



BLOODLIST 2009



BLOODLIST 2010



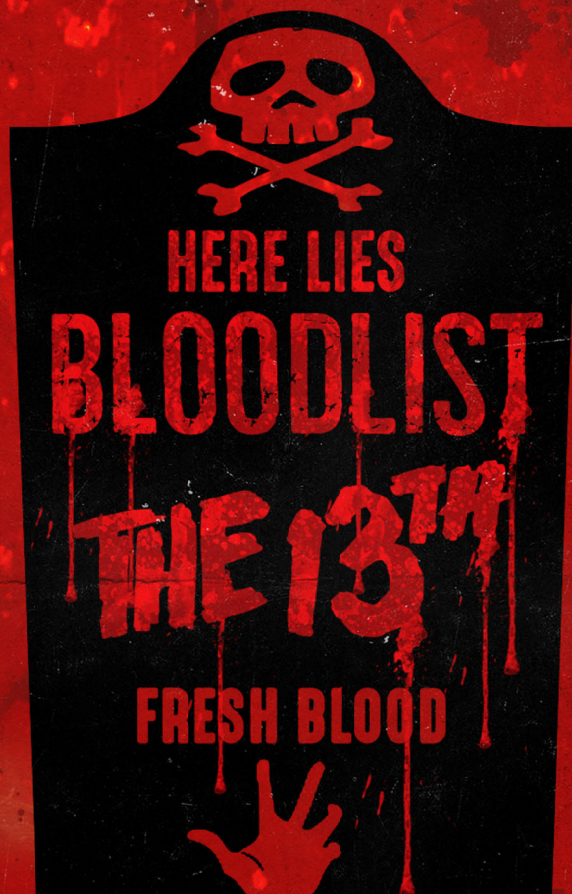
BLOODLIST 2011



BLOODLIST 2012



BLOODLIST 2013



BLOODLIST 2014



BLOODLIST 2015



BLOODLIST 2016



BLOODLIST 2017



BLOODLIST 2018



BLOODLIST 2019



BLOODLIST 2020

I KNEW YOU ONCE

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SHE FIRST MET him during their third grade attendance because their names were the last in the alphabet. Her name was Xan and his name was Yosef.

He was a timid thing back then. But early onset puberty betrayed him with an intimidating stature. He had a wide face and a square jaw that he'd carry into his thirties. His heavy stare precluded him from any puppy dog romances. His eyes sat too far back in his skull behind large glasses. The girls in their third grade class called him "Owl". And twenty years later, he appeared in their hometown without warning. And when she spotted him, Xan felt herself reduced to a nervous third grader again. In those twenty odd years outside the classroom, Yosef had grown into his features. His build was impressive even if he hid it. He made a habit out of slouching to shrink himself. But Xan noticed him in the movie theatre reading a book. The lights hadn't dimmed and she saw him clearly.

The theatre wasn't full. He was two rows down to her left. He was wearing snow boots like everyone else. The state forecast predicted three inches, but the town was buried underneath two feet instead. Black ice made the roads outside impossible. And the one salt truck was unprepared because the forecast had undersold the storm. Luckily, everyone local walked and dressed warmly for the worst. Xan always wore thick, dark turtlenecks. And because the theatre did not have coffee, Xan drank hot water from a white paper cup. Over the brim, she took another good look at Yosef. Snow freckled his coat like hers. His hair was thinning. Somehow his receding hairline made his jaw wider. He wore the same kind of coke bottle glasses from the third grade. He mouthed whatever he was reading. Xan sat up a bit straighter, but she couldn't make out the book's title. The cover looked worn and tattered. Then the lights dimmed and Yosef melted into darkness.

The movie theatre was old and the storm whistled through it. It was the town's most impressive monument. Xan worked at the concession stand when she was younger. She'd stow away in the back rows of the theatre and watch films for free. Everyone traveled through its doors at one point. Xan was pretty sure she saw almost everybody who lived in town. The population was just

shy of fifteen hundred. The young moved on and the old stayed behind. Xan was maybe the youngest to remain in town and she was thirty-five. All matters considered, she was the most suited to stay. Xan liked the quiet. The town's routine was comforting. Admittedly, she would fantasize about a more lively existence. But she kept those reservations to herself out of consideration for her father when he was alive. His deteriorating health anchored her to his side. Meanwhile her peers openly complained about not having any excitement within fifty miles. The girls she grew up with mocked Xan's acceptance of the town. It made her plain. They were good at poking fun at people, especially Yosef back when he was still around. But Xan made the best of her situation and discovered she liked the town's quiet pastimes, the movie theatre's matinees being her favorite. And it was during one of these matinees Xan spotted something rather exciting in her so-called boring hometown.

