

No Takebacks

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1.

We didn't build the app to kill anybody.

It wasn't even our idea to build it, exactly. One day RJ's dad was just standing there in the kitchen with us after his work, and he pretty much foisted the idea on us. His tie was two-fingers loose and he was digging in the refrigerator for a beer. RJ and me were sitting on the island (me) and the counter (him), texting. Or, if I'm going to be honest here, for the first time in somewhat-recorded history, we were *pretending* to text.

That beer, RJ's dad was sure, had been there this morning?

Yeah.

Anyway, he finally settled on some orange juice straight from the carton, and then he was just standing there with us like I said, doing that thing where he thinks we're all hanging out, being cool. At least he tries, though, right? More than I can say for my dad, who runs the house like a military barracks, telling us when we can and can't be at ease, soldiers. Interrogating me about my plans for the future if he ever finds me just sitting on the counter one fine lazy summer day.

To be specific, and blip back to RJ's kitchen, the *last* fine lazy summer day before senior year started.

"So . . ." RJ's dad said, wiping the extra-pulpy orange juice from his top lip, "what are you two troublemakers brewing up this particular afternoon, now?"

I didn't look up, couldn't, was too busy processing his 'brewing' and what it might or might not mean. Whether it was some kind of coded approval or explicit accusation or what.

"You know," RJ answered for both of us, shrugging to make it stick.

RJ's dad nodded, took another deep glug, and then asked if we had that red light, green light one yet?

We looked up to him with reptile eyes.

“That *app*,” he said, about the phones we were still working, and his eyes, they were all glittery with possibility.

I did a short little mental groan, here. Kind of squinted in anticipation. Talking software outside your age group always feels like trying to use sign language through the bars of the gorilla cage.

“It’s free, see,” RJ’s dad went on, “this computer kid from Palmdale, he made it for his little sister one afternoon, because he was supposed to be babysitting her but wanted to play online or something. There’s an article in the paper today, yeah?”

“The paper,” RJ repeated, his sentence the blade on some construction tractor, scraping bottom.

His dad was impervious, though. Had too much momentum. Was probably going to say ‘computer kid’ again, even.

“All you do is stop moving the phone when the light goes red, then on green light you—”

“Cool,” I said, sliding down from the island. “Red light, green light, right?”

I pretended to be calling it up on my phone. On the way out.

“Not really,” RJ’s dad said, his tone downshifting a bit. “But that’s not the point. The point is that that app, it’s the new babysitter. All the parents are downloading it for their babies now. Three hundred thousand so far. And counting.”

He let that hang.

“Dollars?” RJ finally asked.

“Downloads,” his dad said, licking his lips, excited. “And you know what? Each one of those downloads has his name on it. That afternoon watching his little sister, it got him into MIT, yeah? *Full ride*.”

“Ah, the Ride . . .” RJ said, sliding down from the counter now as well.

This was where all of his dad’s casual just-hanging-out stories always ended up: some kid getting a full ride to college.

But still.

Three hundred thousand downloads? With how many screen refreshes per session?

Probably a million impressions, easy.

And even at a tenth of a cent per—you could do some serious bank that way.
All we needed now was the app.

#

RJ's great idea was "Naked Leapfrog." I wasn't against it, especially as it involved asking Lindsay from Chem to help, but when my mom found our storyboards on the kitchen table that night, we had to have another sit-down with my dad when his shift was up at ten.

It went the usual way.

The only reason I got to keep my phone was by arguing that I was testing code on it, for my college applications.

RJ chimed in too, and threw in a Corvette if the app really took off, if my dad was interested in looking cool.

"A *sports* car," my dad said, and leaned back in what he called his Spartan chair. His no-nonsense chair.

RJ shrugged, the left side of his mouth eeking over a bit, and, as it turned out for the next twenty minutes, my dad actually had a thought or two about sports cars. Complete with anecdotes and horror stories and statistics. There was maybe even some kind of insurance quote in there.

I apologized to RJ with what of my face I could—we've been friends since third grade, so he got it—and then, slouching across the dark driveway to recompose ourselves in the bushes (one cigarette, maybe two), ash out on RJ's old dog's real headstone again, RJ said, "Dude, if only we could have seen *that* one in the rearview," and I kind of looked behind us, had to agree.

People have gotten rich on worse ideas.

#

Most of what we needed for the app we could scavenge from stuff already on the market, though a couple of those took enough hours to crack that night that we probably should have just written them ourselves.

"And we can't ask Lindsay?" RJ said, his game keyboard glowing up his face like this was a campfire story we were telling to each other, conditional by conditional, curly bracket by curly bracket.

“She’ll be all over us once the cash is rolling in,” I told him.

We hunched back to the coding.

The app we were building was going to be the definition of elegance. Just because it was so simple, or could be, if we wrote it straight. Not a game, not some stupid trivia, no overlooked system utility or navigation aid for amateur seamstresses, and definitely not another porn scrubber or privacy screen.

A camera.

Just that.

It wasn’t supposed to kill us.

#

What our app would have going for it was what RJ called the ‘chill factor.’ It was what he’d wanted to call the thing, even—nobody else was using it for an app yet—but I talked him down from that particular ledge, pulled us back to the realm of the sane: ‘No Takebacks.’ Even though takebacks was pretty much exactly what our app was about.

RJ’s complaint about wishing we’d seen my dad’s Corvette lecture coming? We were marrying that to a handheld device, then, if everything panned out, amping it up into a portable haunted house.

The idea was that, when you had that feeling somebody was behind you, just kind of lurking, waiting—Simms in Marketing taught us this last year: find something everybody alive shares, then winnow that down to a product they can buy—when you had that feeling, you could just ‘check your messages’ or whatever (this is you, calling the app up) then lower your hand back down, the phone still palmed there, and snap a pic of the world directly behind you.

