

# NOSEBLEED/CABLEJUICE

*by William Pauley III*

[41]

I remember the nausea, then everything went black.

There wasn't a memory for days after that [maybe there was, but I certainly have no recollection of it now]. All I remember is the heavy feeling in my gut as I stared down at the world [thousands of feet] below me, little houses on the hill all looked like little pills to me, and the guy behind me pushing against my back. I was the only thing standing between him and the all-American feeling of freedom. Freedom in the form of nothing, in a swallow, in a fall.

I'll be the first to admit, I was frightened. Days before the jump we were all men—red meat eating, fist pounding, beer guzzling men [we fucked our wives and came on their naked breasts every night a game wasn't on, as man as it gets, by god]—but in that moment, standing up there in the clouds [where man was never intended to be] and looking down at the expanse of civilization below us, and realizing in that moment too that mankind are no more than insects [looking down at our anthills from the view of God's eye was when I first felt the nausea swirl inside my stomach], we were not men, we were drones, robots, followers of the machine. Standing there on the edge of the plane, as I was trying to get myself to man up and jump, my knees buckled, I tensed up, and lost all memory of everything I had ever known.

In an instant, I was nothing.

In the next instant, I was falling.

Someone pushed me. Someone behind me on the plane, another soldier [one that was either more man than me for his bravery, or less man than

me for his ignorance], grabbed me by the pack and shoved me out the back hatch with all his might. I was falling. I knew I was falling, but I felt nothing. I knew how fast I was traveling, my body knew the precise moment to expect full on collision with the earth below, but my mind was wiped, tired, and traumatized. I could not get my hands to pull the parachute release, to save my own life—as much as I tried, I could not think of a single reason to do so.

I continued to fall long after the other soldiers' chutes had all blossomed. The farther I fell, the faster I fell. My body became hard like steel, like an atom bomb dropped from a plane. In that moment I was atomic, delivering my own personal doomsday.

I was a shell.

I was delivering the weakest message from God to the people of earth.

I was absolutely nothing.

The minute it took my body to jump from the plane to collide with the earth felt more like hours, days maybe. I thought of everything and nothing all at once. I was scared, I was brave, I was something otherworldly.

When I hit the ground, it hurt, but not like it should have. In reality, my ass and my boots should have both met the ground by passing through my flattened skull, but it didn't happen that way at all. In fact, all I felt that day was a little pressure on my face, enough to break the cartilage in my nose and cause a little bleeding. My face hit first, buried itself a few inches in the ground [I landed out in the dry cracked desert], and my body followed as it skidded out about one hundred feet.

Then my legs, which were hanging over my skull like wicked tree limbs, finally fell to the ground. A cloud of dust engulfed me.

I wish I had a better explanation for it— something interesting, something provocative, something that would help answer the many questions everyone had for me afterwards—how I can fall from a plane, speeding through the clouds, for thousands of feet, crashing into the earth at God knows what speed, and come out with only a nosebleed—but I

have nothing.

I've only recently remembered these details. It's been something like two months since the fall and this is all that's come back to me. Maybe something will happen, like a dream or a stumble [if I hit my head against something hard, then surely I will remember, as it always seems to work in the movies], and suddenly I will remember everything.

Until then, there is only this.

I am Bricker Cablejuice, the human glitch.

*I wasn't sure why this memory was always the beginning of the cycle, as it was a memory from many years ago, and so far back in my past that it didn't make any sense for it to be placed before the memory that always played out next. Where were all the other memories, the ones from the years between? I deduced that this first memory came from the year 1949, given the event took place during my stint in the military [I was honorably discharged almost as quickly as I was enlisted, after falling from the plane, understandably]. The memory that immediately followed was a memory occurring many decades later. Fifteen to be exact...*

## **CHANNEL//FORTY-ONE**

When I looked out the window this morning I saw an old man sitting down at the bus stop. When I say old man, I mean a man of the age of eighty. When a man is eighty, he feels eighty. He's an old man, no two ways about it. Bones become weak and frail, legs walk slower, mouth talks slower, lungs breathe slower. Everything becomes difficult. Even the easy things in life, like checking the mailbox, become difficult, some days even impossible. A man longs for death at that age, and the only good thing about it is that he's nearly there, it's within reach. Men are crumbling ogres at the age of eighty. I should know, I've been eighty twice already.

It took me an hour to get from my bed to the window. Getting to the

window from my bed in a single hour is major progress for me. Seems I've mastered the system. I have pushed myself to the limit and now can fill my day with twice as many activities as before. Filling my day with activities has only recently become a concern of mine. Before, I used to lay in bed most of the day, not even getting up to shit or piss. I'd let the nurses worry about it. I used to laugh about how long those gals had to attend college, how hard they'd have to work, just so they could wipe up someone else's shit. They're all glorified janitors, babysitters. I don't laugh about it anymore though. Life, for those people, is so short. Wasted time in a life that short is the greatest shame. Wasted time for a man my age, a man of one hundred and sixty three, seems like it'd feel the same as fifty pound weights around the ankle of an eagle, so I can't imagine how it must feel for normal folk.

I'm not saying I'm not guilty of it too, cause I am, and I'll be the first to admit it. Like I said before, I've wasted quite a bit of my life, nearly all of it, to be completely honest. I've taken my life for granted time and time again, and I've even spent a good portion of it trying to end it. My body has been abused in ways that would have killed other men, and I have the scars to prove it. I used to think this body of mine was a curse, but now I know it's more than that. I kick myself when I think of all those years I spent lying in bed, depressed as all hell, wishing I was just like those other folk, normal folk. Surely I was put here for a purpose. Surely God had a reason for me.