AS THE FILM played, Xan was certain she hadn't been mistaken. It was Yosef. It had be. She had seen him very clearly. She tucked her legs underneath herself so she could sit higher. Her neck stiffened from straining to see in the dark. She had the perfect vantage point. The flickering screen illuminated the small audience. In momentary flashes, Xan spotted Yosef again. The film refracted from his glasses like high beams. It made it seem as if he didn't have any eyes, just brilliant white-hot circles.

It was strange to see him. No one had for the better half of ten years. Xan made it a habit knowing about Yosef since she first saw him in third grade. She had lent him a pencil once. He never returned it, but she hadn't minded that. If she thought about it, it was then she began learning about Yosef. His parents made an unexpected move into the town when he was two. They would later become the town's most historic—if only—scandal. His father was a fifteen year old national society scholar runaway. And his mother was a forty-one year old English Literature high school teacher.

More than twenty years ago, Yosef's mother had supposedly conned the state police into believing Yosef was an unexpected consequence from a consensual, adult relationship. But

Yosef's paternal grandparents knew otherwise. Paranoid, Yosef's mother fled north with Yosef and his father. During her escape, the car veered off an icy road. The black ice was just as dangerous back then. The sedan skidded too fast for her reflexes. Yosef's mother had been meaning to take the car in for maintenance, but she neglected the chore. The tires parted with the asphalt and the sedan plowed into a snowy embankment. The town's only salt truck had spotted the car accident. Yosef's mother flagged down the driver. She waded in the snowy, remote road while Yosef and his father huddled against the sedan's dying heater. She claimed Yosef's father as her older son to avoid questions.

The rouse lasted for six years. But at the end of the third grade, Yosef stabbed a classmate with a pencil for biting him. Xan witnessed it, she was there. It was her pencil balled in Yosef's fist. She had made a mistake and told their teacher. It was confiscated of course, and her pencil set was forever incomplete. Back then, teachers suspected Yosef's sudden outburst was linked to problems at home. Yosef's mother tried to explain away her son's behavior. They had been so careful in those six years not to draw attention to themselves. After the incident, Yosef's parents pulled him from classes to be homeschooled. Their neighbors overheard nightly arguments which were always punctuated with kitchenware shattering. Yosef's father had begun to miss his former life and he couldn't be bothered with raising Yosef. And there were rumors that Yosef's mother chased a young woman from the house. She had entertained the gossip, but later clarified she only asked the girl to leave because her supposed older son was forbidden to date. Everyone found that strange because Yosef's father was the perfect gentleman at twenty-one. After Yosef's homeschooling failed, his mother gave him to her sister for safe keeping. The state police showed up in town not long after. It happened that Yosef's aunt had a conscience which superseded her sisterly bond. Yosef's mother was arrested and his father returned home. He and Yosef's paternal grandparents left Yosef with the aunt. The entire matter was an embarrassment for the town. Six years had passed since the car accident and no one had suspected Yosef's mother. It came as no surprise locals wanted to forget. And so it was that Yosef was erased from public memory. He and his parents. But here he was twenty years later watching a movie in the town's theatre. It was something that worried and excited Xan at the same time.

YOSEF STAYED AFTER the film. Other movie-goers trudged back outside. Xan and Yosef lingered apart in their separate rows. She nursed her hot water and he watched the credits. The screen winked and the projector ground to a halt. Xan stood to leave, but she saw that Yosef stayed put. He pulled out his book, adjusted his glasses, then started reading again. Curious, Xan lowered herself back into her seat. She finished her hot water as she waited. She hadn't figured out how to approach him. She began to debate whether she should approach him at all. There wasn't a guarantee he'd recognize her. A theatre usher swept the floors as another wheeled a garbage bin down the aisles. The taller of the two stopped at Xan's row.

"We need to clean. We're closing for the day, the storm's getting worse," he said.

Xan gathered her belongings and stood. She looked over to Yosef. He was still reading his book, still mouthing the words on the page. As she exited the row of seats, she stalled for a better view of him. He used a finger as a guide while he read whatever it was on the page. From where she stood, Xan couldn't make it out. She walked up the aisle towards the exit. Behind her, she heard an usher approach Yosef.

"You too," he said.

WHEN XAN STEPPED out of the movie theatre, she saw how wrong the forecast had been. Everything outside was covered in snow. The sun was gone and the world was grey. Xan huddled in her coat underneath the movie theatre's marquee. She was stranded.

Xan lived about three miles from the movie theatre. She was squatting in her childhood home since her father's death. She had already been living there when he got sick. And afterwards Xan saw no reason to leave. It was too convenient. The town was within walking distance and Xan usually did not mind hiking through the snow.

