

A misty forest scene with two children's silhouettes. The forest is dense with tall, thin trees, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves. The lighting is soft and ethereal, with a hazy, greenish-white mist filling the air. In the foreground, two children are silhouetted against the light. One child is standing still, while the other is walking away from the viewer. The overall mood is mysterious and slightly unsettling.

EVERLOST
neal shusterman

CHAPTER 1

On the Way to the Light... On a hairpin turn, above the dead forest, on no day in particular, a white Toyota crashed into a black Mercedes, for a moment blending into a blur of gray.

In the front passenger seat of the Toyota sat Alexandra, Allie to her friends.

She was arguing with her father about how loud the radio should be playing. She had just taken off her seat belt to adjust her blouse.

In the center backseat of the Mercedes, dressed for his cousin's wedding, sat Nick, trying to eat a chocolate bar that had been sitting in his pocket for most of the day. His brother and sister, who sandwiched him on either side, kept intentionally jostling his elbows, which caused the melted chocolate to smear all over his face. As it was a car meant for four, and there were five passengers, there was no seat belt for Nick.

Also on the road was a small piece of sharp steel, dropped by a scrap metal truck that had been loaded to the brim. About a dozen cars had avoided it, but the Mercedes wasn't so lucky. It ran over the metal, the front left tire blew, and Nick's father lost control of the car.

As the Mercedes careened over the double yellow line, into oncoming traffic, both Allie and Nick looked up and saw the other's car moving closer very quickly. Their lives didn't quite flash before them; there was no time. It all happened so fast that neither of them thought or felt much of anything. The impact launched them forward, they both felt the punch of inflating air bags—but at such a high speed, and with no seat belts, the air bags did little to slow their momentum. They felt the windshield shatter against their foreheads, then in an instant, they had each passed through.

The crash of splintering glass became the sound of a rushing wind, and the world went very dark.

Allie didn't know what to make of all this quite yet. As the windshield fell behind her, she felt herself moving through a tunnel, picking up speed, accelerating as the wind grew stronger. There was a point of light at the end of the tunnel, getting larger and brighter as she got closer, and there came a feeling in her heart of calm amazement she could not describe.

But on the way to the light, she hit something that sent her flying off course.

She grabbed at it, it grunted, and for an instant she was aware that it was someone else she had bumped—someone about her size, and who smelled distinctly of chocolate.

Both Allie and Nick went spinning wildly, crashing out of the blacker-than-black walls of the tunnel.

and as they flew off course, the light before them disappeared. They hit the ground hard, and the exhaustion of their flight overcame them.

Their sleep was dreamless, as it would be for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 2

Arrival in Everlost The boy had not been up to the road since forever. What was the point? The cars just came and went, came and went, never stopping, never even slowing. He didn't care who passed by his forest on their way to other places. They didn't care about him, so why should he?

When he heard the accident he was playing a favorite game; leaping from branch to branch, tree to tree as high from the ground as he could get. The sudden crunch of steel was so unexpected, it made him misjudge the next branch, and lose his grip. In an instant he was falling. He bounced off one limb, then another and then another, like a pinball hitting pegs. It didn't hurt, all this banging and crashing. In fact he laughed, until he had passed through all the branches, and all that remained was a long drop to the ground.

He hit the earth hard—it was a fall that would have certainly ended his life, had circumstances been different, but instead the fall was nothing more than a quicker way to reach the forest floor.

He picked himself up and got his bearings, already hearing the echoes of commotion up on the road. Cars were screeching to a halt, people were yelling.

He hurried off in the direction of the sounds, climbing the steep granite slope that led up to the road. This wasn't the first accident on this treacherous strip of highway; there were many—a few every year. Long ago a car had even left the road, flown like a bird, and landed smack on the forest floor. Nobody came with it, though. Oh, sure there had been people in the car when it had crashed, but they got where they were going even before the boy came to inspect the wreck.

This new wreck was bad. Very bad. Very messy. Ambulances. Fire trucks. Tow trucks. It was dark by the time all the trucks were gone. Soon there was nothing but broken glass and bits of metal where the accident had been. He frowned. The people got where they were going.

Resigned, and a little bit mad, the boy climbed back down to his forest.

Who cared anyway? So what if no one else came? This was his place. He would go back to his game and he'd play them tomorrow and the next day and the next, until the road itself was gone.

It was as he reached the bottom of the cliff that he saw them: two kids who had been thrown from the crashing cars, over the edge of the cliff. Now they lay at the base of the cliff, in the dirt of the forest. At first he thought the ambulances might not have known they were here—but no; ambulances always know these things. As he got closer, he could see that neither their clothes, nor their faces bore any sign of the accident. No rips, no scratches. This was a very good sign! The two seemed to be about fourteen years old—a few years older than he was—and they lay a few feet apart from one another, both curled up like babies. One was a girl with pretty blond hair, the other a boy who kind of looked Chinese, except for his nose, and his light reddish-brown hair. Their chests rose and fell with

memory of breathing. The boy smiled as he watched them, and made his own chest rise and fall in the same way.

As the wind passed through the trees of the forest, not rustling them in the least, he waited patiently for his playmates to awake.

Allie knew she was not in her bed even before she opened her eyes. Had she fallen onto the floor in the middle of the night again? She was such a thrasher when she slept. Half the time she woke up with the sheets tugged off the mattress and wrapped around her like a python.

Her eyes opened to clear sunlight streaming through the trees, which was not unusual except for the fact that there was no window for the light to shine through. There was no bedroom either; only the trees.

She closed her eyes again, and tried to reboot. Human brains, she knew, could be like computers, especially in the time that hung between sleep and wakefulness.

Sometimes you said strange things, did even stranger things, and once in a while you couldn't figure out exactly how you got where you got.

She wasn't bothered by this. Not yet. She simply concentrated, searching her memory for a rational explanation. Had they gone camping? Was that it? In a moment the memory of falling asleep beneath the stars with her family would come exploding back into her mind. She was sure of it.

Exploding.

