THE END OF TIME ON ROSEWYLD LANE

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I HOPE THEY find my seven-year-old son dead and decomposed down to the dirty bones soon. I hope he's so far gone by now that they have to identify him from dental records and there's nothing left to clue into what he suffered before his body was hidden. I pray for this at least once a day whether God still listens or not. I've never meant a prayer more in my life. If he won't answer that one, I might switch it up and ask that I'm found dead soon. I don't care so much where or how, but as far as the when goes, Jesus Fucking Christ, let it be soon.

I pass the turn for our street sort of by accident and sort of on purpose. I make the next left off Samsonn Courte onto Hollend Avenue. This street has grassy medians full of flowers. Shit, is it time for flowers to bloom again? My wife is going to be beside herself. More than usual, I mean.

Goddamn it, I don't want to believe this is what usual is for us now, but I guess that's exactly what it is.

I miss him. We all do, of course. It goes without saying. My wife is a shell of her former self.

Cameryn misses the hell out of her younger brother too. She comes alive a little around her friends, but there is still a darkness in her, a storm that never stops brewing behind her eyes. I'd love it if she'd lash out at me like my wife has a few times. I don't want another female in the house screaming at me, but it would be good to see that storm break inside her before it eats her alive, before it turns her into her mother, I guess I mean. When she's at home, all that life drains out of her in an instant. It makes me fear that any glimmer of happiness she shows away from our family is more of an act and the brooding, lost girl that stares through things instead of at them is the reality. There are boys who prey on brokenness like that.

God help us, the world is full of fucking predators hunting every street in the world.

I reach the northern end of Hollend. Without much thought, I turn

west on Absynthe Way. I want to say that street is named after a drink laced with opium, but I don't know. I feel like I'm in a drugged haze as I wave at the Philmoors working in their yard, all their kids accounted for. They're good parents. Better than me, I suppose. My absent son used to play with their kids. Such a little boy to haunt such a wide stretch of streets and life.

Fuck.

I should have been paying attention. I should have known better. Everyone tells me it's not my fault. My wife doesn't say it and my daughter doesn't say it anymore, but everyone else does. I can't believe it though because the truth hurts, and I need to punish myself with the kind of truth that hurts the most. Forgiving myself for something like this feels wormy and rotten, like a body hidden in the woods after God knows what.

We were loading up the car for a family trip that day. It wasn't the Disney trip. That was supposed to be in December—December two years ago. Cameryn was being nasty about having to go, but her brother was all joy. He stood on top of a root and called for his sister to look at him balance. She held up her hands beside her head and shook them, her eyes bulging with older sibling frustration.

As we loaded her bike on the rack behind the van. He was riding his bike around and singing a song about the pirate's life being for him. I don't even know where he heard it. On YouTube or in memes, I guess. She kept yelling at him to shut up. I took her aside and talked to her about being kind to him. I said that in the future they would need to count on each other because we wouldn't always be around, most of her friends now wouldn't be in her life forever, but her brother would always be there for her. I actually said that shit on that day. I think that last scolding haunts her too. I know it's a permanent sour taste in the back of my throat.

On his next loop around our driveway, I told him we needed to load up his bike and he said, "One more time around."

I didn't say yes or no, but I let him go as we packed other things. Some people tell me it's a false memory, a manifestation of my guilt after the fact, but I don't think so. I distinctly remember thinking that something might happen to him while we were fucking around with the car. I mostly thought about him getting hit by a car, but that underpinning fear of your kid getting grabbed by someone was bubbling under the surface of my mind then too.

Our street is sort of a culdesac and sort of not. There are trails for golf carts and hiking, but a couple are wide enough for cars. It's a maze of those trails through the little wooded areas between streets. People should have seen if he was taken up one of them, but no one did.

It was my fucking responsibility to keep up with him, not theirs.

A car honks behind me and wakes me up from my fugue. There's no light where Absynthe meets the four lanes plus a middle turn of Coremyyn

Highway, but I'm sitting there like I'm waiting on one. I don't bother waving an apology, but pull across two lanes in a gap in traffic that is probably a little too tight and drive south, going slow in the fast lane.