The movie theatre door opened behind her. Yosef stepped outside. To Xan's surprise, he joined her underneath the marquee. His proximity wasn't something she expected. Up close, Yosef was different. She silently faulted herself for thinking otherwise. Xan dared to glimpse at him. He stood close and she saw the severity in his face clearly.

It was obvious Yosef's commanding presence was something he had cultivated elsewhere. He squared his shoulders, removing the hunch in his back. But what Xan noticed most was the way he smelled. His cologne's musk stung her nostrils. It wasn't sweet and it wasn't bitter, but it nauseated her. She swallowed and swore she could taste copper.

Yosef looked out into the storm and frowned.

"You're not going to walk are you?" he asked her.

His voice surprised her. The third-grade Yosef had stuttered when he'd talk. Xan could tell he had trained himself to mask it. Yosef's words came out thick. He had given himself a regional drawl when no other local in their town had one.

Xan did her best to hide her nerves.

"Most people do." she responded.

Xan surprised herself. She stood a little taller after speaking. Her father had often told her she turned smart when she got nervous. Yosef pointed through the snow flurries across the street. She followed his gesture. In the snowy haze, she saw the silhouette of a truck.

"I can drop you off." Yosef offered.

“Thanks, but your car isn’t going anywhere in this.” Xan spoke over the crescendoing winds.

“It’s warmer in a car.” Yosef insisted.

“You’ll burn out the battery keeping us warm.” she reasoned.

Yosef did something then which surprised Xan more than his corrected speech impediment. He smiled. His cheeks pushed up his coke bottle glasses and crow’s feet sprouted around his eyes.

“You’re a smart one.”

Xan shuddered. His words unsettled her. Yosef extended his hand and introduced himself.

“Yosef.”

Xan looked at him. He hadn’t recognized her at all. Part of her knew she would not have recognized him herself if it weren’t for his trademark glasses and his startling height. From where she stood, Yosef had done a lot to remake himself. Xan too had changed a lot about herself since the third grade. But at thirty-five, her face remained a full circle. And she had settled on liking it rather than obsessing over thinning it out. When she’d smile to be polite, she looked young and all together harmless.

Xan did just that. She smiled with her mouth closed and reciprocated Yosef’s gesture. Her grip matched his.

“Xan.” she said.

They shook hands. Neither wore gloves. It was extraordinary that Xan lived in town for so long and she never troubled herself to buy a decent pair. She usually managed the cold by balling her

sleeves into her fists. Yosef's skin felt rough against hers. His knuckles were knotted. Yosef pressed a finger into her wrist more than she would have liked. A fleeting thought came to mind that he was taking her pulse. She took back her hand.

“Did you like the movie?” Xan cleared her throat.

“I might've enjoyed it more with your company.”

Xan blinked. Her gut tightened and she suddenly felt ill. She didn't expect to feel like that when she spoke with Yosef. His voice was flat, but it was eyes that made her stomach harden. His eyes were too eager.

The movie theatre door opened behind them. The ushers and the projectionist shuffled outside. They chatted as they locked the doors. The projectionist noticed Xan under the marquee. He smiled at her, but then he frowned after noticing Yosef. He glanced between them.

“Are you okay getting home, Xan?” he asked, his eyes on Yosef.

The projectionist's voice wavered, but he deepened it ever so slightly. His employee uniform was oversized. His coat ballooned from the snowy gusts. Like Xan, he was one of the few young adults who chose to stay in town. But the uniform made him appear younger no matter how tall he stood. His sudden presence was welcoming given her current company.

“I'm fine, thank you.” Xan assured him.

The projectionist hesitated, biding his time. Yosef considered him.

“He's friendly.” Yosef said.

“It’s rare we get visitors. You’re the first one in a while” Xan explained.

She studied Yosef’s face, waiting. But he did not correct her. He sighed then looked back to his truck. Through the snow, the truck might as well have been two miles away.

Yosef adjusted his glasses and squinted into the storm.

“Looks like it’s getting worse. The offer still stands.” Yosef said.

“It’s okay, thank you. I live nearby.” Xan said.

Yosef nodded, considering a thought he didn’t speak aloud.

“Be safe.”

Yosef then left on that instruction. He started to walk towards his truck. He moved from underneath the marquee and into the storm. He strode past the projectionist and the ushers. The wind lashed at his coat, billowing his sleeves. He lumbered through the snow, chin tucked to his chest. Xan rubbed her wrist. The feeling of his rough fingers still weighed on her. She stared after him as his hulking silhouette was eaten by the storm.