Which you could already do, sure—the problem with global anxieties is that there’s usually a global fix already in place—especially if you had the know-how to re-assign your shutter to a mechanical button. But, as we tested and found, it took some pretty serious skill and no small amount of dumb luck to keep that camera straight up and down. Pushing that mech button, it turned out it wasn’t just your finger muscles that got involved. Your whole hand tensed up, whether you told it to or not, and right at the wrong moment: when you were pushing the button.

If you hack into the image stabilization routines and crank them up, they can scrub most of that motion out, yeah. But that just leaves you with a fairly clear shot of whatever you've got in the frame. Which is to say that, when you're not looking, your aim tends to be off. Big surprise, I know. It turned out we were real good at snapping pics of the floor or the ceiling or our own asses, but hardly ever got what was behind us lined up properly.

Our revolutionary solution, then, was to hook a line or two of code between the phone's gyroscope and the camera's shutter, so that the image would only capture when the phone was straight up and down, perfectly vertical, giving it a straight look back.

As for lateral, though, the side-to-side—well, the app was going to be free, right? The only thing that could correct for that would be . . . a bluetooth tie-in with a near-eye device strung up like a periscope? some infrared sensor to square the phone with the room? a fisheye lens? We could fake the fish-eye trick anyway, just stretch the image, let it distort out, but that wouldn't change the original field of view, would just suggest it had been wider than it was, and the market was already spilling over with this kind of sleight-of-hand tomfoolery.

Finally we just stole another of RJ's dad's garage beers, smuggled it to the bushes, toasted Cedric (the dead, headstoned dog), and started in with the field trials.

The app worked perfectly. Better than we could have dreamed. A thousand people should have thought of this already.

We took turns trying to sneak up on each other, caught ourselves on film each time, without having to look back. And it was good we ran the tests, too, or we never would have figured out to make the flash optional, and, in case there were some legacy phones out there not playing the game (ours did), we fiddled with the autorotate, to keep the image from getting flipped, because, when you're trying to catch some slender dude ghosting up behind you, you don't need to be worried about if you're phone's upside down or not.

The lateral still sucked, of course, but what we'd lucked into there was that, when the washed-out, black-and-whited image of us playing backdoor ninja was only *half* in the image, it was approximately eighty-five times creepier.

Score one for the good guys.

So we went back to the drawing board (RJ’s basement room, the door locked), put a fat-fingered toggle on the flash, dialed up the contrast some, and then spent the rest of our last before-school weekend trancing on how to layer in random pics from the phone’s gallery, the same way those ‘zombie yourself’ apps stenciled gore over your face.

The difference there, though, was that those apps were more participatory, always asked you to position your face in the dotted green lines, please, and, even with that kind of help, still, the final image kind of sucked.

The other problem was the random pics being sucked from the phone’s gallery. What if, instead of a snap of your mom cooking hamburgers—we’d just copy her outline over, fill the rest with textured shadow—what if what the app sucked across to pretend was sneaking up behind you, what if it was a pretty sunset, an idyllic windmill?

So we killed hours and many many braincells coming up with just five stock images to bundle in with the app: a girl crawling on the ‘wall,’ a guy just standing there, a hand starting to reach around some corner, a pair of floating eye smudges, and a simple wisp of smoke you could take to be whatever you wanted, or didn’t want. And we figured how to fade them into these ‘takeback’ shots like they’d been there all along. It was spooky as hell.

Except.

One thing you learn, coding, is that there’s always an ‘except.’

It was RJ who stumbled onto it: when you download those stupid rotating wallpaper apps or one of those ‘innocent maze with a jack-in-the-box zombie’ numbers, there’s always that download lag, where the server’s sneaking those hidden images across. It wasn’t so much that we were worried about people watching the progress bar, keeping a close eye on the running printout right above it—we *would*, but that was us—it was that, sneaking stuff into somebody’s memory like that, caching it they-don’t-know where, that was a porn move. And even if it was just a machine reviewing our app, not a real person, still, that kind of underhandedness, even if it was all in good fun: we were going to get filtered.

Never mind that, after our app cycled through all five *sneak_up* images, the joke’s tired, the app deleted, only rated on how it ended, not how it was.

We stole another beer, considered things.

No, a windmill wasn't scary, even if it was three foot high and sneaking up behind you in the hall.

No, it wasn't scary to see that same girl crawling along the side of the hall.

What we finally settled on, though it was going to slow the process down, was upping the array of stock images from five to a cool hundred, and rigging the recursion such that it would iterate through however many images we made available, really. We were in it for the long haul, after all, and RJ was a serious whiz with fake randomness, and me, my job was to strip each of these images down to the bare bones. My goal was to get each down to about five kilobytes, but the wall I ran into was, of course, pixelation, which, unless you're somehow in the game, isn't all that scary. So what I finally lucked onto was letting the images swell back up to a whole fifteen kilobytes—they were all greyscale, had some definite blur built-in—but *then* just scaling them down to micro. Bam: seven kilobytes per, about. We had to dial the smoothing up a bit to compensate, but all in all, it was working.

All that was left was to push these little *sneak_up* images into some buried directory online, .htaccess it for all time (though 'Lindsay' could probably break in . . .), and we were on to the second round of trials.

The app was light, it didn't glitch, it had a hooky name, some promised fun, and we'd left some space at the bottom of each image for all the banners that were going to run.

"So?" RJ said, standing up from his bed.

"It's Sunday night," I told him.

Our eyes were bloodshot, our fingertips raw, our pores were exhaling cheese puffs—another weekend gone, lost forever between two curly brackets no one would ever properly appreciate.

But it had been worth it, too.

Screw college, right?

RJ walked me across his driveway, my dad's security light popping on as soon as we stepped up onto the concrete.

The app was on both our phones, of course, and our laptops too.

“Don’t take any pictures I wouldn’t,” RJ said, stopping at the free-throw line to sail an imaginary one in, and I saluted him, spun slow and fake-drunk on my heels—just another sailor, looking for my gangplank home—and leaned into whatever my dad had waiting for me after not checking in all weekend again.

Tomorrow was the first day of senior year, though.

There was nothing he could do to me that would matter.