Something about that word made her uneasy.

She opened her eyes again, sitting up this time. There were no sleeping bags, no campsite, and Allie felt strange, like someone had filled her head with helium.

There was someone else a few feet away, sleeping on the ground, knees to chest.

A boy with a bit of an Asian look about him. He seemed both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, as if they had once met, but only in passing.

Then an icy wave of memory flowed over her.

Flying through a tunnel. He was there. He had bumped her, the clumsy oaf!

"Hello!" said a voice behind her, making her jump. She turned sharply and saw another, younger boy sitting cross-legged on the ground. Behind him was a granite cliff that extended high out of sight.

This boy's hair was unkempt, and his clothes were weird — sort of too heavy, too tight, and buttoned way too high. He also had more freckles than she had ever seen on a human being.

"It's about time you woke up," he said.

“Who are you?” Allie asked.

Instead of answering, he pointed to the other kid, who was starting to stir.

“Your friend is waking up, too.”

“He’s not my friend.”

The other kid sat up, blinking in the light. He had brown stuff on his face.

Dried blood! thought Allie. No. Chocolate. She could smell it.

“This is freaky,” the chocolate boy said. “Where am I?”

Allie stood up and took a good look around. This wasn’t just a grove of trees, it was an entire forest. “I was in the car, with my dad,” Allie said aloud, forcing the scrap of memory to her lips, hoping that it would help to drag the rest of it all the way back.”

“We were on a mountain road, above a forest. ...” Only this wasn’t the forest they had driven past. That forest was full of tall dead tree trunks, with stubby, rotting limbs. “A dead forest,” Dad had said from the drivers seat, pointing it out. “It happens like that sometimes. A fungus, or some other kind of blight—it can kill acres at a time.”

Then Allie remembered the squealing of tires, and a crunch, and then nothing.

She began to get just a little bit worried.

“Okay, what’s going on here,” she demanded of the freckled kid, because she knew Chocolate Boy was as clueless as she was.

“This is a great place!” Freckle-face said. “It’s my place. Now it’s your place, too!”

“I’ve got a place,” said Allie. “I don’t need this one.”

Then Chocolate Boy pointed at her. “I know you! You bumped into me!”

“No—you bumped into me.”

The freckled kid came between them. “C’mon, stop talking about that.” He started bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet. “We got stuff to do!”

Allie crossed her arms. “I’m not doing anything until I know what’s going on — “

and then it all came crashing back to her with the fury of— “—A head-on collision!”

“Yes!” said Chocolate Boy. “I thought I dreamed it!”

“It must have knocked us out!” Allie felt all over her body. No broken bones, no bruises—not even

scratch. How could that be? “We might have a concussion.”

“I don’t feel concussed.”

“Concussions are unpredictable, Chocolate Boy!”

“My name’s Nick.”

“Fine. I’m Allie.” Nick tried to wipe the chocolate from his face, but without soap and water it was lost cause. They both turned to the freckled kid. “You got a name?” Allie asked.

“Yeah,” he said, looking down. “But I don’t have to tell you.”

Allie ignored him, since he was starting to become a nuisance, and turned to Nick. “We must have been thrown clear of the accident, and over the cliff. The branches broke our fall. We have to get back up to the road!”

“What would you want to go up there for?” the freckled kid asked.

“They’ll be worried about us,” Nick said. “My parents are probably searching for me right now.”

And then suddenly Allie realized something. Something she wished she hadn’t.

“Maybe they won’t,” she said. “If the accident was bad enough...”

She couldn’t say it aloud, so instead, Nick did.

“We could be the only survivors?”

Allie closed her eyes, trying to chase the very idea away. The accident had been bad, there was no question about it, but if they came through it without a scratch, then her father must have as well, right? The way they made cars nowadays, with crumple zones, and air bags everywhere. They were safer than ever.

Nick began to pace, losing himself in morbid thoughts of doom. “This is bad.

This is really, really bad.”

“I’m sure they’re all okay,” Allie said, and repeated it, as if that would make it so. “I’m sure they are.”

And the freckled boy laughed at them. “The only survivors!” he said. “That’s a good one!” This was no laughing matter. It made both Nick and Allie furious.

“Who are you?” Allie demanded. “Why are you here?”

“Did you see the accident?” Nick added.

“No,” he said, choosing to answer Nick’s question only. “But I heard it. I went up to look.”

“What did you see?”

The kid shrugged. “Lots of stuff.”

“Were the other people in the cars all right?”

The kid turned and kicked a stone, angrily. “Why does it matter? Either they got better, or they got worse, or they got stuck where they were going, and anyway there’s nothing you can do about it, so just forget about it, okay?”

Nick threw his hands up. “This is nuts! Why are we even talking to this kid? We have to get up there and find out what happened!”

“Can you just calm down for a second?”

“I am calm!” Nick screamed.

Allie knew there was something...off...about the whole situation. Whatever it was, it all seemed centered on this oddly dressed, freckle-faced boy.

“Can you take us to your home? We can call the police from there.”

“I don’t got a telly-phone.”

“Oh, that’s just great!” said Nick.

Allie turned on him. “Will you just shut up — you’re not helping.” Allie took a good long look at the freckled boy again. His clothes. The way he held himself.

She thought about the things he had said—not so much what he said, but the way he had said it. This was my place... now it’s your place, too. If her suspicions were correct, this situation was even weirder than she had thought.

“Where do you live?” Allie asked him.

“Here,” was all he said.

“How long have you been ‘here’?”

The Freckle-boy’s ears went red. “I don’t remember.”

By now Nick had come over, his frustration defused by what he was hearing.

“And your name?” Allie asked.

He couldn’t even look her in the eye. He looked down, shaking his head. “I haven’t needed one for a long time. So I lost it.”

“Whoa ...” said Nick.

“Yeah,” said Allie. “Major whoa.”

“It’s okay,” said the boy. “I got used to it. You will, too. You’ll see. It’s not so bad.”