XAN SLIPPED TWICE on her walk home. Beneath the snow, a sheet of ice blanketed the gravel. She dug her boot into the ground, anchoring herself. She stumbled in the snowy haze. The projectionist had insisted he escort her home, but Xan declined. His eyes wandered too much. And given their closeness in age, she recognized his intentions and her interest was elsewhere. There were other reasons, but it was too cold for her to really think and pick out a better one. Xan made it about a mile from the movie theatre before she saw Yosef again.

Xan felt the headlights' warmth on her back first. An engine's low rumble crescendoed as tires churned in the snow. She turned and saw the familiar truck. It stalled beside her, its tail pipe spitting smoke. She coughed as the truck's unwelcomed exhaust filled her lungs. Her eyes watered. The window receded and Yosef beckoned her from the driver's seat. His coke bottle glass fogged from the truck's dashboard heater.

"You sure you want to walk?"

Xan wondered if Yosef had followed her from the movie theatre. She had glanced over her shoulder more than once, but she hadn't noticed him. The thought that he had shut off his headlights crept into her mind. And Xan hesitantly stepped backwards. Her boot crunched in the snow.

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm right ahead, my dad's waiting on me." Xan lied. She felt her lungs tire as she talked over the wind.

"Let me drive you. You won't get far, it's not safe in a storm like this." Yosef said.

Xan debated the proposal, but Yosef decided for her. He leaned across the console and popped open the passenger door. The door whined as it opened and the cold air swirled. That's when Xan spotted the gun. Yosef trained the barrel at her face.

"Come on, before the battery dies and we're both stuck out here."

Xan froze. She fixated on the gun, her head filling with static.

"Get in, it's cold." Yosef said.

The truck sat high from the ground. Xan gripped the door as she hoisted herself into the open seat. She thought about running. Her destination was close, but the snow was deep and the road in front of her disappeared in the grey fog. Yosef was tall and his legs were long, he could possibly catch her. Xan squeezed the door's handle and her knuckles whitened. She suddenly felt very warm and she ignored her doubts and did the best she could in the moment. Xan slammed the door then bolted through the snow.

It was hard to run. Xan stumbled, her boots catching as she tripped over herself. She scrambled upright, secured her bearings, then ran again. She whimpered through her efforts, sweat beading at her forehead and the cold immediately chilling it. The sharp air burned her lungs. It shortened her breath, leaving her gasping as she ran. The truck's receding headlights illuminated her escape. But Xan fled down the road only a short distance before Yosef cut the engine and the headlights faded. Xan lost sight of where she was going. She idled for a moment. She slowed her pace, surveying her surroundings. The storm worked against her. It whipped at her face and numbed her hands. Xan looked to where Yosef's truck had been. But she could not see its silhouette in the snowy haze. Something hard lumped in her throat, but she refused to cry. He'd hear her. Suddenly, she heard the engine's faint hum nearby. Xan swallowed back her sobs and hurried onward.

The further Xan went, the slower she moved. The snow clumped to her coat. She felt herself dragging as she staggered. She looked behind her more than she could count. The engine's faint hum taunted her. Xan wheezed, her knees buckling. The storm dried her throat and siphoned the air from her lungs. Her chest constricted. Her breathing thinned. She squinted through the grey fog ahead. The familiar road seemed otherworldly. Her legs suddenly expired and Xan crumpled. Her knees sank in the snow. Behind her, Xan heard the truck's brakes whine. Then the headlights flooded the remote road. The truck's door opened and slammed. The snow crunched under Yosef's snow boots as he waded towards her. He eclipsed the bright headlights, choking the stream. The road darkened. His looming shadow elongated as he neared. Yosef stopped short

from where Xan fell and he lingered, considering her. He then glanced to the stretch of road behind them.

“You made it about two yards.” he commended her.

THE TRUCK SMELLED like Yosef. The dashboard’s heater cooked everything inside, marinating the odor. Xan’s head swam from the nauseating stench. She centered herself and stared at the dashboard. The gun stared back at her.

Yosef hummed as he drove. His sounds were guttural. The melody he hummed rattled in the back of his throat. His hand was never too far from the gun. Xan distanced herself from him. She pressed against the passenger door.

Xan licked her lips. They were cracked. Her tongue caught flakes of dried skin. She glanced between Yosef and the gun.

“I lived here all my life. Me and my father.” Xan started.

Yosef drummed his fingers on the wheel. His sounds deepened as the melody circled back to the chorus of whatever song he was humming.

“He’s sick.” Xan explained.

The lie stuck and she pushed it along. But Yosef only tapped the heel of his palm against the wheel. His humming crescendoed. His silence spelled out a dark realization and Xan shuddered. Her chest tightened again and the lump reappeared in her throat.