2.

By Wednesday, RJ was a ghost.

Not literally (not yet), but that was kind of just his place in the cafeteria, in the halls, in the parking lot.

Usually, I’d be right there with him, but somehow the Life Sciences I was having to make up from sophomore year, it had taken off. Mostly because I wasn’t the only one having to make it up.

Lindsay was in there too. My new lab partner.

It was taking me longer and longer to get ready each morning. My dad would grumble over the breakfast table about the girl I was becoming, and how pretty I was getting, and I’d just chew, swallow, and float to second period again.

I’d like to say I had no illusions about Lindsay and me, about homecoming and prom and life, but it went way past that. I was neck-deep in that particular fantasy, and sinking fast.

At lunch I found RJ, leaned in, told him my plan.

“*Her?*” he said back.

Her phone was newer, brighter, better, was supposed to be harder to hack. I wanted to try the app there, if she was game.

“Maybe we’ll play some Naked Leapfrog too,” I told him, shrugging, trying to come off more lecherous than I was.

“I put a text button on it,” RJ said back.

“Link-with-attachment, right?” I said, suddenly concerned.

He didn’t dignify that.

Of course it would be link-with-attachment. Trying to build our own cute little text program *inside* our app, we'd have to be poring through different carriers' protocols, asking permission for this, not stepping on that.

"What about the Lonely Brigade?" I asked.

It was our code for the social networks.

"You think?" he said, kind of doing his sneer thing.

We were really talking now. Like it had always been.

"Why not?" I said. "That's where we want the pics to show up, don't we?"

"There's no revenue for second-hand impressions," he said. "You know that, right?"

Because there would be no real way to track them.

"But we can brand them, anyway," I said. "Just clear-letter, discrete. Directing them back to the app, keeping it part of the chain, all that."

RJ shrugged one shoulder, was watching somebody across the cafeteria.

It was Lindsay. I could tell by the way he let his eyes keep skating past her.

"Remember that toddler game?" he said, coming back to me. "That my dad said?"

"Red light, green light. Go directly to college."

"That's all he could use it for, wasn't it? For his MIT application. Because— putting banners on it would be stupid, wouldn't it? Who advertises to babies?"

I blinked, focused.

He was right again.

"But we're not like that," I said.

He shook his head no, agreeing with me.

But still.

That guy, that app, he was our origin story. And now it was hollow. Now he was somebody we'd make fun of.

"Think the app'll scare her?" he asked then, catching my eyes for a flash.

"You sleeping, man?" I asked back.

"Jump right out of her pants, right?" he went on, then lifted his chin to get me to look.

It was Lindsay, maybe two steps from us, balancing her water-with-lemon, her salad.

She smiled, twirled past, biting her lip in hello and doing something impossible with her eyebrows.

“Life Science,” RJ said, *not* watching her walk away. “What’s homework going to be like for that, you think?”

“Exactly,” I said, and brushed past him, my eyes glued.

#

Two days later, RJ started texting me some of the new takeback images he was generating.

I was in the library with Lindsay and two of her friends. But mostly with Lindsay. At least in my head.

So far I’d agreed to show her where she could nab papers online, places the faculty didn’t know about. I was going to show her where all the good music and movies were, too, but was going to space it out some. Surprise her on Thursday with what wasn’t in the theatres until Friday, that kind of stuff.

You use what you’ve got, I mean. This was my one chance.

And now RJ was helping.

I looked at the image he’d flashed across, then lowered it under the table, scanned both ways to see if any teachers were close.

“What?” Lindsay said.

Her dad wouldn’t let her load any apps he didn’t scan first, as it turned out. The human virus checker, as it were.

But when you’ve got a daughter like that.

“Give me your number,” I said to her—that easy—and bankshot the image off a tower two miles a way, drilled it back under the table, to her phone, balanced right there on her thighs.

It was a takeback pic, sure, but RJ had done something different, had twisted the code back on itself somehow.

Behind the washed-out version of his long hallway was the crawling girl. She wasn’t on the wall anymore, though, but the floor. And not floating two feet above it like

could happen, but right on the surface of the carpet, reaching forward along it like a cat, her face just blank.

Lindsay dropped her phone. It rattled under the table.

More, I texted back to RJ.

We were going to be so rich.

I thought that was the only way things could go, yeah. There's going to be an empty seat at graduation now, though.

Maybe two.

#

By the beginning of the next week, RJ was a star, at least on the cell networks. Instead of a ghost, now he was dragging a fuse. Like he'd weighed his options, studied the landscape of his life, considered the future, and made the measured decision that senior year, we were all going to know his name. One way or the other.

Let me say here that I never took credit for the images he was getting the app to produce.

I'd had a hand in the initial program, had spent a hurried two hours parsing through the code with him on Saturday, his dad grilling steaks for us in the backyard, but that was just maintenance and bugkilling, trying to get it all to spec before we took it live.

Before we could do that, though, we had to nab a domain—it was actually available, and, because it was for 'college,' his dad floated us twenty-four months on his card, base package—we had to stake out some freebie bulletin board, complete with set-up and faq threads, each of us set up as boss moderators. We were also supposed to write up little backstories for ourselves, to attach faces to the app.

"If you have time, I mean," RJ had said from behind his laptop, about that.

It was like we were playing battleship.

"Ha ha," I said back, and never looked up.

"So is this the end of our summer romance?" he said back, and this stopped me.

I looked around my screen, was about to say something back—no idea what, but I could feel the words in my throat—when his dad ducked in with news about those steaks, how if you don't pay at least glancing attention to the corporeal, then you risk getting lost forever in the abstract—his usual out-loud bumpersticker—and I forgot what RJ had said.

That night it came back, though.

Two-thirty in the morning found me at our living room window, no lights on behind me, to give away that I was there.

In the bushes there was the cherry of a cigarette, rhythmic like a heartbeat. Except slower. More deliberate. And at the wrong height for RJ.

Unless he was breaking his own rules, using Cedric’s custom little headstone as a bench

He was.