Okay, I'd like to keep this here confession honest, so to do that, I have to admit now that I really never have been much of a religious man. I'm not entirely sure what I believed in before, if anything at all, but if I dig real deep I can say that I most likely always knew that there was something more to life than just living, fucking, and dying. There had to be. Even before I ever suspected my immortality [or what I assumed was immortality. I was getting older, my body was aging, I was an eroding collection of bones in a thin skin sack, but I would not, could not, die. Or at least I hadn't...yet], I had an undeniable feeling of a consciousness living somewhere within the air that surrounded me, what I assumed was the presence of a higher being. But what was that higher being and how did it relate to me and my role in the world? I had this and countless other questions in my mind, always, even now, only now I'm not too afraid to

dive into the unknown, just too old.

This reminds me, I was a scared child. Everything from shadows to water, I feared it all. I used to be convinced that the devil lived inside my earhole [I swear to God I could hear the demon banging on my eardrum every single goddamn electric night]. I can't say it was the devil for sure, but something was in there. Something unnatural. Maybe even supernatural. I used to try to drive the little bastard out, weird things like sticking the sharp- end of a pencil inside my ear, piercing the eardrum, or years later pushing a lit cigarette into it, scorching my ear flesh. Ended up causing permanent damage to my hearing [even to this day, in my left ear, the world still sounds like the inside of a seashell to me].

*Bricker, the demon used to say to me, Bricker you're a goddamn wolverine. You can't teach your tricks to anyone. No, son, you were born with it. You're a goddamn wolfcat.*

I never felt like the demon really ever knew me at all. Of all the years, of all the tragedies, of all the triumphs, I thought that damn demon would have figured me out a little better than it had. It never felt real to me. At least that's what xxxxxx tried to get me to believe [I don't have a single thing to say about that man. I refuse to speak about my encounters with Him. The man was a tyrant and I wasted a good portion of my life pouring out to Him. I will not spend any more time speaking His name and retelling His teachings. I won't have it].

I did, however, find it strange to be staring down at a man, half my age, that caught my eye initially because of his striking resemblance to xxxxxx. Could He have had a younger brother? It seemed impossible given all I knew about the man, or at least very unlikely. Although I never saw xxxxxx as an old man [His appearance when I last saw Him was that of most fifty year olds] I was certain that this man, the one I was staring down at through this nursing home window, could not have been Him. xxxxxx would have to have been much older than this man. xxxxxx would have surely been dead by now. No way in all of Hell that the man on the street was one in the same. In all of Hell. No way.

I stood in the window most of the day. The man never moved from his place on the bench. Buses came and went, but the man did not budge

from his position. I was convinced this was not Him, however, I did not look away from him, even for a second, the entire day.

Only once did he move. Once. For a while I was convinced he had sat on that bench and died there, perhaps frozen to death, or maybe his heart had given out, I thought, but I was proven wrong the moment he moved.

Yes, he moved.

He looked up at me. He raised his head and looked straight at me as I stood in the window staring down at him. He didn't look around. He didn't catch a glimpse of me out of the corner of his eye. He looked directly at me. There was no emotion shown on the man's face, not from what I could tell anyway [my eyesight is terrible, exactly what you might imagine from eyes as old as these]. I could definitely see the shadows that hung over his eyes and across his cheeks though, and behind the shadows, although blurry, those eyes, the whites of his eyes burned images into mine, specters, ghosts, they were all there, as they always were in xxxxxx.

His stare made me remember things and forget them again, all within seconds. So many images, memories, reveries danced before my retinas. Then they were gone.

And that was all. That was all he did from that moment on, stare. I did not turn away. Invisible ropes of tension wrapped themselves tightly around our eyeballs, and our stares dared the other to walk across the line, into the unknown.

At this moment I knew it was xxxxxx. Had to be.

Then, for no reason at all, I fell asleep. I wasn't even tired; in fact, as I mentioned earlier, I had just woken up an hour before. My eyelids grew heavy and I fell into unconsciousness all within a fraction of a second. Clouds of darkness swirled around the room, opened its hot mouth, and took me inside it.

The world would appear much different to me the moment I'd awaken.

That night I dreamt about honeybees. In the dream, the bees were all

disappearing, fleeing from their hives all at once, overnight. Complete and total abandonment. The only bees that remained were the queen and the many younglings. No telling where the others had gone.

But I knew.

I knew because I had been to this place before, the place of erasure, of erased things. Colony collapse disorder, that's what they called it. For one reason or another, an entire colony would vanish. I thought about this as I slept, what it meant to completely disappear from the world and how something could leave everything it's ever known, the only place it ever called home, for emptiness, for darkness, for complete nothingness. I couldn't relate to the idea myself, but it made me dream of other humans and what would happen to them if they all had suddenly disappeared, vanished, without a trace. Gone. I suspected it would have been much quieter, peaceful, that is, given what was left roaming this god-forsaken planet wasn't worse than humans themselves. There are worse things than humans, after all, much worse. I had seen them, and unbeknownst to me at the time, I'd be seeing them again, there in that very dream, or what seemed like a dream to me then.