“I remember you. We were in the same third grade class.” Xan blurted.

Yosef quieted slightly. Xan shakily gestured to his face.

“You wore the same glasses.”

Yosef blinked. His brow scrunched as he frowned. He instinctively adjusted his glasses, but Xan couldn't read his expression. Unlike her, Yosef masked his thoughts well. Xan's father had always mocked Xan for her readable face. He had called it her billboard. Xan tried her best to decipher Yosef.

“I lent you a pencil once.”

Yosef turned to her right then. His expression was still for a moment then it suddenly erupted. His frown stretched into an ugly grin as he laughed. His eyes danced behind his coke bottle glasses. Xan stiffened. His laughter startled her worse than his smile. His face contorted as his horrible sounds filled the truck. Xan's eyes watered.

XAN NEVER IMAGINED she'd be kidnapped. Then again, she never imagined she'd see Yosef again. After settling from his fit of laughter, Yosef asked for directions. When Xan hesitated, he persuaded her with the gun. Yosef then drove her home as he had offered before all the unpleasantness. The truck crept down the quiet street. Yosef surveyed the neighborhood. He peered outside the windshield to the dark windows looming overhead. Xan knew the neighboring houses were empty.

In the past twenty years, the neighborhood lost its fair share of residents. Most had relocated to more exciting places. The properties hadn't been sold yet. And Xan would sometimes explore the abandoned houses whenever her quiet pastimes became too quiet. Xan shrank in the houses' shadows as the truck idled in the street. She stared at the dark windows, willing a curtain to peel

back. But everything was still, just as she dreaded. Yosef cut the engine and the truck became just as silent as their surroundings. He nodded to the glove compartment.

“Bring what’s in inside there, will you?” Yosef asked.

He grabbed the gun off the dashboard and stuffed it in his waistband. He then wrenched open the door and exited the truck. Xan lingered. She reached for the glove compartment. It popped open and she flinched. Inside she found the book Yosef had been reading in the theatre. It was smaller than she expected. The handheld journal was faded from overuse and some sort of water damage. Xan was less curious about it now, but her hands trembled as she secured it in her grasp. She started to pry it open when Yosef suddenly smacked the truck’s hood. Xan yelped and looked out of the windshield. Yosef beckoned her as he rounded the truck.

Xan stepped outside the truck. Her boot slipped and she stumbled backwards. Yosef caught her arm, stabilizing her balance. His reflexes startled Xan. He never lowered the gun once. The storm’s wind bullied her and she staggered in the snow. Yosef gestured to the quiet houses lining the street.

“Lead the way.”

Xan clutched the book to her chest. She trudged through the snow, skirting around Yosef. Through the flurries she could see the gun trained on her. Yosef shadowed her as she approached her house. Snow crunched underneath their boots. Xan slowed as they neared the doorstep. Yosef’s breathing grew heavier. It heated the back of her neck. She glanced over her shoulder. His eyes were wandering behind his coke bottle glasses. He peered at the windows, but the curtains were drawn. He glanced back at Xan and she shuddered at his stare. She quickly turned away. He pressed closer to her and he wedged the gun’s barrel into the small of her back.

“Open the door.” he instructed.

Xan fumbled for her keys in her coat pocket. Her hands were numb. Her skin tingled as her fingers brushed against the cold metal. She stalled, her thoughts coming alive again. Yosef was too close for her to run. She imagined his dexterity was better than hers. Xan hooked a finger in the keys' ring. The metal jangled in her pocket as she fondled the keys, but she did not withdraw her hand. Suddenly, Yosef surprised her. He reached into Xan's coat and he snatched the keys for himself. He clutched them in his fist then jabbed Xan in her kidney. Nothing she wore softened the blow. His fist permeated through her coat and thick sweater. Spots of color burst in her vision then everything quickly blurred. Xan's lungs deflated as she doubled over. The book fell from her grasp and plopped in the snow. She choked on the cold air around them. She felt light headed and the world spun. For a moment, Xan swore she saw a window's curtain move. And for that moment, she swore she saw her father's emaciated face as he spied on the outside world.

Xan never imagined she'd see her father's face again. She believed she had seen the last of him at his wake. The funeral home had livened his face with makeup best they could. His skin had already withered and his cheeks had con-caved. But the funeral home hadn't been successful in rearranging his permanent scowl. And Xan thought she saw it clearly now as she struggled to breathe. Her dead father glared at her then she blinked and he was gone. Xan's legs buckled and she began to crumple, but Yosef caught her elbow. He shoved her towards the house. Coughing, Xan braced herself against the door jam. Yosef picked up the book and thrust it in her hands. Xan glanced back to the window as he unlocked the door. The curtain was shuttered as it always had been.