I hugged my arms to my sides, felt the coldness of my phone press into my bare skin.

Without looking back, I glowed the phone on, opened the app, and lowered my hand, the picture snapping once the phone was straight up-and-down enough.

The picture was empty, of course.

Just our couch, that stupid floor lamp I used to think was a robber. The doorway to the left of it, black and yawning.

I deleted it.

#

Probably the scariest image RJ sent to me that week, that he fully knew I had to show to Lindsay, who was going to cc the whole class, it was one of his dad that he’d doctored.

It was in the hall again, like the rest—my guess is he was using his mom’s tall mirror at the turn into the living room to orient, keep the lateral in check—but it was different in that it was just static.

Over our cheese-puffed, brainstormy weekend, we’d agreed that the suggestion of motion, of something approaching the phone, that that was all *kinds* of scary. Better than something you were walking away from, anyway.

But this one, this time, it was what he was walking away from.

It was his dad, way back by his bedroom—RJ’s mom’s long gone, of course; I don’t even remember her, so much—and he was just sitting against that wall, his legs splayed out in front of him, his head cocked over, an obvious kind of stain on the wall.

Lindsay looked up to me in Life Science when she saw it, and I looked away, wasn’t thinking about money so much anymore.

That afternoon, I found reasons to be outside, stayed there just piddling until RJ's dad pulled up, lifted his briefcase to me on his way in.

I waved back, looked back to my house, and went inside to check if RJ had uploaded that particular shot to the hidden directory.

He hadn't.

It was just the stock hundred we'd come up with together. They seemed so tame now.

I was about to back out of that terminal—already had, really, had to key back in—when I caught the tail-end of that list of files I'd just called up.

The count was a hundred, like I'd been expecting, and they were named sequentially after the *sneak_up* lead-ins—clever clever—but there was another directory there now. *Inside* the protected directory.

I tried "Lindsay" as password, but it wasn't her this time.

I tabbed up, then, went root to try to at least see how many characters this password might have, but I suck in the shell, and the architecture, it was all different now, was some kind of chutes and ladders game, a labyrinth, one with dead-ends and bottomless wells and something that, when I tried to open it, locked up my system.

What had RJ done?

I rebooted, was about to just rush that file system, hit it with everything I had, but then that image of RJ's dad was in my head again.

The bedroom door. The door to RJ's dad's bedroom.

I pulled my phone, called the picture up.

The doorway was on the wrong side.

Wasn't it?

Yes. I'd practically grown up over there. RJ's dad had encouraged it, even, after his last encounter with my dad.

But how could it be on the wrong side?

I stood, walked out into our own hall. It wasn't as long as RJ's, and had tables and junk all cluttered in it, but still.

I stood at the end, right by my doorway, closed my eyes and took a takeback pic.

Just normal.

I looked through the walls, to the memory of RJ's house, and then to this hall.
The mirror.
He had the mirror.
I dragged my mom's in from her closet—she was out walking, like always,
'because it was daylight'—set it up against the turn into the living room.
Already I didn't like this.
I could see myself too well. Like I was at the end of the hall, waiting for myself.
But screw it.
This wasn't for me, this was for the app. This was for RJ.
I walked up to my reflection, held my phone down and backwards, snapped
another pic.
Nothing. Just the usual.
I turned around, sure I was missing something—did RJ's dad have some old
brown-and-white photographs framed on the wall on the left side?—and lowered my
phone, didn't realize the app was still on until I felt the camera burr, the image
processing.
I held it up.
It was my hall, reversed.
Except I was standing there right in the middle of it.
“What are you doing?” I said out loud, to RJ, and just then my dad stepped into
the hall in his workshirt, looked from the mirror to me and didn't even say anything. Just
brushed past, shut his door behind him.

#

The day Lindsay gave me a ride home was the day RJ had to spend in the main office.
There were counselors and principals and even a city police.

It wasn't for the takeback shot in circulation today—a benign old image of Cedric
he'd blacked-out, let bleed at the edges, like he was loping up behind, his mouth
glittering—but for the one of his dad, shot in the head.

“What do you think they'll do to him?” Lindsay said, both hands on the wheel.

“He's just screwing around,” I told her.

Still, the support forum on our site had a few members now. From school, mostly, because he'd put the brand on the bottom of the images he was texting.

When Lindsay pulled up to my curb, I didn't get out at first.

I turned to her, was in some level of prep for asking her to maybe hold back on forwarding any more of the messages, that I needed to talk to RJ first, but then her face was right there.

I bumped into her, pulled back smiling.

And then we sort of kissed.

I rose from the car, drifted across the lawn, and, once the front door was closed my dad clapped me on the shoulder and then shook my whole body. It was in congratulations.

"A real piece," he said, my mom standing right there in the kitchen doorway, "you need any, you know, any—" but I was already in my room by then.

That night I trolled through our hidden directory again, was going to crack into that Area 51 if I had to use a crowbar, but then there was a new version of the app waiting right there, shuffled in with the images.

I put it on my phone, laid back on my bed so there'd be nothing behind me, and clicked through.

All that was different was the theme. We'd had it just standard silver and blue, tried and true, but now all the backgrounds were shades of black, and all the words—there weren't many—were a deep maroon.

The update log in the readme said that it had been blacked out for night use. So that glow from the screen wouldn't give you away.

I looked to the front of the house. To me, standing in the window, looking into my phone's bright display, having to squint from it after studying RJ in the bushes for so long.

The next day he was back in the halls, no problem.

The first text he sent explained that he was having to throttle back for the moment. So it was going to be dead dog pictures for the foreseeable future.

That's a complicated word to text, too, 'foreseeable.'

The attached image was another Cedric snap, in the same backwards hall, his toothless old mouth glinting in the washed-out sixty-watt.

He was closer now.

#

“How are you cloaking yourself?” I asked him, finally.

We were in the bushes, standing on a bed of cigarette butts.

Our beers were balanced on the headstone. RJ had carried them right out the front door.