Soon I'd be seeing everything again. Everything I'd ever done—all the good, all the bad—would soon be playing back to me [some of the sins were unspeakably horrid, but I am nothing if not honest. No matter how terrible a person this makes me out to be—it's the truth]. Memories arrived in the form of ghosts, and they vanished as quickly as they appeared.

## *CHANNEL//THIRTY-TWO*

*A memory swirled...*

I was standing in a familiar room. It was dark and I was a much younger man then. I removed a handgun from the holster at my ribcage; the leather shoulder straps were the only item I was wearing on this particular

night. Standing naked in the living room of my home, what once was my family's home [they had long since left me alone], I held the gun nervously, with copious amounts of stress raking at the tendons of my trigger finger in short, quick spasms. There were pictures staring at me in all directions, the smiling face of my daughter, my wife...my son, my little boy's eyes were looking straight at me. Goddamn it, if I knew that day was going to be the last day I would ever see him, things would have been different. I would have been a better father to him, I would have been there every second. I wouldn't have wasted so much goddamn time doing other things, pointless things that meant nothing. I would have been better.

But he was gone, and my wife and daughter were gone too.

I was a man, alone, and being alone meant drinking whiskey straight from the bottle and fingering the trigger of a gun. Without families, men teeter over the line of being dangerous to themselves and being dangerous to others. Some men even find themselves on both sides of that line.

There was heavy rain that night with mighty winds that rattled the windows and shook the doors, as if the storm itself were desperately seeking shelter, a way inside, protection from the horrors of itself, and in that way the storm and I were one in the same. The rain fell hard against the roof and collected in giant puddles out in the yard, nearly flooded completely. The rain reminded me of a time I would've much rather forgotten, the time we [my family and I] headed to the coast. For most, visions of the beach and family vacations were sweet memories, something cherished. For me it was the physical manifestation of the darkest reservoirs of my mind, an actual place of fear. No man should ever have to feel the pain I've felt there in that place, on that dark coastline.

Images, haunting photographs, of my family, of my son, my little boy, flickered behind my eyelids like a horror film in a cold, empty theater. The gun in my palm suddenly felt as if it were holding me, and not the other way around. I felt as if the house was holding me hostage instead of protecting me from the storm. Everything around me felt like a trap. I was feeling paranoid and strangely claustrophobic and everything felt insane to me, unreal and cold. Unreasonably [I know that now], I felt the

gun could cure these feelings, the uncomfortable sensation of strangulation. Turns out, I was wrong, but damn if I didn't try.

When I opened my eyes, I noticed shadows dancing on the ceiling, watching as I unloaded two bullets into my temple with the only injury being a slight headache. They were taunting me, taking shape of my every failure. I couldn't even kill myself. Even the biggest failures still succeeded at suicide, so where did that leave me? What was I now?

In that moment, I wanted to cry. I *needed* to cry, but the tears would not form. Sometimes it's necessary to let emotions destroy you, to let go, to lose total control of yourself. I could not. I stood there, shaking, nervous, frightened, all under stares from the countless photographs hanging in frames on the walls. It was out of utter frustration that I shot at the ceiling. Four bullets left the chamber of my gun and pierced clear through the roof directly above my head. Rainwater leaked in through the bullet holes, four constant streams pouring down upon the crown of my head. The water was cold and uncomfortable, but also somehow soothing. It was nice to feel something different for a change, even if it was unpleasant.

The gun I was holding would not kill me, I knew that even before shooting myself with it, as I had played out a variety of versions of this night many times before. I wanted nothing more than to die, but nothing would end me, the gun would not fucking kill me.

I could kill others with it, I suppose, but the only man I wished to kill [the man who murdered my son, my little boy] may as well have been a ghost. He didn't seem to exist. All I knew was my son was with me one moment and the next he was gone. Hours later he was dead, murdered, but without a murderer. The cops found nothing, no sort of clue, no finger pointing in any direction at all. They shrugged their shoulders, told us they did the best they could, then gave up, leaving me and my wife and our daughter alone, knowing that our son's killer was somewhere out there in the same goddamn world we were living in. Everyone became a suspect to me, to my wife. We were forced to live a life of unhappiness, to never trust another human being as long as we lived. We got so caught up in it, in fact, that we turned against each other. We began blaming one another for our unhappiness and lost the only thing either of us had left. My wife

and daughter, they left me, here in this very room, years ago. I've been trying to end the nightmare ever since. But this gun would not kill me. Nothing would. Goddamned curse.

I'd be forever Adam.

*Static swirled behind my eyelids and soon other visions would appear to me...*

## ***CHANNEL//FORTY-ONE***

I was hoping there would be a way around it, a way I could share with you my story and not have to mention xxxxxx or His experiments, but I'm struggling. I'm finding that I am wasting more of my precious time [time has never been more sacred to me than it has in the past day, with the old man sitting outside my window, ghosts in his eyes and his constant staring. I can't even gaze upon him now without falling into tiny comas] trying to find a way to avoid the man than if I were to just clench my jaw and let His ideas flow, in the form of words, or perhaps a beam of light, carrying my thoughts directly into your skull. I apologize for the information you're about to sew into your mind. You will never be able to un-learn this, it will forever be a part of you. It is for this reason alone I feel the need to apologize. And even that doesn't seem like enough, but it's all this tired old soul can offer at the moment.

