“He’s up in the top right,” Ernie said.

“Not the guy with the blurred face?” I said.

Ernie put his finger on the panoramic photo of the old lumber mill’s 317 employees from 1931. There was a man in a suit with his hat at his side, squinting into the sun.

“That’s my great-grandfather,” Ernie said. “He sailed from Australia to work here.”

“The mill must’ve employed the whole town,” I said.

“Man, it was the town.”

“He was an accountant? You said an in-office head?”

“They’re all dead,” Ernie said. “The youngest person in the photo is fifteen? One-hundred and four next year?” He took his hand from the photo and picked up his champagne.

“One or two of them could still be alive,” I said.

“What mill-hand lives over a century?”

I shrugged, none that I knew.

Ernie left the room, and I walked up to the photo and looked at all the faces. Some were cracked and sharp from being mill-hands. Some were round from pushing all that paper. Some were young, and hadn’t decided to be cracked or round yet.
One boy had moved his head right as the photo had been taken. He was a shaky, blurred face, and his friends smiled beside him. But now, I guess Ernie was right.

I took my champagne off the bedside table, and I left the bedroom.

I walked into the bunkroom as Liv walked out. She asked me, “You haven’t seen Maggie, have you?”

“I took a shot with her maybe thirty ago.”

“I can’t find her.”

“Well, I’ll keep my eyes open,” I said.

“We wouldn’t help closed, would they.” She passed me and went downstairs.

Ernie was on his bottom bunk, rolling a joint. “You want some, man?” He’d taken his blazer off and had rolled up his sleeves.

I nodded and checked that my shirt was still tucked in, then I sat on the edge of a bed. Ernie had finished his champagne and he had moved on to the whiskey that he’d saved for tonight.

“So, what happened to them?” he asked. “The mill-hands.”

“They got buried, and remembered,” I said. “Well, hopefully most of them.”

“No, what happened to them.”

“Nothing, I think.” I finished my champagne.

“Don’t say that,” Ernie said. He picked up the whiskey and popped out the cork, “Here.” He poured me some and he sat back.

“Catholics go—”

“You were at my first communion, dude, you know I know what they say.”

“Buddhists reach Nirvana, and they exist in like endless bliss.”

“We’re not Buddhist,” he said. “That’s like saying I’d wake up on Elysium.”

“You might.”

“So we could all just end up in Valhalla?”

“You’re not a great enough warrior for that.”
We laughed.

“Well, what do you think happens?” He asked.

“Nothing, I said that.”

“You can’t just say nothing.”

“I can, what do you mean? You never realize when it happens because when it does, you’re already nothing. There’s no waiting, there’s hopefully no pain.”

Ernie leaned back behind a cloud of smoke, shaking his head. “But, our secrets, and memories, and even the bad moments?” He ashed in the tray.

“Gone,” I said. “Literally dirt or ash, or whatever.”

He laughed and threw up his hands. “Then what’s the fucking point? We just bitch about, and then go out like smoke and shit...Ah, God, man. Maybe the Lemurians are right, we die under the mountain and get fucked by crystals for eternity.”

“Yeah, I don’t know all about that,” I laughed. “But, I do know that we don’t know until we do, and by then it’s over.”

Ernie scratched his head as he sat forward. “Fuck,” and he slowly chuckled as he rubbed his free hand on his pant leg. “Then it’s like before being a kid? It’s not even nothing, there won’t be one thing there?”

“Yeah, man, I think so.”

And we both laughed.

“Fuck,” he said. “Cheers to that.”

We clinked and we sipped, and the whiskey was a good warm. He passed me the joint. I took a long drag and looked out the window. It was night and there was a light wind, a little snow on the ground, the start of a warm winter.

“Then, what’s the point of it all?”

“Don’t ask me that,” I said.

“But everything we do is gone right when we go.”

“Yeah, and you leave a wake.” I passed it back to him. “People remember the great and terrible things you did.”
“That picture has 317 employees from 1931,” Ernie said. “No one remembers their names.”

“Records from the mill could still exist.”

“You’ve seen the mill,” Ernie said, passing it back to me. “That place is forgotten. It hasn’t been a hundred years and all those employees got is their face in some random kid’s house.”

“Except for the one dude who moved his head,” I said as I laid back on the bed.

“Yeah,” Ernie chuckled. “He’s really nothing, man.”

We were quiet as I took another drag. The bouncy bass and yelling from downstairs pounded through the old floorboards. The floral wallpaper was still wilted from the water leak four years ago. The ceiling was white, cracking plaster. A gust hit the side of the building, and it groaned and sighed.