“How am I what?” he asked back, squinting through the smoke.

“You’re using the mirror,” I told him.

He cocked his head over, said, “That one?”

We stepped out of the bushes and he hit his flashlight widget.

His mom’s ancient old mirror was leaned up against the side of the house.

“It was sucking the light away,” he said, then leaned back to the headstone.

“Your dad throw a fit?” I asked. Because his dad always did, when it came to his mom’s things.

“I told him it was scaring me,” RJ said, pinching his cigarette away like a tough guy, grinding it out on the bottom of his shoe. “Why, you want it?”

I looked out to the black monolith of his house, not a single light on.

Four hours ago, his dad had got back from work for the ten-thousandth time.

I shook my head no, I didn’t want it.

“So we ready to go live then?” he said.

“Sure,” I told him. “Whatever.”

He nodded cool, we touched beer cans, and then he was gone, back to it, and I was still standing there when my phone got a text.

Lindsay, probably. Test tomorrow.

I was half right.

It was a long shot, blurry, from a made-up number, but still, you could just make out the two of us in her car, her mouth pressed against mine in the daylight, right there by the trashcans and the mailboxes, where RJ and me had used to build big complicated ramps to launch our bikes up into the sky.

Only one of us came down, though.

I'm sorry, RJ.

#

Two days later, two days before it happened, Lindsay edged down beside me before Life Science, tipped her laptop over so I could scope it.

It was the bulletin board site. Mine and RJ's support thread, the faq, the bio of the app, all our best guesses at marketing.

"It's just for college," I told her.

"No, look," she said.

There was a new thread. It was the series of Cedric pics, like, if you glued them to the corner of a tablet of paper then flipped through them, you could see him creaking along again.

It was the next step.

Our pie-in-the-sky idea with the app, it had been to take not one shot, but five or six in a burst, then plant the same *sneak_up* image into each, a little closer, a little bigger, and *then*, when the user opened that file, thinking they were just getting a static pic, they'd instead get an image that all of the sudden stuttered ahead, so much closer to them.

That was the pay version, of course. Because you've got to have a pay version.

But now RJ was giving it away for free.

"No, this," Lindsay said, and scrolled down.

It was some kind of blog, or a long post.

No: the bios we were supposed to be attaching. The faces behind the app.

I don't remember RJ's exactly, word-for-word, and it's gone now, of course, is evidence in some file cabinet, has been scrubbed from the net, but I wouldn't want to remember it in that much detail, either.

Because RJ couldn't scare us with pictures anymore, what with everybody watching, he was using words, now. Trying to come up with a story to explain why Cedric was dogging him like that.

It wasn't even close to how it went down, though, the Cedric thing.

I mean, I had been there for it, kind of. It was right after RJ had moved in beside us, when his mom was still around.

Then one day, maybe after they'd unpacked their last box, she just wasn't. Even though her car keys were on the hook, her shoes in their place, her sunglasses (it was summer) by the sink. There was never any note, any ATM photo, any goodbyes.

In the middle of it all, too, when everybody in the neighborhood was volunteering their house to be searched—except my dad, of course, who knew his rights, and didn't so much need the law knowing about his gun collection—in the middle of all that, Cedric had turned up dead.

It was bad timing, but he was old, so it made a sort of sense, everybody guessed. Especially if he was grieving.

What didn't make sense—to my dad, at least—was the granite mini-headstone RJ's dad came home with. For the *dog*. After his wife had already obviously split with the vacuum cleaner salesman. But—this is still my dad—anybody who'd commemorate an animal like that, maybe his wife was just being reasonable, right?

And I'd never even once seen a vacuum cleaner salesman.

And, the whole thing—Cedric, RJ's mom—that whole first impossible year of craziness, of running to the door every time it rang, of buying longer and longer cords for the phone, it was never something RJ and me talked about. How do you, right? Still, that was where we met, right there at that dog funeral, so it's not like we could forget it either. My mom had walked me across to stand there with the new kid while RJ's dad droned on and on about the dog, really talking about his wife. Finally, I'd even cried, and RJ had edged over, stood close enough to me that we were kind of touching.

Ever since then, you know. Joined at the hip, all that. Battleship combatants for life.

But friendships forged over a dead pet, I guess they've got a built-in expiration date. This re-do RJ had spun up of what happened to Cedric, and just to sell a piece of software, just to make everybody in senior class finally notice him—it had to be over, me and him.

And Cedric was the tame part, too.

The real story was what had really happened to his mom that day, what the neighborhood had been waiting to find out for years. But RJ and his dad didn't even *have* a garbage disposal back then, I don't think. Maybe a therapist would see some kind of

call or plea in what-all RJ made happen to her in his fake bio, I don't know. That doesn't mean he'd turn his back on RJ for even a moment, though.

According to the post, Cedric hadn't died of old age or, as RJ's dad wanted, of sadness either. His spirit wasn't out wherever RJ's mom was now, keeping her safe.

The way RJ had it, it was the rings that had killed Cedric. And the necklaces. The earrings. Three brooches, a handful of bracelets, because garbage disposals can't chew metal.

But neither could Cedric, so it had to be forced down with this little mini-Louisville Slugger he had. Piece after piece, all RJ's mom's jewelry. *A little internal bleeding for the family hound*—I remember that part. And not on purpose.

When I was done with it that first time, that only time, I shook my head no, my eyes wet, and pulled Lindsay's laptop shut as gently as I could, like I didn't want everybody to hear.

"Do you want to just sleep at my house?" she said, the worry there in her eyes. "My parents are, you know. This weekend."

I swallowed, tested my voice in my head before using it, asking if she wanted me to bring a movie, something like that.

"Can you get any, like, anything to drink, you think?" she said.

"You like beer?" I asked back, still not looking right at her but into the future.

Anything was possible.

3.

That afternoon—this was Friday, the Friday before the rest of my life—RJ opened their utility door, caught me at his dad's refrigerator, my arms clinking with garage beer.

"I'll pay you back," I told him.