It wasn't long after I had fallen from the plane when I had first come in contact with xxxxxx. I suppose I was sort of a celebrity at the time, the media went wild over me. The world couldn't get enough of my story. I was featured in all the big publications and even made a couple appearances on television, which was a big deal at the time. I was looked at as some sort of hero, but not the type I would have been proud to have been. No, instead I was looked at as some sort of *superhero*, some kind of immortal freak.

*"Airman Bricker Cablejuice: World's Greatest Anomaly,"* I remember one of the headlines read. Another was, *"Doctors Call Cablejuice a Human Glitch."*

At first I felt adoration from all the attention, but that quickly faded as I soon became known as an error, an inexplicable mutant. I became incredibly depressed and refused to make any further public appearances or keep any appointments with the media. It was right around this time that xxxxxx found me.

To truly understand my state of mind during that time, and why I would have ever agreed to work with xxxxxx in the first place, I'd imagine you'd have to have actually been there, standing in my very boots, having the world come down on you the way it came down on me. I became fragile. The only man in history to have ever survived free falling from such an incredible height [and escaping death with only a nosebleed] and there I stood, fragile. My body was untouchable, my spirit was shattered. Again, I was a shell. Atomic, but defused. He showed up at precisely the right moment, as if He were lurking somewhere in the shadows around me, waiting for this moment to arrive. I desperately needed to believe in something, as I was discovering in those moments too that suicide was not an option for me [blood loss only made me nauseous]. xxxxxx gave me something to believe in, for a while anyway.

He knocked on my door and I answered. He stood tall, taller than me, draped in a grey trench coat and black wide-brimmed fedora. He was carrying a black briefcase in His hand. He introduced Himself to me and asked if He could come inside. I nodded and shut the door behind him.

“You are a gifted man,” xxxxxx said to me, “God has put you here for a reason.”

“I am cursed,” I said.

He sat on the sofa and removed something from His briefcase. It looked to be some sort of electronic dial.

“Not a curse—a wonder, a miracle,” He said. “You are exactly what I need. God does answer prayers.”

He handed the dial to me. There were several wires sprouting from the back of it. It was black with tiny white numbers printed around it: 41, 32, 23, 14, 5. As I examined it, He told me it would be a part of me, that I was the only one alive who could survive the procedure.

“What procedure?” I asked.

He looked up at me with wet wild eyes, seemingly swirling with blue flame.

“You are to become something of a hybrid,” He explained. “Through careful installation of machine parts into your body, you will gain access to a variety of consciousnesses.”

He paused and pointed at the dial held in my hands.

“This dial will allow you to...switch channels, if you will, flipping back and forth between consciousnesses, living lives of many different people all at the same time. Like some sort of...television man, I suppose.”

What He was saying didn't make much sense to me. Television itself was fairly new at the time, and somewhat magical to those of us who didn't understand the technology side of it, so the thought of the machine being inside me, an actual part of me, was completely unfathomable. However, given my fragile and somewhat broken state of mind, I found the idea of being able to run from one life to another rather alluring.

It didn't take much thought before I accepted His offer and agreed to go through with the many procedures. After all, I was suicidal, and the worst that could possibly happen was that I would die, finally be allowed to die. I had nothing to lose and many lives [many escapes] to gain. However, I was foolish. There were worse consequences than death, I would find. Soon, I'd have five different lives, all of them lonely, all of them terrifying in one way or another. And worst of all, I was forced to live all five of these lives forever, until the end of time. Until my last breath, whenever/if ever that would happen.

The first operation transpired that night, the installation of the dial into my skull. He did it right there in the living room of my home, without anesthesia or proper surgical tools. Before the operation, He asked me for a steak knife, a claw hammer, and a handful of rags. As far as I knew, these were the only tools He used to wire the dial into my brain. He said it was the riskiest of all the operations that lay ahead of us, that all the other components relied on the success of this one particular procedure.

And it worked. Afterwards, I felt a new sense of being. I felt important. I felt as if I were contributing to knowledge, to science. I felt like a *future man*. And it brought me closer to God. There was finally a purpose for me, I thought, a reason to live, a meaning behind my freakish gift. I finally knew why I was placed here on this earth. It all made sense to me, and all this was realized within those precious moments.

But as the operations continued, as I became increasingly less human, God would prove to be the furthest thing from me.

## CHANNEL//TWENTY-THREE

*Static. Static. Static. Static. Stat—*

The room was always cold, as if the doctors were trying to keep us cancer patients from rotting, stinking up the place. Chemotherapy felt a lot like a nursing home for smokers in that we all had lived our lives sucking the cancer from tobacco sticks [our lips wrinkled in long thin lines, our mouths looking somewhat like an eyeball with ugly spider leg lashes stretching from our lips across our even uglier faces] and had in a way graduated to this, our final place of rest and the last stop on the long road of life. I'm a tired woman. I've been around so long, I'm ready to go. Don't be sad for me. *Ha! Like anyone would be!* Some become genuinely depressed when they're told they have cancer and that treatment must begin immediately in order to have any real chance of survival, others *love* it. Some of us have waited for this moment all our lives. Cancer was the ultimate pity. No matter how shitty a person I'd been in my life, no matter how many birthdays I missed, people I hurt, money I owed, all would be forgiven when this one word was uttered: *cancer*. It was a godsend.