THE HOUSE WAS still before Xan and Yosef entered. Outside, the wind battered against its sides and funneled through the chimney. As they hurried indoors, snow barreled through the door with them. They staggered into the living room. The curtains thrashed on their rods and batted against the windows. Yosef steered Xan further inside then sealed the entrance. The curtains settled once more and everything fell silent. Xan panted, holding her side. Yosef lingered by the

door, listening to the house. He then poked the key back into the lock. With the heel of the gun, Yosef broke the key in the lock. Xan winced. She looked up at Yosef.

“Precautionary.” he shrugged.

Yosef tucked the gun back in his waistband. He then investigated his surroundings.

Xan kept him in view. He moved professionally and her breathing hitched. Yosef approached unfamiliar surroundings with a rehearsed agility. It was surprising if not horribly admirable to witness such a hulking man move so gracefully. His steps were measured and he prowled on the balls of his feet. It wouldn't take long for him to discover she lived alone. He'd find the emptied hospital bed in her father's room with all his dusty belongings. Xan glimpsed to the front door. But Yosef never moved too far from Xan. He circled their surroundings, only poking his head into nearby doorways. Satisfied, Yosef returned to where Xan stood. He nodded to a plastic-covered couch.

“Sit.”

Xan lowered herself onto the cushions. The plastic squelched underneath her. Yosef shed his coat and tossed it aside.

“Where's your purse?”

Xan normally did not carry a purse. She made a habit of filling it with napkins and gum more than anything else. Her wallet had always been an afterthought. Xan pointed shakily to an armchair. Yosef grabbed the purse and rifled through its contents. Grumbling, he turned it inside out and dumped everything on the floor. A lone tampon rolled to Xan's foot.

“I don't have any cash.” Xan said.

Yosef inspected her wallet. He took out her driver's license.

"That's okay."

He sat across from her and studied her. Xan refused to avert her gaze. She cradled her side and challenged his stare, but her nostrils flared and Yosef smiled. He glanced about their surroundings.

"You have a beautiful home."

"It's my father's." Xan croaked.

"Not many photos. Odd." Yosef observed.

Yosef settled his gaze on Xan again. His coke-bottle glasses flashed as his head turned.

"You're very photogenic."

"He's down the hall. In his room." Xan explained.

"Who?"

"My father."

Yosef's grin stretched his face. It aged him and it seemed altogether too wide for his square jaw. The coke-bottle glasses pinched the bridge of his nose. It left a welt between his brows.

"Oh, I think not." Yosef argued.

“He is.”

They held each other’s gaze. He was hard to read still, but Xan saw his eyes sadden. It was sickening to think he pitied her. Her neck grew hot. The sweater’s high collar baked against her skin. She had never been a good liar, but she had never been a bad liar either.

“I’ll play.” Yosef sighed.

Yosef straightened his back and sat tall. His chest puffed outwards as he inhaled deeply. He sniffed the damp draft circulating through the house. He lingered, holding whatever smells wafted about in his nose.

“Iodoform,” Yosef deducted. “It’s that hospital smell. The cleaning agent is hard to miss.”

Yosef cocked his head.

“When did he die?”

“He’s in his room.” Xan shook her head.

The lie needed to be true. Xan willed her father’s stored hospital equipment to resurrect. But the house and everything inside it was still. Yosef considered the nearby hallway then looked at Xan. He opened his mouth then screamed. Xan’s chest constricted. Her breath shortened. She thought she heard herself squeal, but Yosef’s bellow made it hard to hear anything. It reverberated through the house and Xan’s joints locked.

Yosef waited for a moment. He glanced between Xan and the hallway behind her.

“I don’t think there’s anybody else here.” Yosef said.

Xan hiccuped.

Yosef fished out a pair of gloves from his coat. He wriggled his calloused hands inside. The latex snapped against his wrist as he adjusted for comfort. Xan’s hiccups deepened. Yosef tugged a balled grocery bag from another pocket. He snapped it loose and shook it until the wrinkled bag inflated.

“Are you going to shoot me?” Xan asked.

“Let’s hope not. There’s no fun in that.”

“What do you want?” Xan demanded

“You can take a look if you want.” Yosef gestured to the book in Xan’s grasp.