There were so many emotions for Allie to grapple with now—from fear to anger to misery—but for this boy, Allie could only feel pity. What must it have been like to be lost alone in the woods for years, afraid to leave?

“Do you remember how old you were when you got here?” she asked.

“Eleven,” he told them.

“Hmm,” said Nick. “You still look eleven to me.”

“I am,” said the boy.

Allie decided to call him Lief, since they had found him in the forest, and he blushed at the name as she had kissed him. Then Lief led them up the steep stone slope to the road, climbing with recklessness that not even the most skilled rock climbers would dare show. Allie refused to admit how terrified she was by the climb, but Nick complained enough for both of them.

“I can’t even climb a jungle gym without getting hurt!” he complained. “What’s the point of surviving an accident, if you’re going to fall off a mountain and die?”

They reached the road, but found very little evidence of the accident. Just a few tiny bits of glass and metal. Was that a good sign or bad? Neither Allie nor Nick was sure.

“Things are different up here,” Lief said. “Different from the forest, I mean.

You better come back down with me.”

Allie ignored him and stepped onto the shoulder of the road. It felt funny beneath her feet. Kind of soft and spongy. She had seen road signs before that said SOFT SHOULDER, so she figured that’s what it meant.

“Better not stand in one place too long,” Lief said. “Bad things happen when you do.”

Cars and trucks flew by, one every five or six seconds. Nick was the first one to put up his hands and start waving to flag down help, and Allie joined him a second later.

Not a single car stopped. They didn’t even slow down. A wake of wind followed each passing car, tickled Allie’s skin, and her insides as well. Lief waited just by the edge of the cliff, pacing back and forth. “You’re not gonna like it up here! You’ll see!”

They tried to get the attention of passing drivers, but nobody stopped for hitchhikers nowadays. Standing at the edge of the road simply wasn’t enough.

When there was a lull in the traffic, Allie stepped over the line separating the shoulder from the road

“Don’t!” warned Nick.

“I know what I’m doing.”

Lief said nothing.

Allie ventured out into the middle of the northbound lane. Anyone heading north would have swerve around her. They couldn’t possibly miss seeing her now.

Nick was looking more and more nervous. “Allie ...”

“Don’t worry. If they don’t stop, I’ll have plenty of time to jump out of the way.” After all, she was a gymnast, and pretty good at it, too. Jumping was not a problem.

A harmonica hum that could only be a bus engine began to grow louder, and in a few seconds a northbound Greyhound ripped around the bend. She tried to lock eyes with the driver, but he was looking straight ahead. In a second he’ll see me, she thought. Just one second more. But if he saw her, he was ignoring her.

“Allie!” shouted Nick.

“Okay, okay.” With plenty of time to spare, Allie tried to hop out of the way...only she couldn’t hop. She lost her balance, but didn’t fall. Her feet wouldn’t let her. She looked down, and at first it looked like she had no feet.

It was a moment before she realized that she had sunk six inches into the asphalt, clear past her ankles like the road was made of mud.

Now she was scared. She pulled one foot out, then the other, but when she looked up, she knew it was too late; the bus was bearing down on her, and she was about to become roadkill. She screamed as the grill of the bus hit— — Then she was moving past the driver, through seats and legs and luggage, and finally through a loud grinding engine in the back, and then she was in the open air again. The bus was gone, and her feet were still sinking into the roadway. A trail of leaves and dust swept past her, dragged in the bus’s wake.

Did I...Did I just pass through a bus?

“Surprise,” said Lief with a funny little smile. “You should see the look on your face!”

Mary Hightower, also known as Mary Queen of Snots, writes in her book *Sorta Dead* that there’s no easy way to tell new arrivals to Everlost that, technically, they are no longer alive. “If you come across a ‘Greensoul,’” as new arrivals are called, it’s best to just be honest and hit them with the truth quickly,”

Mary writes. “If necessary, you have to confront them with something they can’t deny, otherwise they just keep on refusing to believe it, and they make themselves miserable. Waking up in Everlost is like jumping into a cold pool.

It's a shock at first, but once you're in, the water is fine."

CHAPTER 3

Dreamless Lief, having been so long in his special forest, never had the chance to read any of Mary Hightower's brilliantly instructional books. Most everything he knew about Everlost, he had learned from experience. For instance, he had quickly learned that dead-spots—that is, places that only the dead can see—are the only places that feel solid to the touch. He could swing from the branches of his dead forest, but once he got past its borders to where the living trees were, he would pass through them as if they weren't there—or, more accurately—like he wasn't there.

He didn't need to read Mary Hightower's Tips for Taps to know that you only need to breathe when you're talking, or that the only pain you can still feel is pain of the heart, or that memories you don't hold tightly on to are soon lost. He knew all too well about the memory part. The worst part about it was that no matter how much time passed, you always remembered how many things you'd forgotten.

Today, however, he had learned something new. Today, Lief learned how long Greensouls slept before awaking to their new afterlife. He had started a count on the day they arrived, and as of this morning it "was 272 days. Nine months.

"Nine months!" Allie yelled. "Are you kidding ,,,.

"I don't think he's the kidding type," said Nick, who appeared to be actually shivering from the chilliness of the news.

"I was surprised, too," Lief told them. "I thought you'd never wake up." He didn't tell them how every day for nine months he kicked and prodded them, and hit them with sticks hoping it would jar them awake. That was best kept to himself. "Think of it this way," he said. "It took nine months to get you born, so doesn't it figure it would take nine months to get you dead?"

"I don't even remember dreaming," Nick said, trying hopelessly to loosen his tie.

Now Allie was shaking a bit, too, at this news of her own death.

"We don't dream," Lief informed them. "So you never have to worry about nightmares."

"Why have nightmares," said Allie, "when you're in one?" Could all this be true?

Could she really be dead? No. She wasn't. If she was dead she would have made it to the light at the end of the tunnel. Both of them would have. They were only half-dead.

Nick kept rubbing his face. "This chocolate — I can't get it off my face. It's like it's tattooed there."

"It is," Lief said. "It's how you died."

"What?"