Of course, the only ones happy to hear the news are just that, shitty people. Those of us who have led shitty lives and have been generally shitty to everyone who had ever cared for us, we're the ones reveling at the thought of having a disease writhing around within us, eating away until there's nothing left. And not only did we have *a* disease, we had *the*

disease, *the* cancer. This was the biggest disease there was, the most famous, or infamous, rather. There's no need explaining a thing like cancer. The word speaks for itself. I for one had never felt better than the day I was officially diagnosed. It wasn't long after I abandoned my family, leaving my parents' house one night to go out with a girl I had just met hours before. I like to think of her as my true love, but I guess we didn't know each other well enough to really know for sure. She was the only girl I ever loved. Hell, she was the only *person* I ever truly loved, be it man or woman. We drove out to the coast that night, without a care in the world. Just the two of us. The memory made me smile just as much as it made me wish for death. Thinking of that girl was goddamn bittersweet.

*Oh, Haley. I'm so sorry...*

Anyway, I returned home, grew up to be nobody, and not a single soul ever gave a legitimate shit about me. Not a one. And that's with a husband, three children, and seven grandchildren, and hell, there were even great grandchildren and great, great grandchildren thrown in the mix too. I couldn't keep up with them all. None of the little shits cared one bit about me! But, hell, if I was being honest, I'd have to say a lot of it was my fault. I'd been put through life's ringer, spit out on the other side, and lived to tell the tale. Wish I hadn't. *Oh, lord, how I wish I hadn't!* There was so much guilt festering inside me I could feel it corroding around my bones, and living with that kind of guilt leads to madness. See, the thing with Haley happened so long ago that anyone who even knew her would be long gone by now, I realized that decades ago, but still it eats at me, even worse than this cancer. *And the mermaids. All those beautiful mermaids...*

So, yes, it was my fault my family didn't love me, but with my disease, I was holding the key, the key to getting my life straightened out, the key to forgiveness, and the ultimate weapon—pity. I finally had an A-list disease, and it was about damn time too. I was getting mighty tired of living. They say life is short, but once you make it to the triple digits, you feel like begging whatever god exists above to be taken out back and put out of your misery with a shotgun blast to the face. If that would have worked for me, I damn sure would have tried it. Maybe not when I was younger, back when I was such a goddamn coward, but after the incident with the mermaids, surely.

*I have to stop thinking about this.*

After the diagnosis, I immediately called everyone I knew, my children first. It was the first time I had called them in over twenty years. I didn't even recognize my daughter's voice when she answered the phone. She cried at the sound of mine. Twenty years of absence, silence, pure abandonment on my part, forgiven after I uttered that one beautiful word: *cancer*. She must have silently notified her brothers, my two sons, because not long after I uttered the word they had joined in on our conversation, calling in from their own phones. They sounded scared, as if horrified at the idea of losing the mother they never really had in the first place. I imagined them sitting somewhere in their houses, perhaps in complete darkness, holding their loved ones and weeping at the thought of my disease-ridden body. As if bringing their lives into this world somehow made them want to forgive me, despite all my shameful actions, as if they were willing to accept any excuse in order to forgive. Now they had it, and all those years wasted on neglect would have to be made up within the short time frame I had left. That was exciting for them, but only because they didn't know what I knew. They thought I'd die in a brutally violent way, with the disease filling every empty pocket within my body and savagely eating away at me until I had nothing left, but I knew better. The cancer would not kill me, only punish me further, and I was ready. *Good god, did I deserve such a punishment!* The sins I committed in my time were so horrid, I came to expect the worst kind of fate, and I accepted my disease with open arms. I was secretly hoping after our conversation was over, after my children had hung up their phones, that they were sitting there in complete silence, blaming themselves for my disease.

Before the cancer came along, I often wondered what my children were doing, what their lives had grown to be in our time apart. I wasn't even sure any of them were still alive before the cancer brought us back together. I wondered, but not enough to actually make the call to find out. Looking back, I'm not sure if it was because I was scared, ashamed of myself, or if I truly just did not care enough to know. It wasn't until after the cancer conversation, after I was sitting in the cold chemotherapy room [a room that housed only strangers to me] with not a single familiar soul at my side, that I realized in all that time on the phone with each of them, I hadn't even asked how my children how they had been these last

couple decades. They asked me about everything. They wanted to know every last detail of my life they missed. Hours of conversation, all about me. I thought about calling again, this time focusing one-hundred percent on them, but just the thought of it made me anxious. I would not call them back, not until the cancer spread even further and I had something more to say, to report. *Jesus*. Even I realized how unbearable I was just thinking that. I couldn't even fake showing interest in my own goddamn children's lives.

All I could manage to do was imagine the disease growing inside my body, eating away at internal tissues the way a vulture picks apart the dead. I wondered how advanced it would get, considering my body and the way it never seemed to give up [I should have died many, many times before, with all my...*experiences*], it would never die. *How far would the cancer spread?* I once dreamed the disease took over the majority of my body, and I suffered there on a hospital bed with my extremities gone, decomposed, left with only a rotting brain, two blind eyeballs, and a mess of half-eaten organs, twisted around my oozing, exposed spinal cord. I knew at some point I would be more cancer than human.

*And. I. Will. Live. Through. It. All.*

I wriggled around in my chemo chair, a comfy recliner, and pulled a blanket taut against my neck. I closed my eyes, feeling the chemicals as they rushed into my veins, silently praying it would only make things worse.