“This house was built by the mill, yeah?” I asked.

He nodded, “My great-grandfather and a few of his friends built it.”

“That’s another way we live on.” I passed it to him.

“No,” Ernie said, he ashed it in the tray. “This is a house. He doesn’t live in it or because of it.”

“But he’s remembered because of it.”

“Sure, but what was he like? Would I have loved him, hated him? His humanity is—” He fluttered his hand into the air.

We were quiet again. He twisted the roach out in the ashtray.

“Man,” Ernie said, lying down. “I don’t want to die.”

“I don’t think anyone really does, you know?”

“You think James is up there? Looking down and smiling and all that bullshit.”

“If there’s a way,” I nodded. “He’s doing it.”

“Or maybe he’s hollering from the halls of Valhalla.”

“He was the group’s fighter.”

“Or what’s that Nirvana shit?”

“Maybe he’s looking up.”
“Don’t say that,” Ernie said.

“I don’t know, man,” I said. “If he is down below, he’s leading the party.”

“Yeah, I mean, you’re right,” Ernie said. “He’s probably partying his ass off.”

“Oh,” I nodded. “There’s no doubt.”

We were quiet for a moment.

“Do you think ghosts exist?” Ernie asked.

“I don’t fucking know,” I chuckled, and I stood up. “I’m going to check on everyone else, yeah?”

Ernie nodded and rested his head in his hands as he lay down in the bed and stared into the slats of the top bunk.

Downstairs in the living room, the twelve people staying here danced and shuffled and celebrated. A few people snuggled on the couch, tired and intoxicated.

Liv walked up behind me. “Mags isn’t here, and it’s pretty cold outside. I mean, there is some snow.”

“I can help you look,” I said. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

“I’m just worried.”

“I’ll go up the road, you go down?”

“Sure,” she said. “Where’s Ernie?”

“Thinking about ghosts in the bunkroom. We doing this?”

“Yeah.”

I took my coat off the hanger. And I walked through the town where the evergreens lined the road that the wind wailed over. I walked through the town where the high elevation let the Milky Way bend above me. I walked through the town, mostly abandoned, where I couldn’t help remembering visiting as a kid, unaware that death could find its way here too.

The road T’d off with another which led down the hill to the mill’s railyard. There, there were rusted trains, the crossing of many tracks, and a big red building with a roof that wanted to fall in but wouldn’t, because it was built resilient.
I sat on the back of a passenger car and I stared at the sky. Mount Shasta hulked in the distance as a dark silhouette, and above it were the stars where heaven, I guess, would or will be.

Voices rustled the bushes to my left as the wind picked up, I leaned back to hide myself and the boy with the blurred face burst through. I still couldn’t make out the details of his face, but he was animate, gesturing and drawing out the two friends who had flanked him in the photo. They passed a jug of wine between themselves. They bickered, teasing the boy for moving his head in that goddamn staff photo. Yet, they celebrated something too. One boy tripped on a rail, but he caught himself. The others laughed. The three of them cut off through the brush.

I leaned forward into the empty railyard as a figure walked off the road. It was Mags. When she saw me, she did a step and a slide.

“Where’d you go?” I asked. “Liv’s gathering hounds.”

“To get cigarettes.”

She sat next to me on the train and she offered one. I took it. For a moment it was just us. And then the wind came and the train creaked, and the peace between us tumbled again as she asked, “How’s that girl?”

“Good,” I said. “I’m very comfortable with her.” What I meant was that after we have sex and we’re falling asleep, she’ll hold me and I’ll be smaller than her and close my eyes and fall right into her, but I’d never share that. That was both mine and hers to take to our nothingness.

“That’s nice,” she said. “I’ve found two boys.”

“Two?”

“One’s really cute,” she said. “The other, I just can’t stop spending time with.”

“You’re going to two time?”

“No,” she laughed. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“It sounds like you might.”

“Like it’s ever easy.”

I nodded and I took a drag. All I could see as I looked at her was the floating 2020 of her luminescent glasses, the white of her teeth, then the ember and the smoke and then she smiled.

We were silent.
“So, what about your two guys?”

“They seem fine,” she said.

“You’re that excited?”

She shrugged and held out the pack, “Want another?”

“Sure, why not.”

“They kill you, that’s why not.”

“And then we become a big vat of nothing.”

“What?”

“Ernie and I were talking about death.”