"Remember Zelda?" he said back, not even a little concerned about the beer, or his dad.

"Which one?" I asked.

We'd raced through them all.

"Fourth grade," he said.

NES. His dad had insisted we start there, even though it had already been a serious antique by our third grade.

He was right, too. It was the right place to begin.

I got the last beer I could carry, balanced it on top and eased the refrigerator door shut with my calf.

“Gannon with two n’s . . .” I said, then looked all the way up the steps to him. “So, this mean you’re back, man?”

“Where have I been?” he said, something mocking in his voice.

“We need to take it live,” I said, catching a beer, and he heard the goodbye in my tone, opened his hand for me to waltz out into whatever this night held for me, and started the garage door down before I was halfway across the drive.

Because I was suddenly sure that if I looked back, I’d see Cedric trotting up out of the past, barely going to make it under the door, I looked back, fumbled the one bottle that kept getting away. It shattered at my feet, the door sealed itself to the concrete, and I wanted so bad to scrape that brown glass over, into the little gutter RJ’s dad always edged between the drive and the grass, then maybe get the hose to take care of the guilty smell. But Lindsay. Lindsay Lindsay Lindsay. And RJ’s dad knew we were into that beer anyway, didn’t he? He had to. It was understood.

Just before she picked me up, my dad surely driving home from his shift, his face grim as ever, his talk radio whispering to him—I was having to time this so perfect—my phone buzzed with a text.

It was the lamp in my living room, the image I’d deleted. It was just standing there. Different anonymous number.

I looked to RJ’s house and the one light that was on, it went off.

Pulling away with Lindsay, then, we passed RJ’s dad, and, right before she turned right for her house, I caught RJ’s dad’s brake lights flaring. So he wouldn’t run over that shattered bottle on his concrete. So he could get out, be sure he was seeing what he was seeing. So he could walk inside, ask RJ what he knew about this, RJ looking up at him from his laptop, a tolerant grin already pasted on his face.

I shut my eyes, rubbed a cold beer against my face, and I’m sure it goes without saying here that, when we got to her place, her parents were gone like she’d said—that

was never the part anybody lied about—but four of her friends *were* there, and they *had* brought movies.

They held their hands over the back of the couch for the beer, laughed and giggled, and I slept in Lindsay's little brother's bedroom, could at least say now that I had spent the night at Lindsay's, even if it was in dinosaur sheets. But I walked home the next morning without waking any of them, telling myself in my head that this was part of it, that this is how you grow up, that you can't be a complete adult until you've acquired the requisite amount of shame, and all I was doing was placing one foot in front of the other, so that I heard that distinct little *pop* at nearly the exact moment I realized I'd just stepped up onto my driveway.

That pop, that shot, it had come from next door. From RJ's. It was the sound the counselors and principals and police had all seen coming, that they were probably all ready for.

I stepped back to the middle of our yard, could feel the parentheses forming around my eyes, the hole starting in my chest, in my life, and then, like he'd been listening for this to happen for nine years now, like he could already see RJ's dad slumping down against the wall by his bedroom, my dad straight-armed our door out, was walking down our flagstones with purpose.

Down along his right leg was the revolver he kept tucked into the seat of his nonsense chair.

In the bushes then, I heard something, a rustling, and my face prickled, my eyes caught on fire, and I knew as true as I've ever known anything that Cedric was about to push through, that his mouth was going to be bright with jewelry, and for a moment I even saw just that—the gold, splintering the early morning light—but then it was RJ, half his face dark with blown-back blood, his chest rising and falling, his dad's small pistol already raised, his pace quick behind it, like he'd told himself he couldn't do this, but maybe he could if he just walked really fast and pretended it was all a movie.

He was already pulling the trigger too, and it was soundless, or, all I could hear, it was all the women's rings he was wearing, clacking against the trigger guard.

The first shot hit our brick wall where the roses used to grow, and the second whipped into the grass by my right foot, and the third slapped into my dad's shoulder,

spun him around a little, this sideways red plume hanging behind him now, just like a paintball that had gone all the way through somehow.

This had been coming too long for that to slow him down, though.

He was walking and shooting as well, pointing his gun like a finger at RJ, like it was some hard-earned truth he was telling him here. Like this lecture wasn't over yet, son.

They met on the oil-stained concrete of our driveway, almost gun-to-gun, and neither stopped until they were empty, and just before RJ slumped over, back into the bushes, the best parts of him spread all over my yard, he looked over to me like he was seeing me over Cedric's grave for the first time, seeing that he wasn't going to have do this alone after all, and I could see in his eyes that he was saving me, with this. From my dad. That our summer romance wasn't over yet.

And then the rest.

Our app, dead. Our web page, dead. RJ and my dad, dead. Cedric's grave empty. The school in mourning, extra counselors bussing in, news vans lurking. My mom getting a triangle flag she just put in the top of the closet. Somebody down at the grocery store saluting me so that I had to duck down an aisle I didn't even want.

Over, done with, gone, end of program, reboot.

Except.

Three days ago, thumbing through my app drawer, I lucked onto ours. The last version RJ had rigged, the black-backgrounded one, with the maroon letters so faint you had to kind of just trust they were there.

It was a terrible design. The old people would hate it.

It was going to go viral.

I'd never even tried it, though.

I hovered the pad of my thumb over it, knew I was going to light it up, that I had to, for RJ, that I owed him that, but then made the command decision that if I could see the scaffolding first, the haunted house wouldn't get to me.

I sucked the app onto my laptop, scrolled through the code, lost myself in the elegance again, the simplicity. The innocence, right? All it was was a camera with a different trigger, then a bit of post-capture image processing, a harmless call out to a

hidden directory. It might get us into some school for marketing, but, as far as programming went, it was practically juvenile.

It might get *me* into marketing school, I meant.

And then I found RJ's last fix.

He'd commented it out, even, in case we wanted to go back. Our routine was, when combing each other's lines, the second one through would erase the notations as he went.

It meant this version, technically, it wasn't complete yet.