*Static filled the room, swallowed the strangers, then swallowed me.*

## ***CHANNEL//FOURTEEN***

*And after a sharp quick sting of electricity, my mind was suddenly somebody else's again...*

My brain was throbbing in pain, a migraine, a ticking time bomb that

would never explode. It just kept ticking and ticking and ticking. Tick, tick, tick. The pain resonated from somewhere within the five sections of vertebrae between my neck and shoulders. I hopped in the shower thinking somehow it would ease the pain, after all it worked wonders on hangovers [or so I've been told]. I didn't like to rely solely on drugs, medication. If there was a chance to solve whatever ails I was experiencing in a natural manner, I preferred to do it that way. Drugs were a last resort. I laid in the bottom of the tub and let the water pour down on me from the shower head, soaking into and pruning my skin. I was an old man then, so I don't know what that makes me now.

To my surprise, the pain did not ease, in fact it had gotten worse. Much worse. The pain felt as if it had kicked and ripped apart my brain. *I thought I felt the prying fingers of a fucking ape!* The bastard was spreading apart the deep folds of my brain looking for mites, lice, or any other vermin that may have been living down inside. Pain radiated from the bones in my neck like a thousand volts of electricity and the muscles running throughout my body had stiffened and made it almost impossible to move. I managed to take hold of my head with both hands—one on my jaw, the other on my crown—and I twisted my skull in a violent rage. I meant to kill that fucking ape, but instead I felt a sharp pain, and then nothing at all. I heard the terrible sound of vertebrae slipping, shifting, and snapping. Afterwards, my world went dark.

Blindness wasn't the only thing that furious snap brought me that day, it also paralyzed my entire body. Every nerve inside me had been severed, as if I'd blown the one goddamn fuse responsible for my every movement. From that unfortunate moment on, I've been nothing but a lump, an immovable wad of lard wrapped around a tiny skeleton.

A Spanish woman named Penelope came to my aid every day after that, and she was at my side almost every hour. The government paid her to do so. *The government, ha!* She was sent by the goddamn government to spy on me, that was more like it, or at least it was my suspicion. Had a girlfriend go missing in 1978 [a long story that doesn't belong here] and they've been following me ever since. *That goddamn helper woman would steal from me!* I'd hear her quietly going through my things and the jingle-jangle of her oversized purse as she scrambled for the door. *That whore!* She fed me too much. I was a fat bloated pig because of her. Every bit of 500 pounds. *She*

*was trying to kill me!*

In the twenty years of being this lump of flesh and bone, I'd nearly forgotten the beauty of the world. Colors faded from memory. I couldn't see color even in my own imagination, only grey. Memories were draped in the same lonely shade. When I thought of Penelope, I always imagined her to look like a grey witch, casting spells on me with her grey wand and flying around on her grey broomstick. Being blind was damn near maddening, except for fact that I became a better hearer as a result. I know they say it's just an old wives' tale, but there really is some truth to it. Maybe it's not that I'm a better hearer, per say, it's just that without my sense of sight distracting me, I notice more with my sense of hearing. Whatever the reason, I was definitely hearing things I had never heard before my blindness came.

When the house was empty, I could hear for miles. Penelope would only leave me here alone when she thought I was asleep, so I pretended to sleep often. When she did, I could hear children playing at a playground a block away. I could hear neighbors walking their dogs [their ringing collars] outside along the streets. Those moments when I was alone were the only times I ever truly felt alive, that some small part of me was still eager to live, desiring the fruits of the world outside the prison I'd made of my own walls. However on one particular day, after Penelope left the house, I heard absolutely nothing but the humming static of the rain colliding with the earth. There was a storm brewing, and I'm not talking just a little rain either, a true storm, a dangerous storm, the type that ripped trees from roots, houses from foundations, corpses from graves [violent storms often caused cadavers buried in shallow graves to resurface, going on one final ride down the flood waters of the countryside and emptying over into some ditch or river somewhere, never to be seen again. Or at least I would have hoped for as much].

Thunder cracked overhead and shook my home. Pictures on the wall vibrated and the same vibrations traveled up my spine and reignited a flame I thought was long since gone. Chills prickled along my arms and neck as I began to feel again. Pain shot in long stems from my neck to my toes and the feeling excited me to no end. *I was able to feel again!* I wouldn't have been able to contain myself had it not been for the fact that I was still immobile, a complete vegetable. Thunder cracked again, but this time

the vibrations were so powerful it caused my muscles to fully contract. *I moved.* For the first time in twenty years, I moved [however only slightly]. My neck shifted and it caused my head to fall forward a bit. It wasn't much, but it felt fantastic, completely surreal.

Hope flooded my consciousness as I waited for the next crack of the whip. The next booming thunder was even stronger than the two that had come before it. My neck muscles pulled and slung my head around like a slow moving moon revolving around its planet, until my face was planted in the fatty pillows of my chest.

With all the excitement of moving, I hardly noticed my breathing became limited. Instead of air, I was sucking in tufts of skin. A fourth cracking thunder brought back my eyesight [lightning illuminated the room and suddenly I could see colors again, but only for a second] and sent another jolt of pain down my spine, hurling my giant body to the floor. My neck bent, this time snapping, as my head became trapped beneath the mass of blubber that was my body.

The next few hours were bliss [before Penelope would find me, that is]. The suffocation and the broken neck should have killed me, but instead I lay there on the floor, happy. The rain hummed all around me, as I finally remembered the beauty of the world.