“Why are you guys scared?”

“We were only wondering about it.”

“That’s not that different.”

The three boys broke back through the brush. They were wilder and drunker, their wine was gone. They pushed each other and they shouted, and this time the boy with the blurred face tripped on the rail, and he laid out in the dirt. The other two laughed, and I grinned. Mags was looking elsewhere, as the boys walked off through the brush.

“Hey, have you seen that big panorama photo upstairs?” I asked.

“Do you think we’ll ever be what we were?” She asked.

“Oh,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“That’s okay,” she said. It sounded like it really was.

“I mean, you have two guys,” I said. “What do you need me for?”

She looked at me and she smiled, and then she looked away.

“I mean, how am I supposed to know?” I said, “It’s not like anything in life has made sense so far.”

“I didn’t mean that broadly,” she said. “I’m just talking about you and me.”

“And I don’t know, Mags,” I said. “We don’t even live on the same coast anymore, how am I supposed to know if two people are going to zip around the same space again, fall into that same rhythm.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Like you said, I don’t know if there’s any reason to any of it.” She stood and started kicking through the gravel as she smoked.
“What do you think?” I asked.
She shrugged, “I’d never try to answer a question like that.”
I chuckled, “So you’d only ask it?”
“Yeah,” she nodded, I could see her grinning.
“So how’s the move working out?” I asked.
“I finally feel like I’m helping people,” she said. “More than I was out here at least.”
“That’s great.”
“And how are you,” she said. “Like, with everything and all?”
“I’m fine.”

A firework painted itself into the sky before exploding. Others rippled throughout town, but there weren’t many.
“What time is it?” I asked.
“Midnight,” she said. “Happy New Year.”
“Same to you.”

“Should we walk back,” she said. It wasn’t a question.
I stood and she went and I followed.

“Do you know what the point is?” I asked as we walked. “If we all end in nothing anyway?”

“Why does it matter to you?”

“Because everyone thinks about it.”

“But why does it matter to you?” She said.

“I guess I am scared,” I said. “What if I get to the end and I look back and I did it wrong. And that’s all I can think before I become nothing, I had one go and I did it all wrong.”

She didn’t respond.

“How am I supposed to know that I shouldn’t have moved with you?” I said. “What if we’re both supposed to be in the city, cascading around? How do I know that wasn’t the right choice?”

And we walked silent, through the chitter of the wind, the ripples of fireworks, the few strong yells of celebration.
“I don’t think you’re supposed to know,” she said. “Or I don’t think you can. I just think you’re supposed to do. And figure that stuff out as you go.”

“And how do I know if I’m right or not?”

“There’s no way to,” she said.

And somewhere, I felt plunged into regret.

“You know I haven’t seen you since James’ funeral,” she said.

“It’s been that long?”

“It hasn’t even been a year.”

“Fuck, I mean I don’t even feel like the same person,” I said, and I checked that my shirt was tucked in. It was. “You know, I knew we were dumb, but I never thought one of us would be dumb enough to, you know.”

“Don’t say that,” she said. “You know that he wasn’t all there in the end.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s just hard. Like, why’d he think, why’d he leave us?”

“Same reason, I guess,” she said. “In his eyes, he had no way of knowing if he was right, or if he was wrong. He was probably all mixed up about that.”

I looked up at her. She had looked away. I knew I was going to cry, but, it was then that we saw the house ahead of us.

The string lights around the garage were on, the old house looked warm. Every guest from inside was cluttered outside, drinking, smoking, watching Ernie sit on his ass lighting fireworks. That big one near must’ve been his. He waved us over and he said, “Goddamn, I thought you two been eaten.”

Liv was already back. She said, “I’m glad you found her.” I felt her looking at the sadness in my eyes. So I nodded, and she smiled, crossed her arms, and looked away, understanding without prying.

Behind our crowd of people, Ernie’s great-grandfather stood solemn. He packed a long pipe, and he watched something in the street, entertained.

I sat down next to Ernie on the cold concrete, and Mags made her way into the standing small crowd of guests, starting a cigarette. Across the street in the high bank of scattered snow and dirt, a branch moved as the boy with the blurred face and his two friends stepped out. They stopped, and they
sat and they watched. And James was here too, he sat up a ways in the road, I saw him. He stared into the sky, and then he looked down toward Ernie.

“Oh hell yeah,” Ernie said.

A big round cylinder sparked and then zipped into the night. And in one beautiful moment, it threw colors among the stars, and I felt a gasp of wonder.