Xan’s hands shook as she did. When she opened the book, the smell of mildew wafted from the pages. A whittled golf pencil rolled from the binding onto Xan’s lap. She turned the pages slowly. It was a scrapbook of driver’s licenses. All the women smiled behind the laminated surfaces. The illegible, scrawled handwriting was scrunched beneath each card. Xan didn’t read it. She did not want to. She focused on the smiling faces on the drivers’ licenses instead. Her eyes stung. All their mouths curled in different degrees. One had a gap tooth. Another had freckles splotched on her cheeks. The tiny details of their face and smiles screamed at Xan. She knew them from school. They were the ones who moved away. The ones who called her plain, the ones who named Yosef ‘Owl’. Xan gasped, her lungs and eyes burning. She hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath. She hadn’t seen the licenses before. Back in the theatre, Yosef’s shoulder had blocked her from seeing. Xan began to wonder if she had seen anything clearly at all. She regretted ever noticing Yosef in the movie theatre. Admittedly, she had regretted it since

he stepped underneath the marquee with her. But the regret was overwhelming now. It washed over her in hot waves.

Xan's mouth trembled as she glanced up at Yosef.

“What is this?”

Yosef grabbed the book from her. He stashed Xan's driver's license inside.

“Why did you come back here?” Xan hiccuped.

Yosef leaned towards her. Sitting down, he was a fraction of his height.

“Home is where the heart is, isn't it?”

Xan's throat suddenly went dry. Her body trembled. She grabbed the golf pencil and rolled it between her fingertips. As Yosef leaned back, Xan squeezed the pencil in her fist then jammed it in his eye.

The lens of his coke-bottle glasses splintered. Xan drove the pencil as deep as she could. The tip scrapped his cornea then penetrated the meat of his eye. Howling, Yosef swatted at her. His flailing arms knocked her back against the couch. She scrambled away, the plastic cushions squealing as she moved. But Yosef swung a fist at her, clipping her ear. His rough knuckles tore her cheek as her head cracked sideways. A ringing vibrated in her skull and rattled behind her eyes. Xan rolled off the couch. Her vision doubled and the floor shifted beneath her. She crawled away from Yosef. Suddenly, he seized her hair, wrenched her head backwards, then knocked it against the coffee table. Xan crumpled, gasping.

Yosef pinned her down, straddling her. Blood ran from his face and sprinkled the carpet. He grabbed the grocery bag and pulled it over Xan's head. He applied his weight against her and tightened the bag. He yelled and spat, blood draining from his eye. Fat red droplets splattered the bag. Spots of colors began to bleed then burst in Xan's vision. She reached upwards and groped for an anchor. Yosef batted her hands away. His howls crescendoed. Xan's hands shot upright and she found the lodged pencil. She wrenched it deeper and Yosef screamed. His grip loosened and Xan bucked until he rolled on his side writhing and screaming. Xan ripped off the bag from her head. Sweat plastered her hair to her face. Staggering to her feet, she snatched Yosef's coat and she fled the living room.

XAN NAVIGATED THE clutter her father left behind. She knocked over piles of belongings to slow Yosef in his chase. She heard him howling and cursing behind her. Xan rummaged through the coat's pockets until she found his truck keys. She tossed the coat aside. Her side burned as she fled, each breath stung. Xan clutched her side and limped to the kitchen back door. She threw herself against it and fell into the snow outside. She clawed upright and then rounded the house. She willed her legs to accelerate, but they struggled to cooperate. Xan heard Yosef tearing through the house as she hurried to the street. She squinted through the grey fog and she spotted the truck's silhouette.

Xan limped past a window. She glanced over her shoulder. Yosef's bloodied face stared back at her. The golf pencil was still wedged in his broken glasses and in his eye. Suddenly, he was gone. His steps thundered towards the front door. Xan saw it shudder in its frame as he pummeled against it. She panted as she limped towards the truck. She madly pressed the unlock button from afar. The headlights blinked rapidly. The beams of light cut through the snowy gusts of wind. Xan barreled toward the beacon. As she neared it, glass shattered behind her.

Xan turned and she saw Yosef clambering out of a broken window. He swatted away broken glass then bolted towards her. He brandished his gun. The faint sunlight caught its barrel. It had an ugly gleam. It winked as Yosef waved it. He fired blindly. The bullet screamed through the

storm's wind and nicked the truck's hood. Xan yelped and dove under the truck. The keys fell in the snow. She groped around for them.

"Xan!" Yosef shouted.

His voice cracked into horrible laughter. Xan bristled.

"Where are you going to go?"

Xan crawled on her belly through the snow. She stayed underneath the truck, minding Yosef's approach. She followed his boots as he circled nearby. Her fingers dug for the keys.

"There's no one here!"

Xan's fingers locked around the truck's keys. She latched onto them and waited for Yosef to come closer.

"Everybody is gone!"

As soon as his boots were inches from her, Xan pressed the panic button. The truck screeched. Its shrill alarm cut through the neighborhood. Disorientated and startled, Yosef yelled. He stumbled backwards. Xan saw the gun drop. She tunneled from underneath the truck. She snatched the fallen firearm and trained it on Yosef.