I arrowed my cursor up to his trailing escape slash, highlighted the whole note, inverting the text of the last thing he'd said in here . . . what? Two weeks ago? I unpacked his cryptic timestamp in my head. The first week of school, yeah. When I was in Life Science, getting a lab partner. I bit my lower lip in, shook my head. Who even timestamps their comments, right? RJ, that's who. He always did it, for—his words—*his* posterity's sake. And then he'd reach back into his pants, for his ass, and try to slap me on the shoulder, really rub his hand in.

I backspaced the comment, left the cursor blinking there at his new line, his last innovation.

All it did was pull a horizontal flip on the image. The easiest thing in the world.

It was why his hall had started turning up backwards. It was software, not the mirror, not the hardware.

I saved it, then saved it again to make it stick. The cursor just blinking up at me like I was being stupid here.

It was right.

But still—something didn't fit. It wasn't Area 51, either. Area 51 had been hidden in the *hidden* directory, and the hidden directory was gone, burned down by the police to keep sickos from leaving digital roses on its stoop.

At first I thought it was that one line of code—code that was explicitly just reversing whatever the camera had captured—it wasn't nearly enough to scrub RJ from the image, from the reflection he was backed up against to reverse his hall, but then I had to thump my temples with the heels of my hands: there *was* no mirror, idiot. Get off that horse already.

And then one of those moments of calmness hit me, where I could feel myself breathing, could feel the rasp of all those air molecules diving down my throat.

Yes.

I fumbled my phone up, my fingers shaking, and peeled through the texts he'd sent. The images. They were all in our forever-long thread. I snapped it off to give me a useable scrollbar and paged through, holding all those air molecules in now.

It couldn't be, though.

Each image, each snap he'd taken of that long hall behind him, each time, the lateral was perfect. The center of focus, the bullseye, it was that back wall where they'd found his dad. In every image, there was the exact same amount of wall on each side, like the perspective, it had to be perfect to tunnel through this.

Had he—had he cropped all the images, then loaded them back on his phone to blast to me and the rest of the senior class? But, he would know that the same angle, the same positioning, that would kill the scare just the same as using the same five stock images.

Then it must mean he'd masking-taped around his feet on the carpet, stood in the exact same place each time, and, I don't know, used a magic marker on his mom's mirror, one that would match up with the back of his hand to get the phone in the same place time after time.

Except there was no mirror.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

And even if he'd done that, still, it would take fifty images to get one that had the exact same angle as last time.

I was breathing hard now. Too hard.

Was he using one shot of the empty hall as backdrop to them all?

It was the only thing that made any kind of sense.

I dove into the code again, deeper than deep, looking for any routine that would allow sampling from the same background.

Nothing.

Of course he could have done it all on his laptop, right? To what purpose, though? He was more careful than that, would never make a background come off re-used and tired.

Then there was only one other option.

He'd cracked the side-to-side thing, just not commented it out. Or he'd lucked into it, maybe pasted one algorithm before instead of after another, so that it got first bite at the variables, and that had made all the difference.

There was nothing in the code, though, even when I used some ancient Perl to compare the old app to the new one.

Except for that one line, and the style junk with the colors, which was in the stylesheet anyway, they were the same.

I slammed the laptop, paced my room, pushed my phone against my forehead like I could force myself to think, here.

If you've never cried a bit from coding, then you've never really coded.

It goes the other way too, though.

The rush of cracking it, of cueing into the Beauty, the Truth, it's all the heroin any junkie could ever need.

And I was so close.

And RJ, he'd been there already, I could see that now. It was where all his calmness had come from. Take my dad's beer, it doesn't matter. Go with her. Let's take it live, infect the world with it.

I stopped pacing, stared into my phone.

That was it.

I was just looking at the scaffolding, was stuck behind the curtain. Maybe the key was in the product, though.

I touched the app, breathed life into it, and was going for the living room, to snap a takeback pic from the front window, see if it would lateral up with the one I'd taken before, but of course that one was gone, deleted once and then deleted again, when it showed back up, ha ha, RJ.

And the living room would probably be too big anyway.

Instead, I just stepped out of my bedroom, into the hall. It wasn't as long as RJ's, but it had to be the standard width. There had to *be* a standard width. Maybe that mattered.

I pulled my door shut, turned around to face it, lowered my phone to vertical and let the shutter snap.

Then I cocked my wrist forward, disturbing the gyroscope, and dropped it down straight again, the camera burring completion in my palm.

Of course.

I did it again, to be sure, and again.

We'd never built in a kill switch. I was going to have to go back in, release the gyroscope after the first pic. If I didn't, the processor would lag, trying to run post-production on a stack of polaroids.

You can't think of everything, though.

Before opening my door again, I checked behind me. Just to be sure.

Nothing.

I crashed on my bed, my back wedged into the corner like always, headphones cupping my ears, and checked the images.

They were empty.

I mean, my hall was there, and there was a smudge of disturbance at about chest-level, telling me something had tried to load in there. But it had aborted.

This is the way it goes, yeah. You duck in for a quick-fix, just to see how something works, and then nothing's working.

It was probably the banner's feed slot that was jacking with the fade-in, too. I was strict with always using all jpeg or all png or all gif in whatever I wrote, but RJ always said he could keep it straight, it's not like he was going to do something global with them all at once, right?

Except the app *was* doing something global with the array it was pulling from the hidden directory.

Oh, wait: the hidden directory that *wasn't there*.

Of course it couldn't load the images.

Still, the way we'd written it, there should have been a big distortion in the hall, not a small, unenlarged one. And, if this app was going to work, if it was going to generate revenue, then that banner needed to quit jacking with things.

And, because we didn't have sponsors yet, the banner RJ had dummied in, just to make sure it fit, it was Zelda. The old one.