"It's just like your clothes," Lief explained. "It's a part of you now."

~~Nick looked at him like he had just pronounced a life sentence. “You mean to tell me that I’m stuck with a chocolate face, and my father’s ugly necktie until the end of time?”~~

Lief nodded, but Nick wasn’t ready to believe him. He reached for his tie, and tried to undo it with all his strength. Of course, the knot didn’t give at all.

Then he tried to undo the buttons on his shirt. No luck there, either. Lief laughed, and Nick threw him an unamused gaze.

The more frustrated Nick and Allie became, the harder Lief worked to please them. He brought them to his tree house, hoping it might bring them out their sour mood. Lief had built it himself out of the ghost branches that littered the ground of the dead forest. He showed them how to climb up to the highest platform, and when they got there, he pushed them both off, laughing as they bounced off their limbs and hit the ground. Then he jumped and did the same, thinking they’d both be laughing hysterically when he got there, but they were not.

For Allie the fall was the most terrifying moment she ever had to endure. It was worse than the crash for that had been over so quickly, she had no time to react. It was worse than the Greyhound bus passing through her, because that, too, had come and gone in a flash. The fall from the tree, however, seemed to last forever. Each branch she hit jarred her to the core. Jarred her, but didn’t hurt her. Still, the lack of pain made it no less terrifying. She screamed all the way down, and when at last she smashed upon the hard earth of the dead forest with a hearty thump, she felt the wind knocked out of her, only to realize there was never actually any wind in her to knock out. Nick landed beside her disoriented, with eyes spinning like he just came off a carnival ride. Lief landed beside them whooping and laughing.

“What’s wrong with you?” Allie shouted at Lief, and the fact that he still laughed when she grabbed him and shook him made her even angrier.

Allie put her hand to her forehead as if all this was giving her a killer headache, but she couldn’t have a headache now, could she, and that just made her all the more aggravated. The rational part of her mind kept wanting to lash out, telling her that this was all a dream, or a misunderstanding, or an elaborate practical joke. Unfortunately her rational mind had no supporting evidence. She had fallen from a treetop and had not been hurt. She had passed through a Greyhound bus. No, her rational mind had to accept the irrational truth.

There are rules here, she thought. Rules, just like the physical world. She would just have to learn them. After all, the rules of the living world must have seemed strange when she was very little. Heavy airplanes flew; the sky turned red at sunset; clouds could hold an ocean full of water, then rain it down on the ground below. Absurd! The living world was no less bizarre than this afterworld. She tried to take some comfort in that, but instead found herself bursting into tears.

Lief saw her tears and backed away. He had little experience with girls crying—or if he did, his experience was, at best, a hundred years old. He found it highly unexpected and disturbing. “What are you crying for?” he asked her.

“It’s not like you got hurt when you fell from the tree! That’s why I pushed you—to show you wouldn’t hurt.”

“I want my parents,” Allie said. Lief could see that Nick was fighting his own tears, too. This was not at all how Lief had imagined their first waking day would be, but maybe he should have. Maybe Lief should have realized that leaving one’s life behind is not an easy thing to do. Lief supposed he would have missed his parents, too, if he could still remember them. He did remember that he used to miss them, though. It wasn’t a good feeling. He watched Nick and Allie, waiting for their tears to subside, and that’s when the unthinkable occurred to him.

“You’re not going to stay here, are you?”

Nick and Allie didn’t answer right away, but that silence was enough of an answer.

“You’re just like the others!” he shouted out, before he even realized what he was going to say.

Allie took a step closer to him. “The others?”

Lief silently cursed himself for having said it. He hadn’t meant to tell them.

He wanted them to think it was just the three of them. That way maybe they would have stayed. Now all his plans were ruined.

“What do you mean others?” Allie said again.

“Fine, leave!” Lief shouted. “I don’t care anyway. Go out there and sink to the center of the Earth for all I care. That’s what happens, you know. If you’re not careful, you sink and sink and sink all the way to the center of the Earth!”

Nick wiped away the last of his tears. “How would you know? All you know is how to swing from trees. You haven’t been anywhere. You don’t know anything.”

Lief bolted away from them. He climbed his tree to the highest perch, up in the slimmest branches.

They won’t leave, he told himself. They won’t leave because they need me. They need me to teach them to climb, and to swing. They need me to show them how to live without being alive.

Here on his high perch, Lief kept his special things: the handful of precious items that had made the journey with him, crossing from the living world into Everlost. These were the things he had found when he woke up after the flood that had taken his life—ghost things that he could touch and feel. They kept him connected to his fading memories. There was a shoe that had been his father’s.

He often put his own foot in it, wishing that someday he would grow into it, but knowing that he never would. There was a water-damaged tin picture of himself—the only thing he had to remember what he looked like. It was pocked with so many spots, he couldn’t tell which spots were dirt, and which were freckles. In the end, he just assumed they were all freckles. Finally there was a rabbit’s foot that was apparently no more lucky for him than it had been for the rabbit.

There had once been a nickel, but it had been stolen by the first kid he came across in Everlost—as money had any value to them anymore. He had found all these items marooned on the small dead-spot he had awoken on, and when he had stepped off the little spot of dried mud, onto living-land, his feet had begun to sink in. The sinking was the first lesson he had learned. You had to keep moving or down you went. He had kept moving, afraid to stop, afraid to sleep.

Crossing from towns to woods, and back to towns, he had come to understand his ghostly nature, and although it terrified him, he endured it, for what else could he do? Why was he a ghost and not an angel? Why did he not go to heaven?

That's what the preacher always said: Heaven or hell — those were the only choices. So then why was he still here on Earth?

He had asked himself these questions over and over until he tired of asking, and just accepted. Then he had found the forest; a huge dead-spot large enough to make his home. It was a place where he could actually feel the trees—a place where he did not sink—and he knew in his heart that the good lord had provided him with this forest. It was his personal share of eternity.