He didn't come back and he didn't come back as we finished packing. I finally walked out to the end of the drive and called him like a dog. I walked out and tried to hunt him down, but he'd already been hunted. We found the bike, but not him. I ran around calling for him until the neighbors came out. They started calling and spreading out in an unorganized search. Most of them would join the official organized search that would follow, but would turn up nothing. It felt like forever, but it was probably only five minutes before I called the police in a panic. One of the neighbors had to take the phone and relay the information for me, because I couldn't hold it together.

I expected the police to say they had to wait before they started looking, but they looked right away for what it was worth. They found one neighbor growing pot in their basement. They found another senile old lady neglecting animals. They found a guy hiding in his girlfriend's house with an out of state warrant for car theft. But they never found my son.

He expressed so much joy that day and it was the last he ever felt.

There's a light at the turn for Samsonn Courte. I ease into the turn lane, get the arrow pretty quickly, and travel east toward our street again.

I expected them to suspect me. They always suspect the father or husband in cases like this. If they ever did, they never said anything.

I walked those cart trails forever. I was always looking for a shoe. I don't know why exactly, but I always expected to find one of his shoes. I reminded myself to not touch it, just to call the police, but I never found anything all those combing search parties failed to find.

I drove around, sometimes alone, sometimes with my wife, with the van still packed like we were just going to find him, pick him up, and take that trip. I don't even remember when we finally unpacked. We never stopped looking though. We never packed up his room. We still have that bike in the garage if he comes back at age nine to sing of pirates' lives again.

We canceled Disney. He vanished before November 1st, so we were able to get all our money back on deposits.

I hold the steering wheel tighter and tighter until my knuckles turn white like the old cliché. I grit my teeth until my jaw hurts. I pass our street again and signal the turn north up Hollend Avenue yet again.

I floated the idea late last year for my wife and Cameryn going to Disney again maybe with some of Cameryn's friends. A girls' weekend or hell, two weeks, if they wanted. Cameryn's still young enough for it. She'd be away from home and with her friends, the conditions under which she is most alive, even if the darkness remains behind the eyes. That idea went nowhere. My wife didn't even bother to run it by our daughter for her opinion.

I know what she's thinking. If we went to Disney and he showed back up at the house finally to find his family had moved on without him . . .

He used to have dreams. Nightmares. He used to have nightmares.

Left on Absynthe. I pass the Philmoors again. No one waves this time. I can't remember how many times I've passed them, but it's more than once today, and I've followed this same flight path on previous occasions.

In one nightmare, he wakes up to find the house empty. We've gone to Disney without him and he's sad. I don't know if my wife remembers him telling us this, but I do.

In another nightmare, one that occurred closer to his disappearance, the doorbell rings. We had and still have one of those fancy smart doorbells with a camera that announces through the speakers, "Someone is at door."

He imitated the voice perfectly when he was telling us the story. It gave me chills. It gives me a chill every time I hear it now. My wife runs to the door every time like she expects it to be him. I want to get rid of it, but we don't change anything at our house anymore.

In his dream, he went to check the door and no one was out there. He goes to look for us and all three of us are gone.

The doorbell rings again with that voice echoing through the nightmare version of our house. This time, a man in a mask busts through the door with a knife trying to stab him.

I go south on Coremyyn Highway and ease into the turn lane to wait on the light.

Goddamn it all, I know he thought of those dreams when he was grabbed by whoever took him. I fucking know it. His greatest fear revealed in that nightmare world in his head was that we wouldn't be there and we weren't. I wasn't.

Left on Samsonn.

I used to see kids on milk cartons, kids on posters, kids on the back of junk mail shoppers, kids on missing person shows rolled out for our morbid entertainment, and I felt nothing. I don't feel much now, but I feel the terrifying void of his absence.

Passed my turn to the most haunted house on the fucking Earth.

There is something horrific in the nightmare world of "missing" that can't be matched with all the horror movie splatter that the sickest minds in the fantasy world of special effects can produce. I might feel differently if they finally find what remains of him, but I doubt it.

Left onto Hollend. The goddamn flowers are blooming.

He's not alive. He's not dead. He's a fucking unanswered question.

It's the most indescribably painful emptiness, that unanswered question.

Left on Absynthe. The Philmoors have gone inside to keep their children safe from the rolling cloud of curse that surrounds me, a curse that makes children vanish without a trace.

