wasn’t-” He sighs, “Listen, that just happens sometimes, she’s fine.”

“Oh so she’s fine, she just starts fucking screaming sometimes.”

“No! She-” He looks to Stella for help, she shrugs, and he loses some of his fire, “Fuckin, sometimes I guess, yeah — is that gonna be problem?”

Annie scoffs, “A heads-up would’ve been-” Stella shoots her a look and Aidan puts a hand on her shoulder, you can’t tell which one cuts her off.

“We didn’t realize she was like, still struggling, is all she meant.” Annie tries to speak again but Aidan silences her with a look then continues, “You’re sure this isn’t too much for her?” For a moment, Pat seems indignant, then loses his nerve,

He sighs and sits back down, “Fuckin, I sure hope not. I- I know she needs me but there’s only so much I can give.”

Stella puts an arm around him and Annie speaks up, her temper quenched, for now. “Pat, you’ve given her a ton — she has to know by now that you didn’t take a gap year out of love for delivering pizzas.”

“Or your parents.” Stella interjects and Pat snorts

“No she knows, I know she knows. She *wants* me to go, I just- she’s not ready to be alone.” He retreats into his thoughts. Aidan heads up towards the RV’s front, the camera wobbling in time with his steps.

“Dude, it’s 1995, we’re a connected species now.” He pauses for dramatic effect, “No one’s alone anymore.” At the last bit, he puts a hand in front of the camera and moves it horizontally right, debuting his wisdom like the slogan at the end of an ad campaign.

Pat looks up at him and smirks, aided by the effort of Aidan's speech if not its contents. With finality he pats his hands on his thighs once and stands up, "You guys ready for a snack-run?"

"Yay! Dad's back!"

Aidan laughs as Stella's face scrunches up, "Ewwwww"

Pat, to his credit, looks delighted; he grabs his wallet and puts his hands on his hips, facing Stella, "Alright champ, I'll only be a minute. Don't talk to strangers, yeah?" Aidan cracks up and it's enough to break Pat's composure.

Stella's less amused, "EWW! Okay fuck you guys, get out of my car."

The other's oblige but don't fall silent, "Your dad's car, you mean."

"Ahhh, her dad's RV, actually."

"Oh but of course, thank you very much."

"OUT!"

She locks the doors behind them, then falls with a heavy plop back into her seat, and relights her nearly-forgotten joint. Looking straight at the camera she goes, "You see that shit? Bunch of dumbasses." Then she reaches to shut it off and the screen goes dark once more.

IV - The Others

“Hey Miriam?” Curiosity got Casey to pause spinning in her office chair, but only momentarily.

“Yes dear?”

“Do you know anything about Annie and Aidan Kohler?” She hoped she sounded less anxious than she felt, asking her *boss* about the town’s most taboo bit of folklore, but, Lord knows she was at a dead-end. At this, Miriam eyed her for a moment, but she was still too busy spinning to notice.

“Cut that out and maybe I’ll tell you.”

Chastised, Casey stilled, mumbling an apology.

“Thank you dear, I was getting dizzy just watching. They weren’t Pinecairn residents, were they?”

“Oh um, no ma'am, I don’t think they were.”

“Then what’s it to you?” Miriam laughed at her own joke then continued, “Casey dear, you know I hate to say it but in that case I don’t think I know anymore than anyone else would.”

“Okay but no one else *talks* about it!” She realized her voice raised far quicker than she meant, and took a breath, “Sorry, I’m just, curious is all.”

Miriam watched her, it took considerable effort, but Casey held her gaze until,

“A story is a terrible thing to hide.”

“Exactly! That’s precisely how I feel, Miri-”

“But you’re asking about a terrible story.” *Terrible how, Miriam?*

Casey fell silent, thoughtful for a few moments then,

“No I know that but, it just, it feels attached to me.”

“Dear, it doesn’t have to be.”

Casey’s face seemed to sag, “I’m not sure I agree.”

“No, no I suppose you don’t.” Miriam sighed, “I was being honest, I really don’t know much about them.”

“But you know something. It’s you Miriam, I know you know *something*.”

“Well I do love flattery.” She paused, “I’ve certainly looked, I guess I can admit that, but before they came, they weren’t really note-worthy to have more than the minimum documentation and afterwards, well, they’re ghosts.”

“Wait, but I thought one of them lived?”

“You don’t have to be dead to be a ghost, Casey,”

“But-”

“You just have to be nearby. See enough of it and it spreads, hollows you out from within. Your body’s always the last to know it’s a corpse.”

“Oh.”

Casey’s eyes were wide, under the library fluorescents, she looked more than a little ghostly herself. Miriam watched the girl, she could almost see her deflate in real time.

“But I’ve heard some gossip here and there, if you’d like to hear it.”