As for these new kids, they would spend forever with him. It was the design of things. They might leave now, but once they saw what the rest of the world was like, they would come back to him, and he would build them their own platforms in the tree, and they would laugh together, and they would talk and talk to make up for all the years Lief had existed in silence.

Down below, Nick had watched Lief climb up the tree until he disappeared into the lush canopy. Nick found himself trying to balance his feelings of sympathy for the boy with his own confused feelings about being dead. He felt queasy, and wondered how that could be if, technically, he didn't actually have a stomach anymore. The thought just made him even more queasy.

“Well,” said Allie. “This sucks.”

Nick let loose an unexpected guffaw, which made Allie giggle. How could they be laughing at a time like this?

“We have some decisions to make,” said Allie.

Nick didn't exactly feel in a decision-making frame of mind. “You think it's possible to have post-traumatic stress disorder if you're dead?” he asked. Allie had no answer.

Nick looked at his hands, which were smudged with everlasting chocolate, like his face. He rubbed his arm. If he had no fleshly body, why could he still feel his skin? Or maybe it was just a memory of skin. And what about all the things people told him in life, about what happened to you when you died? Not that he was certain about any of it. His father had been an alcoholic who found God, and changed his life. His mother was into new age stuff, and believed in reincarnation and crystals. Nick always found himself caught in some uncomfortable in-between. He had faith in faith, though—that is to say, he deeply believed that someday he'd find something to deeply believe. That “someday” never came for Nick. Instead, he wound up here—and this place didn't fit with either of his parents' versions of the afterlife. And then, of course, there was his friend, Ralphy Sherman, who claimed to have had

near-death experience. (According to Ralphy, we're all briefly reincarnated as insects, and the light at the end of the tunnel is actually a bug-zapper.) Well, this place was not purgatory, Nirvana, or any sort of rebirth, and it occurred to Nick that regardless of what people believed, the universe had its own ideas.

"At least now we know there's an afterlife," Allie said, but Nick shook his head.

"This isn't the afterlife," he said. "We never made it to the afterlife. This is kind of an interlife. A space between life and death." Nick thought back to that light he had seen at the end of the tunnel before he had crashed into Allie on the way. That light had been his destination. He still didn't know what was in that light—Jesus, or Buddha, or the light of a hospital delivery room where he would be reborn. Would he ever know?

"What if we're lost here forever?" he asked.

Allie scowled at him. "Are you always so full of gloom and doom?"

"Usually."

Nick looked at the forest around them. Was this such a bad place to spend eternity? It wasn't exactly paradise, but it was kind of pretty. The trees were full and lush. They'd never lose their leaves. He wondered if the weather of the living world could still affect him. If not, then it wouldn't be so bad staying here. Certainly the boy they called Lief had adjusted, so couldn't they? But then, that wasn't the real question. The question was, did they want to?

Lief waited in his tree house, and soon they climbed up to him, as he knew they would. He quickly hid his special things as Nick and Allie reached the platform, both of them huffing and puffing, as if they were out of breath.

"Stop that," he told them. "You're not out of breath, you just think you are, so stop it."

"Lief, please, this is important," Allie said. "We need you to tell us about the 'others' you were talking about before."

There was no sense trying to hide it now, so he told them what he knew. "They come through the forest every once in a while. Other kids on their way places.

They never stay long—and none have come through here for years."

"Where do they go?"

"Anywhere. They're always running. They're always running from the McGill."

"The what?"

"The McGill."

"Is that a grown-up?"

~~Lief shook his head. “No grown-ups here. Only kids. Kids and monsters.”~~

“Monsters!” said Nick. “That’s great. That’s wonderful. I’m so glad I asked.”

But Allie wasn’t shaken. “There are no such things as monsters,” she told Lief.

He looked to Allie, then to Nick, then back to Allie again.

“There are here.”

On the absence of adults in Everlost, Alary Hightower writes: “To date no grown-up has ever been documented to cross into Everlost. The reason is quite obvious when you stop to think about it. You see, adults, being the way they are, never get lost on the way to the light no matter how hard they get bumped, simply because adults always think they know exactly where they’re going, even if they don’t, and so they all wind up going somewhere. If you don’t believe me, ask yourself this: Have you ever seen a grown-up get into a car so they could go ‘nowhere in particular’?”

On the presence of monsters, Mary Hightower is curiously silent.

CHAPTER 4

A Coin on its Edge Night had fallen over the woods, and the three dead kids sat on the highest platform of the tree house bathed in an unnaturally bright moonlight that truly made them look like ghosts. It took a while for Nick and Allie to realize that the moon wasn’t out that night.

“Great,” said Nick, not thinking it was great at all. “Just what I always wanted—to be a glow-in-the-dark ghost.”

“Don’t call us ghosts,” Allie said.

Nick simply didn’t have the patience for Allie’s issues with word choice. “Face it, that’s what we are.”

“‘Ghost’ implies a whole lot of things that I am NOT. Do I look like Casper to you?”

“Fine,” said Nick. “We’re not ghosts, we’re Undefined Spectral Doohickies. USDs.

Are you happy now?”

“Well that’s just stupid.”

“We’re Afterlights,” said Lief. They both turned to him. “The others who pass through — that’s what they call us, on account of how we glow in the dark — in the daytime, too, if you look close enough.”

“Afterlights,” repeated Allie. “See, I told you we weren’t ghosts.”

Allie and Lief began to talk about monsters again, and, as far as Nick was concerned, this was a conversation he would just as well stay out of. Instead, Nick decided to hold his breath, to see if

were true that oxygen was no longer a requirement. Still, he listened.

“If nothing can hurt you here,” asked Allie, “why be afraid of the McGill?”

“The McGill knows how to hurt you in other ways. It knows how to make you suffer till the end time, and it’ll do it too, if it gets the chance.” Lief’s eyes were wide, and he made sweeping gestures with his hands like he was telling a campfire story. “The McGill hates kids that get stuck here — hates the sounds we make. It’ll tear out your tongue if it hears you talk, and rip out your lungs if it hears you pretending to breathe. They say the McGill is the devil’s own pet hound that chewed through its leash and escaped. It couldn’t make it all the way to the living world, but it made it to here. That’s why we have to stay in the forest. It doesn’t know about the forest. We’re safe here.”