We can't move on. We're not allowed to. Because he could be. He can't be, of course, I know that, but I'm not allowed to admit that. People are found in basements in places like Cleveland all the time, so why not here?

South on Coremyyn. A truck swerves to miss me, laying down on his horn. I don't even flinch. I hope someone you love goes missing.

I will never think of him as nine because he'll never stop being seven. Never. When we talk about him to others, he's nine now. If I slip up and say he was seven, my wife won't forgive that. Our marriage is probably doomed anyway, but that slip-up would speed it along. Who are we to thrive and survive when our innocent little boy wasn't allowed to?

Left onto Samsonn and I already know I'm passing our street again before I get there. No white-knuckled anticipation this time.

If I allow myself to fully let go, even for the sake of healing, and he did turn up, the police did bring him back to us alive, how could I forgive that? I gave up on him just like in his darkest nightmares where someone was at the door and we weren't there to save him.

Left on Hollend without even having to think about it. I hope no kid comes running out into the street because I'm barely paying attention. Take your children inside and keep them safe, you fools.

If I hold onto him and pretend it is hope, but he never returns again, I'll be tortured my entire life, but that's what I deserve because I fucked up. It's my fault. I failed him.

Left on Absynthe. The street is deserted. No witnesses if someone else is snatched. The fucking Philmoors in their house safe with their safe kids, I'd trade every last one of them to get my son back or to even get proof he's dead at this point.

I don't even want to believe he is still alive because I can't allow myself to imagine the living nightmare he'd have to be in. Sure, some bereaved mother who lost her baby might have grabbed him as a replacement. He might be brainwashed to believe we are gone and she's his real mother. He might grow old and one day find us with a family of his own, all that missing life partially paid for in the end. Maybe we'll all make that belated trip to Disney finally with our new grandkids.

But—left onto Coremyyn Highway—that's never going to happen.

Because that's not what happened. I know it in my heart.

If he's still alive, he's going through unspeakable torture. He's alone in his worst nightmare where we're just gone and he's on his own with the masked monster that keeps him like an animal, like a toy. Worse than death if he's been in a joyless hell for the last two years.

Left on goddamned Samsonn.

I'd rather imagine his bones in soil that's fed by his rotten flesh.

Missed the turn again. Surprise. There's a haunted house down there waiting on a haunted street. There's a bicycle but no boy to go with it. If

there is a boy, he's too big for that bike by now, but nothing changes on that street, in that house. Not a fucking thing. All the clocks went tick but never tock.

No one is allowed to feel joy again. The missing boy was the last one to feel it, in fact.

Hollend, Absyhthe, Coremyyn, Samsonn, Hollend, Absynthe . . .

I realize to my horror that I really am paying attention. My head hurts from my eyes darting back and forth so much. I'm looking around. I'm looking for him. Sometimes I'm looking for a shoe still, but I'm looking for him. I'm looking for him at seven years old so I can put him in the car, buckle him in, and take him home. I'm still driving around looking. Because he's never aged. Because time is holding its breath for his precious soul.

I need to make that turn I keep skipping. The house isn't haunted, I am. I carry that with me, and I can't get away from myself as they say in recovery.

I need to tell my wife I love her. I need to tell my daughter it's okay to keep living. I need to take us back to family therapy even if we hate it more than Cameryn hated the idea of that final trip we never took.

If I had just said no to one more time around, loaded his bike, and took off down the road away from whatever predator hunted our street that day, just until he moved on or took someone else's kid, one I didn't give a shit about . . . fucking if . . .

Someone was at the door.

I need to take responsibility for the family I still have waiting on the clocks to finally go tock. But I won't. I will finally make that turn and pull into the driveway. I'll go inside and go through the motions. But there will be no "I love you" and no "let's start to heal." That would be a change and we don't change anything in that house because he might come back one day. And unlike in all his nightmares, we'll be there when he does. We'll be there with Mom's empty eyes and his sister's stormy ones.

And me. I'll be there. The guy who failed to keep him safe will be there.

Shit. I miss my turn on Hollend Avenue where the flowers bloom again. I'll have to circle back.

Until the hanging question of our son is answered, we'll be there waiting.