It was strange to hold a gun. Xan shifted the handle in her grasp. It wasn't comfortable, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The paradox was unsettling. It felt familiar even though she had never held a gun. It trembled in her hand. The cold wind chilled its metal until it felt as if the gun had congealed to her skin. The safety was off and Xan's finger twitched beside the trigger. Yosef squinted at her. Blood clotted around his eye.

“Do you have a good shot?”

He tapped the bridge of his nose. To Xan’s surprise, he smiled.

“Between the eyes.” Yosef teased.

It was insane. He was baiting her. Xan knew it. He stepped forward. He stood tall in front of her. He continued on smiling at her before she did it. Xan waited for the moment, milking his anticipation. She held her breath then lined the gun’s barrel with his eyes. Her finger twitched, the trigger jerked. And a bright, red ribbon streaked across the snow. Yosef’s head whipped back; the bullet split his skull in two. His knees buckled and he fell backwards.

The shot echoed for a mile.

Xan moved closer. The red snow folded beneath her boot. She stood still, looming over his remains. Yosef’s face was almost gone. Squinting, she could see the familiar crease where his glass sat across the bridge of his nose. She thought that maybe he had looked surprised at the end. Like he believed she wouldn’t do it. Xan’s stomach churned as her adrenaline evaporated. She collapsed, vomiting. She had suffered too much excitement for her liking.

XAN MAILED YOSEF’S book anonymously to the state papers. Everywhere buzzed for weeks about it. Police harassed journalists about the source, but they were sent away. Fifteen bodies were exhumed from shallow graves across three states. All of them were asphyxiated and all of them were former locals of the town.

Xan read about Yosef’s story more than she wanted to. But the town somehow found itself in the middle of the fanfare. The state papers dubbed him a serial killer and gave him the name ‘The Bag Man’. It was a stupid name and Xan loathed hearing it. Some reporter thought it was clever.

But readers ate up the story and the name that came with it. And soon the town was flooded with out of state travel. Visitors wanted to know about 'The Bag Man's hometown. They didn't even consider the fact Yosef had been hauled off to his aunt's after the third grade. It was perplexing that the town ran along with being labeled Yosef's childhood home. Xan found it all rather disgusting. But if she thought about it, Xan would admit that it was the visitors' fascination with Yosef she hated the most. It served only as a bitter reminder of her own past curiosities.

It was speculated that Yosef returned to his hometown for an anniversary of some sort. But no one could pinpoint what he'd be celebrating. Xan laughed aloud when a reporter predicted that Yosef's return was his retirement tour. She could not bear the celebrity his actions had made him to be. She stopped reading the paper soon after. Sometimes Xan would think back to when she first saw Yosef in the movie theatre. Her stomach would knot and she'd have to sit down. She didn't go to the theatre anymore. She couldn't. It served as the meeting hub for the traveling true crime enthusiasts. They flocked to the town's self proclaimed monument and met to milk every bit of information they could find about Yosef. They worked backwards and found Yosef's old childhood home. The roof had sunken in some time ago, before his return. The floor had rotted out and an overzealous fan twisted their foot trespassing through the wreckage. They found out about his parents' sordid love affair from old locals and they stole bits and pieces to fill their many podcasts. Xan found it funny that no one had found Yosef's body. That was the one thing she knew about him which no one else did.

XAN VISITED YOSEF'S unmarked grave daily. It was unavoidable. She had buried him outside her house. The grave was shallow, but the snow slowed Yosef's rot. It kept him fresh, and it kept him hidden. She would stand over the spot and would fight to keep her insides still. She vomited more than she'd care to admit, but Xan had started to develop a handle on her regurgitation. That's what scared her most. So she striped her father's house of anything value and packed it away on Yosef's truck. The town was no longer quiet. It was crowded with too many people looking for the same thing. For a place that wanted to forget Yosef as a troubled third grader, it was rather strange they loved the killer he became.

Before Xan left, she visited the grave one final time. The snowy mound reflected the sun.

Shielding her eyes, Xan squinted in the morning glare. A shard of glass winked in the sunlight.

She edged closer and bristled when she saw the ruined coke-bottle glasses. Xan crouched down

and plucked them from the snow. Flakes of dried blood stained the lenses. She considered the

broken remains in her hand. It felt only right to take it with her and she did. She had righted a

wrong after all. The body was safely buried in the snow. Xan retreated to the truck. She slid into

the driver's seat and set the twisted coke-bottle glasses on the dashboard. The lone lens caught

the morning sunlight and winked at Xan again. She started the truck, her eyes on the snow-

covered road ahead.