Nick could tell that Allie wasn’t convinced. He wasn’t convinced himself, but in light of their current predicament, suddenly anything seemed possible.

“How do you know all this?” Allie asked.

“The other kids who come through the forest. They tell stories.”

“Did these kids actually see the McGill?” Allie asked.

“No one who’s ever seen it has escaped.”

“How convenient.”

Nick released his breath, having held it for ten minutes with no ill effects.

“Technically speaking,” Nick said, “there have always been monsters, or at least they were called that until people knew something better to call them. The giant squid. The megamouth shark. The anaconda.”

“See!” said Lief.

Allie threw Nick a withering look. “Thank you Mr. Google. The next time I need some crucial information, I’ll type in some choice keywords.”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “I’m sure your keywords will all have four letters.”

Allie turned back to Lief. “So, is this McGill a giant squid?”

“I don’t know,” said Lief, “but whatever it is, it’s terrible.”

“It’s made-up,” insisted Allie.

“You don’t know everything!”

“No,” said Allie, “but now I’ve got all the time in the world, so I eventually will.”

Nick had to admit that both Lief and Allie had their points. Lief's stories reeked of exaggeration, but every story had some basis in truth. On the other hand, Allie had a practical view of things.

"Lief," Nick asked, "has anyone who's passed through here ever come back?"

"No," Lief said. "They were all eaten by the McGill."

"Or they found a better place to be," suggested Nick.

"Either we stay here, or we get eaten by the McGill," said Lief. "That's why I'm staying here."

"What if there's another choice?" said Nick. "If we're not alive, but we're not quite dead, then maybe..." He pulled a coin out of his pocket—one of the few things that had come with him, along with those overly formal clothes he wore.

"Maybe we're like coins standing on their edge?"

Allie considered this. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, we might be able to shake things up a little, and find a way to come up heads."

"Or tails," suggested Allie.

"What are you talking about?" said Lief.

"Life and death." Nick flipped the coin, and slapped it down on the back of his palm, keeping it covered with his other hand, so none of them could see how it had landed. "Maybe—just maybe—we can find a way out of here. A way into the light at the end of the tunnel... or maybe even a path back to life."

It seemed the trees themselves held the thought, sifting it through their boughs, giving it resonance.

"Could that be possible?" Allie asked, and looked to Lief.

"I don't know," he told them.

"So the question is," said Nick, "where do we go to find out?"

"There's only one place I want to go," said Allie. "Home."

Nick instinctively sensed that going home wouldn't be a good idea—but just like Allie, he wanted to go home. He had to find out if his family had survived, or if they "got where they were going." They were in Upstate New York, though; it was far from home.

"I'm from Baltimore," Nick said. "How about you?"

"New Jersey," Allie said. "The southern tip."

“Okay. Then we head south from here, and keep an eye out for others who can help us. Someone has got to know how to get out of this place...one way, or another.”

Nick put his coin away, and they all began to talk about life, death, and a way out of this place in between. None of them had noticed on which side the coin had landed.

Allie had always been a goal-oriented girl. It was both her strength and her weakness. She had a drive to completion that always got things done, but it also made her inflexible, and stubborn. Even though she adamantly denied being stubborn, she knew deep down it was true.

The coin-on-its-edge business might have been fine for Nick, but Allie was not at ease with all the metaphysical talk. Going home, however—that was a goal she could buy into. Whether she was dead or half-dead, whether she was spirit or wraith, didn't matter. It was too unpleasant to think about. Better to put on the blinders, and keep her thoughts fully focused on the house where she had spent her life. She would go back there. And once she was there, all things would sort themselves out. She had to believe that, or she would lose her mind.

Lief had his own unique way of seeing things, too — and his vision began and ended with the forest. He wouldn't be going with them, because for Lief, being alone in his safe haven was better than having company in the big bad world of the living.

As for the snowshoes, they were Nick's idea, although Allie was the one who figured out how to make them, and Lief was the one with the practical know-how to actually do it with twigs and strips of bark. Allie thought they looked kind of goofy, but after all it wasn't like they'd be posing for a fashion show any time soon.

“What's the point,” Lief had said when Nick first mentioned the idea of snowshoes. “It's not going to snow for months, and we move right through snow anyway.”

“They're not for snow,” Nick had told him. “It's so we can walk on living-world roads without sinking in. We'll be able to move faster if we don't have to pluck our feet out of the asphalt after every step.”

“So then they're road-shoes, not snowshoes,” Lief said, then went about tying twigs together with strips of bark. When he had finished the shoes, he handed them to Nick and Allie. “Aren't you afraid at all?” he asked. “Aren't you afraid of what's out there? All the things you couldn't see when you were alive? Evil spirits? Monsters? I've been waiting forever for you to come. I prayed for you, do you know that? God hears our prayers here. Maybe even better than before, because we're closer to him here.” Lief looked at them with big, mournful eyes.

“Please don't go.”

It tugged at Allie's heart, and brought a tear to her eyes, but she couldn't let her emotions influence this decision. She had to remind herself that Lief wasn't really a little kid. He was an Afterlight who was more than a hundred years old.

He had done fine in his forest alone, and there was no reason to think he wouldn't be fine once the forest was left.

“I’m sorry,” Allie told him. “But we can’t stay. Maybe once we learn more, we’ll come back for you.”

Lief put his hands in his pockets and sullenly looked at the ground. “Good luck, then,” he said. “And watch out for the McGill.”

“We will.”

He stood there for a moment more, then said, “Thank you for giving me a name.

I’ll try to remember it.” Then he climbed away, disappearing high in his tree house again.

“South,” said Nick.

“Home,” said Allie, and they climbed out of the forest to face the treacherous unknowns of the living world.