It made me lean over, see if my NES console was still in the corner somewhere, tangled in its cords. Maybe one last turn through Hyrule would be the right send-off for RJ. The right thank you. Because—it's stupid, but we'd never really left it behind. That first day RJ's dad had mentioned red light, green light to us in the kitchen? Why I'd been the one sitting on the island, not RJ, it was because of Zelda. In the NES version he'd introduced me to in third grade, he'd always been fascinated with the boulders, with how, if you walked around some of them three times, then came back the other way, a door would open up.

For us in elementary, the same way the floor lamp in my living room had always been the robber, come to take me away, his kitchen island had always been our boulder. One time, spending the night, he even told me that's where his mom had really gone, he was pretty sure. That he had walked wrong to the refrigerator, gone back for the butter he'd forgot by the toaster, then gone back the other way around the island, made some secret door swing open in her closet, and she had just reached through, fallen the rest of the way.

It's stupid, but it's real. Or, it was to us.

"You shit," I said to him, just out loud, for making me think of all that again, but then . . . could that be it? This app *had* lived on RJ's rig at the end, after all. What if the little image-reverse he'd built in, what if that was Link, turning back to go the opposite way around the boulder now? What if the doubletwist plus one necessary to open whatever door, what if it was just holding your phone upside down (1), backwards (2), and *then* flipping that image (3), which was already under so much strain just to stay straight?

That was just three things, though.

The boulders always required a fourth.

I checked my phone just before it shook in my hand, reminding me the images were ready—RJ’s idea.

I scrolled through them, still empty, and then the phone shook again, which was one more time than we’d coded for. Had RJ sneaked a *reminder* vibration in as well? But where? It would be scary, though, like the app was insisting, was trying to warn the user.

But one thing at a time.

I slammed the pics onto my laptop to try to figure if that distortion in the air could help me diagnose things.

It didn’t.

The scaled-back pictures that shouldn’t have been there, as their directory had been burned—there they were, stacked on my desktop. I clicked the top one, had a bigger screen now, and could zoom, see that it was just the crawling girl, scaled back to bug-size, hanging there in the air of the hall, not even remotely scary.

“Are you local or what?” I asked the top one, and thumbed through my phone’s cache.

No.

I wheeled the crawling girl close then far, close then far, like she was coming for me.

It wasn’t scary.

Still, before getting back to the real work of the night—it was completely possible my phone had cached those hundred images in some way I was too tired to lock onto—I decided to make sure the sampling was truly random, anyway, wasn’t just the first few from the array. Because that wouldn’t be nearly so easy a fix. Cracking RJ’s fake randomness, the 128 bit keys he liked to paste in, pretend he was hinging stuff on—it would be easier to just start over.

And maybe those keys were the source of the problem, even. Or the secret to keeping the lateral straight.

The top pic I’d already been seeing, of course. Crawling girl. Next was the shadow fingers we’d rigged reaching around a corner, but, just like all the *sneak_up* images in RJ’s hall, the app had placed them perfectly somehow, right on the edge of the doorway opening onto the living room.

Maybe the width of the hall did matter.

I nodded, went to the next.

It was the smoke. Like a progression.

Maybe that was a good idea, too, if we ever did that fake animation on the paid version: sequence the stock images, build some logic in that wouldn't let this one pop unless that one had.

I clicked ahead, looking at my door instead of the screen for no real reason, and, when I came back to the laptop I felt a new hollowness in the deadspace behind my jaws, pushed the screen away so hard it shut.

My lungs were trying to hyperventilate or something.

No, my head, my *head* was doing that.

Same difference.

I looked to the door again. It was still shut.

I came back to the laptop, its side-light telling me it wasn't asleep yet, no. That it was waiting for me.

What I'd seen, what was there, it was—but it couldn't be.

A boy, about twelve. Washed-out and black and white. Skinny, shirtless, his pants just hanging off him.

RJ in sixth grade?

I wanted it be him, yes, because our summer romance wasn't over. Then *he* could be the fourth time around the boulder, right? The app only hits hyperdrive or whatever after satisfying 1, 2, 3, and a strange fourth, which, like Cedric had been for him, could be somebody close to you, dead. A blood sacrifice, to lubricate those doors that shouldn't open.

But it wasn't RJ.

RJ would never pull a lampshade over his head and stand there like that, just waiting for me to see him.

It was my dad when he was a kid. I knew. All his anger, his rules, his haircuts and talks, it was all there in the empty spaces between his ribs. The muscles that hadn't grown in. The bruises, the white lines of old cuts, burns above the sleeve lines.

I shook my head no, please, not him, not this.

Anybody but him.

But it couldn't be, either.

I was still being stupid, like with the mirror. Had to be.

I breathed down to a rate that didn't scream panic, watched my hand cross that bedspread space between me and the laptop, and opened it.

The image was gone, the hall empty again.

Was that worse or better, though?

“Mom?” I called out, then called again, louder, and then my phone shook in my hand again, stiffening that whole side of my body.

“No, no,” I said to the phone, and only opened it because I was afraid it was going to ring if I didn't, which would definitely set me screaming, kickstart the kind of feedback loop I could never claw my way back from.

There was no image on my screen, no lamp-headed boy.

Just the app, waiting, primed. Insisting.

I turned the phone around, to see the lens—maybe RJ had figured out how to sonar the flash to control the lateral?—and just when it got vertical enough, it snapped a takeback pic of me.

I dropped it again, but it was still plugged into my laptop.

The image resolved on my screen.

It was me, like it should have been, but behind me, instead of the glare of my wall, my posters, my bulletin board, there was all this open space. Years and years of emptiness to fall through.

And then the light on my ceiling fan sucked back into itself.

I opened my mouth to scream but before I could the bulb flashed back, dying, bathing the room in its fast blue light.

Standing at the end of my bed was the lampshade boy.

I straightened my legs, pushed back, away from him, and my phone rang. It was the single loudest thing ever.

I fumbled it up before its ringer could split the world in two, slammed it to the side of my head and, in her sleep voice, my mom asked if I'd been calling her, if I needed anything, where was I?

I tried to say something, to tell her, to tell her all of it, but, in the glow of my laptop screen, in the light from my phone, the room was empty again.

For now.