Penelope soon found me and I was able to breathe again, but my vision was gone again [the hours without air caused some permanent damage, most noticeably my skin, now visibly displaying bright purple and blue veins, broken capillaries, prominently and disgustingly, among other minor things]. The earth continued to spin, the stars and planets still had their suns and their moons—the universe as a whole remained unchanged—however, from that moment on, I was forever different. I'd never have anyone to love or even be anyone who deserved love, but I'd always have that moment. I was happy, and although I wasn't able to physically show my feelings or my excitement, for the time being I was able to remember them, and that was good enough for me.

The next day Penelope propped me up close to the window, and I sat there, my blind eyes pointed up at the sky, hoping to conjure up a darkness overhead. I'd sit there for days on end, eagerly awaiting the next

thunderstorm.

*Color bars filled my eyes and suddenly worlds were shifting again...*

## *CHANNEL//FIVE*

I drowned my ears in static, sitting beneath the giant moon on a night too cold to belong to August. My headphones served as both earmuffs and a way out, a way out of myself, even if only for minutes at a time. Noise poured out of the foamy speakers and burrowed deep into the folds of my brain, electrocuting, burning memories from the inside out. I could not think [this was a good thing]. When I say noise, I mean just that—noise—no music. I listened to sounds of light bulbs breaking, ants marching, and animals chewing. Music could not bring silence to my thoughts. No matter how mellow, it could not bring calm. Only noise. Only noise got me there.

I felt a vibration in my pocket. It was my cell phone. The person on the other end of the line was trying to kill this moment for me, trying to bring me out of my cold night terror blues. I pretended it was supposed to happen, that it was all a part of the experience, the experience of suffocating my brain, killing myself under the bitter night's hot open mouth of spilling moonlight, overdosing on a field of vibrations with the entire universe as witness. But it wasn't working. I only felt nauseous.

I checked my phone. My friend Kayla sent me a text message. It read, "HEY BECCA, WHERE R U?"

Electric drones straddled my eardrum as I read this and I thought to myself how anyone could possibly ever answer that question accurately. It was a good question, don't get me wrong, but even still, it was absolutely pointless. *I am here*, that's where I am. That's all I know. *How could anyone know any more than that?*

"I am lost and I don't understand my existence, or even how I exist, and

the moon is hanging directly above my head,” I responded.

I looked up at the sky. It looked like the cold glass wall of an illuminated television screen. The stars looked like white noise to me. All in an instant I found that my eyes were suddenly drowning in static as well as my ears. There was no relief, there was no quick sharp pain or pinch to sever the nerve, only this endless drowning. Static filled my head, swelled it, but not enough. It wouldn't break. I needed more than this to escape. I was still there, inside my body. I'd done everything short of getting down on my knees and begging to be taken away, for my breath to be stolen by the vacuum, to be completely swallowed up by the ever-expanding static of the night sky. I was playing with fire and purposefully inhaling the smoke.

My phone vibrated again. Kayla said, “FUNNY YOU MENTION THE MOON, IT'S ALL OVER THE NEWS TONIGHT.”

I tried my best to ignore her, to continue with my lunar suicide, but I found the message too strange not to reply. I drummed my fingers across my leg and thought about tossing my phone out into the dark ocean of tall grass that surrounded me, but only for a second. I refrained.

“What do you mean?” I typed.

I buried my hands in my pockets, frustrated at the entire universe, myself included. There was a pressure in my skull, a pressure that could only be cured by death. Everyone I knew had let me down, even my own body had failed me. I chose to pass on, to continue living life in my next form, a form without this...*pressure*, but I couldn't do it alone. Believe me, I've tried, but time and time again I've failed. I was too strong for death, it seemed. Time would pass, every single night, failure after failure, and I would look up at the moon and the man inside would grin his unusual grin and stare down at me with crows feet clipped to his eyelids. I'd be sitting in a pool of my own blood, vomit, shit, and the moon would just smile, mocking my pathetic, useless, never-ending existence.

I looked up at the moon with more anger than hope. The noise swelled inside my skull, but it was not enough. Nothing was ever enough. The cold stuck to the skin of my face like a thousand tiny needles. I was feeling numb, but again, not enough. The giant moon was full and bright

and looming. I continued to taunt it, to stare back at it with eyes that were filled not with fear, but anger. I could not see the man inside the moon that night and it had me wondering if I ever would again.

*That goddamn moon owed me this.* After all, it was the primary cause of my cranial pressure. It gave me nothing but pain in my twenty-eight years, and all I'd done in that time was try to ignore it, or at times when I was feeling extra ambitious, run away from it, but not that night. That night I was asking to finally be put out of my misery.

And it failed me, of course. Like everything else in this goddamn universe had failed me. Tears were forming at the corners of my eyes. I couldn't handle any more pressure. If only I could have fallen to my knees, pressed a loaded gun to the end of my nostrils, and pulled the trigger. If only I could have sent a cold bullet of relief straight through the pain, a one way ticket out of myself forever...but I couldn't and wouldn't. *So many flaws.*

My phone vibrated again. I wiped the tears from my eyes and checked the screen. It read, "NEIL ARMSTRONG IS DEAD."