Whether or not careless children actually sink down to the center of the Earth, no one can say for sure. Certainly many do disappear, but as it always seems to happen when no one else is looking, confounds all attempts to discover where they actually go. The official term for sinking, coined by none other than Mary Hightower herself, is “Gravity Fatigue.”

In her groundbreaking book *The Gravity of Gravity*, Mary writes: “Do not believe rumors that children leave Everlost. We are here to stay. Those who can no longer be seen have simply fallen victim to Gravity Fatigue, and are either at, or on their way to the center of the Earth. I imagine the center of the Earth must be a crowded place by now, but perhaps it is the spirits of those of us residing there that keep the Earth alive and green.”

CHAPTER 5

Friends in High Places Mary Hightower was not born with that name. She could no longer remember what her true name was, although she was relatively certain her first name started with an M. She took the name Mary because it seemed a proper, motherly name.

True, she was only fifteen, but had she lived, she would most certainly have become a mother. And anyway, she was a mother to those who needed one—and there were many.

The name Hightower came because she was the very first who dared to ascend.

That singular bold act of climbing the stairs and staking a claim had earned her a level of respect from others she could not have imagined. They were in awe of her, and many other Everlost children followed her lead. Realizing her position was now high in more ways than one, she decided it was time to share what she knew about Everlost with all Afterlights. Although she had been writing for more than a hundred years, she had only shared it with the small group of younger children she had taken under her wing. But the moment she became Mary Hightower, all that changed. Now her writings were read by everyone—and what had once been a small group of children in her care had grown into hundreds. She had no doubt she would eventually be a mother to thousands.

Some people thought of her as a god. She had no desire to be a god, but she did like the respect and honor with which she was now treated. Of course, she did have her enemies, and they called her less flattering things, but always from a safe distance.

Today her view from the top floor was magnificent, and sometimes she swore she could see the whole world from here. Yet she knew it was a world that had gone on without her. Far below the traffic of the living world passed, dots of buses and taxis in constant congestion. Let them go about their business, she thought.

It means nothing to me. My concern is this world, not theirs.

A knock at the door drew her attention away from the view. In a moment Stradivarius stepped in, a mousey boy with tufts of tightly curled blond hair.

“What is it, Vari?”

“A Finder’s here to see you, Miss Mary. He says he’s got something really good.”

Mary sighed. Everyone called themselves “Finders” these days. Usually they had never actually found anything of importance. A scrap of paper, a piece of driftwood, maybe. The true Finders had far better goods. They were masters at what they did, and knew all the circumstances that could cause an object to cross over into Everlost. The true Finders were few.

“Is this someone we’ve seen before?”

“I think so,” said Stradivarius. “And I think he’s got real food!”

This news caught Mary’s attention, although she tried not to show Vari how much.

She was good at keeping her emotions to herself, but if the Finder truly had food that had crossed over from the living world, it would be hard to contain herself.

“Show him in.”

Vari slipped out, and returned with a young man, about thirteen years old, wearing nothing but a bathing suit, its waistband hidden by a pasty root-beer belly. Well, thought Mary, we can’t choose the moment and manner of our crowding. Just as this boy was condemned to travel eternity in a bathing suit, she was consigned to the most uncomfortable school dress she owned. The only good thing about it was that it was green and matched her eyes.

“Hi, Miss Mary,” the Finder said, respectfully. “You remember me, right?” He smiled, but his mouth stretched much too wide, and he had far too many teeth, giving the impression that she could tip back the top of his head like a boy-shaped cookie jar.

“Yes, I remember you. You’re Speedo, from New Jersey. The last time you came, you brought an orange, wasn’t it?”

“Grapefruit!” he said, thrilled to be remembered.

It had been a long time since she had last seen this particular Finder, but how could she forget the bathing suit? “What did you bring today?”

His smile stretched even wider. Now he was teeth all the way to his ears. “I brought something fantastic!...How would you like a little...dessert?”

“Dessert?” said Mary. “Please don’t tell me you’ve brought some of those horrid fortune cookies!”

Clearly Speedo was offended by the suggestion. “I’m a Finder, Miss Mary. I know better than to waste your time with fortune cookies. I won’t even touch them.”

“That’s very wise,” Mary told him. “And I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insult you.

Please — show me what you’ve got.”

He hurried out, and returned with a box that he set on the table. “You may want to sit down,” he told her. When she didn’t, he removed the lid to reveal something Mary thought she’d never have the good fortune to see again.

“A birthday cake!” There was no sense trying to hide her astonishment—and yes, perhaps she should have sat down, because the sight of it made her feel faint.

This wasn’t just a slice of bread, or a gnawed chicken bone, as many of the Food-Finders brought; this was an entire birthday cake, round and white, completely unmarred. It said “Happy 5th Birthday Suzie.” She had no idea who Suzie was, and she didn’t care, because if she was having a birthday, she was one of the living, and the living were not her concern. Mary lifted her finger, then turned to the Finder. “May I?”

“Of course!”

Slowly, carefully she dipped her finger down and touched it to the cake, dragging it over the tiniest edge, feeling the frosting stick to her fingertip.

She pulled her finger back and put it to her mouth to taste. The explosion of flavor was almost too much to bear. It took over all her senses, and she had to close her eyes. Vanilla buttercream! So perfectly sweet!

“It’s good stuff, huh?” said Speedo. “I was gonna eat it myself, but then I thought my favorite customer might want it.” And he added, “That’s you,” just in case there was any doubt.

Mary grinned and clapped her hands together, as she realized how the Finder had come across the cake. “You wait at birthday parties! How very clever!” Everyone knew the only food that ever crossed over was food lovingly prepared—and it only happened when that lovingly prepared food met an untimely, unlikely end. Where better to find such food than a birthday party, where mothers bake their love right into the batter? “That’s brilliant!” Mary said. “Absolutely brilliant.”

Speedo looked nervous, and hitched up his bathing suit—a nervous habit, since it was in no danger falling down. “You’re not going to tell anyone, are you? I mean, it’s a trade secret. If people knew where I go to find food, everyone else’ll do the same, and I’ll be out of business.”