“Really?”

“People die, dear; rumors never do.”

“That’s grim.”

“Not if you love gossip!” Miriam laughed, then focused, “I mean you already know, the campgrounds are a little outside of town, but the way I’ve heard it, they were still here pretty often for coffee, beer, cigarettes, and all that, they’d come in the morning and that was perfect,

usually they were still too hungover to make a ruckus, so I've heard." She paused to take a slow sip of coffee and Casey tried not to be impatient. Still, she couldn't help prompting her, "Usually?"

"Well one of the days, they drove in all stirred up 'cause one of 'em went missing!"

"Wait, I thought Adrienne vanished *after* they killings."

Miriam shook a finger at her, "Not Adrienne, dear, one of the others. They dragged a deputy out to the campsite and spent the morning looking. Sheesh, if he'd just stayed a little longer, those kids might still be around."

"Then what happened?"

"They kept looking, the kids stayed behind and the officer came back here to ask around; he went back the next day and, well I think you know the rest, dear."

Casey blushed, "Does anyone?"

"Fair enough." Miriam thought for a few minutes. Casey almost went back to her work then, "How long have you been investi-"

Casey met her gaze before she cut her off, "Years. Is that-"

"That's *fine* dear, I'm glad someone's got the stomach for it. Maybe keep that one on the quiet-side though."

Casey smiled at her, "I won't tell if you don't."

"Deal." Miriam smiled back, "There's not much I can do to help, but, dear, I *have* been awfully tired lately, you wouldn't mind closing up here a little more often would you?" *She's growing on me.*

Casey caught the real question immediately, "Boss, that's absolutely fine by me."

Home Video III b.

You didn't touch the tape, *or* the VCR, you're like ninety-four percent sure of that much. All the same, there's a minute or two of static and the image returns.

6/6/1995 - 4:41 P.M.

The scene's largely unchanged from the last one, though the sun's a bit lower and Stella's once lengthy joint is shorter by *quite* a bit. She sets what's left of it in a cupholder, alternately licking her fingers, pinching the lit end of the joint, and wincing, until it's out. You watch her try to crack a window and give up when it doesn't budge. She walks back up front and puts a hand on the dashboard,

"Heyyy girl, so, you're gonna start when the other's get back, right?"

The RV, like most of them, remains silent.

"I'll take that as a yes." Then she starts, letting out an *Oo* as, evidently, she remembers the camera's on. She centers herself in the frame (the very top of her head's a bit cut-off but you let it slide), clears her throat and,

"Gooood evening ladies and germs, you asked, and we've got your answer; what takes longer? Potheads buying snacks or-" There's a noise outside the RV and she jumps, when she steps to the side you can see Adrienne outside the door, looking shaken but better and, in this moment, wildly entertained.

"Nono don't stop on my account I wanna hear what you call me!"

Stella turns back to the camera, her face violently red. You watch her try valiantly to scrape together some composure. Finally, she turns around and opens the door,

“How much did you see?” Despite their best efforts, neither girl’s composed in the slightest.

“See what?” Stella looks relieved until, “all I saw was the birth of TV’s newest personality-”

“Fuuuuuuuck”

“One question though, why’d you sound like a radio guy from the ‘20s? I’m no expert in broadcast news but I think we’re kinda-”

She’s interrupted by another sound from outside, Pat and the twins are at the door now, looking awfully proud. Stella wheels on Adrienne,

“I’ll give you an eighth to never repeat what you saw.”

“Girl, I’d do it for free.”

“See? That’s why you’re my favori-”

“But if you’re offering, I want the weed.”

Stella shakes her hand, then snorts and pulls the handle to open the door, she’s still talking to Adrienne while the others come in.

“Girl, you’re learning too *much* from Pat.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Okay, ouch.” Pat breaks in as he climbs back onto the RV, then looks at Adrienne, “Hey, welcome back — how’s the internet?”

“Ugh,” Adrienne plops into a seat, “It’s confirmed, no Cammy in *Street Fighter Alpha*, those bastards”

Pat plops into the driver’s seat, saying at the same time as Adrienne “Those bastards.” Then asks, “And how’s Geopages?” Adrienne’s composure falters,

“It was fine, quiet day in the ‘*cities*.’”

“Just fine? I thought it was changing the face of web-browsing.”

“Oh it so is, just,” She breaks eye contact to stare at her hands, “slow news day I guess.”

Pat looks at Stella questioningly, she shrugs, and he changes the subject.

“Alright only like 15 minutes to the campsite, you guys ready to finish this thing?” The others cheer while Adrienne grabs the camera. She waves at it, and you hear a “Hi again.” as she carries you back to her seat. She props you up so you’re looking out the window. As you head from the town center to the campsites, buildings give way to trees. Together, you watch the world go by.