I decided not to respond this time. I put the phone in my pocket and laid down in the grass, continuing to gaze up at the moon. Suddenly I wasn't angry anymore. I'd managed to calm myself down, *or rather Kayla had.* If it took forty-three years for the moon to finally get to Neil, then I guess I had around fifteen more of my own left at least. It wasn't the answer I was looking for, but it was an answer nonetheless. It may not have been the immediate reprieve of the pressure I needed, but it was a time frame, maybe more like a prison sentence, so I couldn't be angry over it. There was an end in sight. A darkness at the end of the tunnel.

Sometimes I'd get so caught up in my own troubles that I'd forget about the troubles of others, that there were other people in the world suffering too, not just me. I needed to learn to be more patient, more considerate. The moon had a big job. I'm sure it killed dozens on any given night—and though I couldn't guarantee it, I'd be willing to bet they'd all been suffering much longer than I had. I must have been close though, to see the man inside as he stared down at me from above. Seemed too odd to be a coincidence. I must have been within reach in those moments, but he was not there that night, the night I called him out, and at the time it was



I was not in this room, or so I thought at the time. I assumed I was dreaming I was someone else, as I often do, but strangely I could not see myself. Even as I looked down to examine myself, looking for my body, for flesh and blood, there was nothing. I was no one, only a vapor, or so it seemed.

There was another man in the room, a man dressed in all grey. His face was hidden behind a surgical mask. His eyes were filled with white [no irises, no pupils, just white]. He held a large object in his hands, a jar, half-filled with some dark blue-colored liquid. Something about the jar made him chuckle, soft at first, but quickly escalated into hearty laughs, deep from the gut. He walked over to a tray sitting on the table next to the hollow-headed body. The tray was filled with what I assumed to be the contents of the hollow-headed man's skull. The man in grey, still sniggering, proceeded to stuff the jar full of the bloody offal from the tray in a violent, messy manner. The blue-colored liquid now appeared clouded and purple. A pair of eyeballs, a tongue, ears, and a brain were clearly visible within the glass walls of the jar, all crammed and piled on top of one another like cucumbers in a pickle jar.

*Bricker, you're a goddamn wolverine. I heard a voice say to me. You can't teach your tricks to anyone. No, son, you were born with it. You're a goddamn wolfcat.*

The voice was not coming from the man in grey, however, the only man within an earshot of me, whoever and wherever I may have been at that moment. It was coming from deep within me, the demon inside my earhole.

The man in grey is xxxxxx. I warned you about Him.

*I told you not to share your gifts with anyone, you goddamn fool. You are a man, alone. Always alone. People only slow you down.*

I could not respond, instead I thought about the many lives I'd lived and tried imagining having lived them alone, without a single living soul hanging around my neck at any point. The demon was right. Other people only made my life more difficult. All my sadness, guilt, and unhappiness stemmed from the loss of individuals I had allowed myself to get close to.

*Your purpose was different than what you made your fate. You realize this, don't you?*

*Bricker, you goddamn wildebeest, you are an error, a glitch, and you are to blame for making yourself that way.*

I wanted nothing more than to scream at the top of my lungs. I wanted to ask the demon the point of living five lives [or even one life, for that matter] if I am meant to live them all in isolation, abstinent of love, of desire, of passion. What was the point of life with those things removed?

*You. Could. Have. Lived. Forever.*

Is life worth living if you have no one to share your happiness with? Wouldn't those short-lived happy moments ultimately lead to massive periods of great sadness?

*Your gifts were wasted on human invention, Bricker. You and all the others...*

Others? There are others? Other what? Others... like me? I could not actually ask the demon these questions, having no mouth in which to speak, but I soon found I didn't need to. The answers appeared to waiting for me in the next room.

*Bum. Bum. Bum-Bum-Bum.*

The demon was drumming in my ear again. The closer I got to the doorway, the faster and more vigorous the drumming became. I felt a part of its song, as if I were musical notes dancing atop a wicked drumhead.

*You're learning secrets, dear boy...*

I stepped into the room. There were four other bodies stripped naked and lying on tables. Two were women and two were men. Blood dripped from craters that used to contain brains, eyeballs, the gore behind faces, and pooled on the floor beneath them. It was the scene from room one, but multiplied by four.

*Five immortals, five jars, five channels. Turn around, Bricker.*

I turned around. The man in grey, His white eyes burning images into mine [specters, ghosts] was standing before me. xxxxxx. He held up the jar so I could see it. The eyeballs inside were twitching, as if in REM cycle. There was a label stuck to the glass. It read, "Channel// Forty-One." He

chuckled, turned, and placed the jar on the desk near a computer monitor. There were four other jars on the desk, all sporting the same gory contents. xxxxxx pulled two wires from behind the monitor and pushed them down into the jar labeled “Channel//Forty-One,” piercing the brain flesh in two pinpoints, carefully placed.

Once the wires were in position, He spun His body around and pulled the surgical mask from His face. His mouth was open. He laughed maniacally. Television static liquefied and filled His mouth, leaking out the corners and dripping down onto His chest. Splashes of it were spat from His mouth with every wicked cackle. He held a finger high in the air, almost comically, like a cartoon or something. A strange sensation of dread came over me as I realized in that moment what was about to happen.

*Bricker, you goddamn wolfcat.*

With one final snigger [the static spewed from his mouth like vomit], He slammed His finger down on the computer keyboard and instantly the room disappeared.

*When I awakened, I found myself standing at the edge of a plane, dressed in full uniform, struggling to find the courage to leap...*

**Nosebleed/Cablejuice**

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