“I won’t tell a soul,” Mary said, “but you have to tell me one thing. How many birthday parties do you have to sit through until a cake crossed over?”

He puffed up proudly. “Three hundred and seventy-eight!”

Mary shook her head. “You must be sick of birthdays!”

“Hey, you do what you’ve gotta do, right?” Then he walked around, talking about the cake like it was a used car he was trying to sell. “It was something to watch, though. That little kid reached up and pulled the whole cake right off the table before they could even put the candles in! It smashed in a heap on the floor, but as you can see, it left a lasting impression on the table where it sat: The ghost of a birthday cake, just waiting for me to take.”

Mary looked at the cake and thought about dipping her finger in again, but stopped herself. It would be too easy to keep on eating it and not stop until the last crumb was gone.

“So,” said Speedo, “what do you think it’s worth?”

“What are you asking?”

“How am I supposed to know what I want, when I don’t know what ya got to give?”

Mary considered this. The cake was worth ten times anything she had ever traded for. This, she knew, was this Finders gold mine, and he might never find another one. He deserved a fair and honest trade.

Mary crossed the large room to a chest of drawers, and pulled out a set of keys.

She tossed them to Speedo, and he caught it.

“Keys?” he said. “I’ve found lots of keys. They ain’t no good unless the thing they unlock also crosses into Everlost—and that never happens.”

“Something very strange happened in the living world a few weeks ago,” Mary told him. “A man sent his car into one end of a carwash, and it never came out the other end. No one has any idea what happened to it.”

He looked at her, his face a mix of hope and distrust. “And what did happen to it?”

“Sunspots.”

“Huh?”

Mary sighed. “If you had read my book, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Vortexes but Were Afraid to Ask*, then you would know that sunspot activity tends to create vortexes from the

living world to ours, through which living-world objects sometimes fall.”

“Oh,” said Speedo. “Sunspots, yeah.”

Mary grinned. “In a parking stall at the north side of old Penn Station, you’ll find a silver Jaguar. I don’t travel much, so I doubt I’d have much use for it.

It’s yours, if you promise to bring me all of your best food finds.”

She could tell that the Finder was excited about the car, but he was a good negotiator. “Well,” he said, “I already do have a pretty sweet ride....”

“Yes,” said Mary, “you talked about it last time you were here. As I recall, it’s more trouble than it’s worth, because you can never find a place to park it.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I guess I could do with something smaller. Okay—it’s a deal!”

He shook her hand a little too forcefully, finally letting his true excitement show. “A Jag. Wow!” His smile stretched right into the middle of his ears, and Mary simply had to say something about it. Someone had to.

“You should try to remember that the living only have thirty-two teeth.”

He looked at her, stunned by her directness.

“Eight incisors,” Mary continued, “four canine, eight bicuspids, and twelve molars, if you’ve got wisdom teeth.”

“Oh,” he said, getting red in the face.

“It’s clear you put a lot of importance on your smile, but when you think about it too much, it starts to take over.”

Even before he turned to leave, Mary could see the information taking effect;

his mouth was shrinking back to sensible proportions.

In her book *Spectral Visions: An Afterlight’s Guide to Looking One’s Best*, Mary Hightower writes, “If, at times, you find others looking at you strangely, and you don’t know why, chances are you’re losing touch with your own self-image.

That is to say, your body, or your face, is beginning to distort. Remember, we look the way we look only because we remember looking like that. If you forget that your eyes are blue, they may just turn purple. If you forget that human beings have ten fingers, you may suddenly end up with twelve.

A simple remedy to image-loss is to find a picture that you think resembles you — and if you’ve ever happened to have crossed over with an actual picture of yourself, all the better. Study the picture. Take it in as much detail as you can. Once the image is firmly in your mind, you’ll start looking like your own

self in no time. Never underestimate the importance of remembering how you looked in life.

Unless, of course, you'd rather forget."

CHAPTER 6

Scavengers Nick remembered everything about his life in perfect detail. How he looked, how his parents looked, what he had for lunch before the miserable accident that landed him here. It troubled him, though, that Lief had become such a blank slate over the years he had been in his forest. His memories aged badly, fading like an old newspaper, how long until Nick suffered the same loss? He didn't want to forget anything.

Having been used to travel at sixty-five miles per hour, Nick's southbound trek with Allie was a slow one. Hiking was not one of Nick's favorite activities. In life it would make his joints ache, and he would invariably stumble on some rude protrusion of nature, and skin a knee. This hike-after-death was no more pleasant. True, the bruises and body aches were gone, but he could not deny how thirsty it made him. Thirsty and hungry. Lief had told them that they no longer needed to eat or drink anymore than they needed to breathe, but it still didn't stop the craving. "You get used to it," Lief had told them, back in the forest.

Nick wasn't sure he ever wanted to get used to an eternity of longing.

They also discovered their spectral bodies didn't actually require sleep, but, as with food, it didn't change the craving for it. Nick and Allie had agreed that they would take time to sleep, as they would have if they were still alive.

It was a connection to the world of the living that they did not want to lose.

The simple act of resting, however, couldn't be done just anywhere.

"How can we sleep if we sink?" Nick had asked on the first evening. The road-shoes they wore did their job while Nick and Allie walked, keeping them mostly on the surface of the road, but if they stood still for too long, the ground began its slow swallow. They couldn't find a way to keep from sinking that first night, and so they kept walking.

It was on the second day of their journey that the solution came. When the mountain road became treacherous, they began to find odd little patches of asphalt that weren't like the rest of the road. They were solid! The patches were never more than a few feet wide. It was Allie who figured it out when they came across one that was marked with a small white wooden cross.

"I know what this is!" Allie said. "I saw them when we visited Mexico. They put little crosses by the side of the road where people died in car accidents. I never thought to look for it here in the States, but I'll bet there are people who do it here, too."

"So the passing of a spirit must leave a permanent mark on the spot where it happened, turning it into a dead-spot!" Nick had to admit it was an exciting, if somewhat morbid discovery.

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