The air smelled of ozone, though the rainstorm wouldn't hit for some time. An early morning such as this was prime pickings for cool temperatures and a dim-lit world. Harvey had left the house early, intent on taking advantage of that bounty, those moments when the sun is still low and nobody but you and the birds are awake. Perfect for a jog. Also perfect for the pair of running shorts with an embarrassingly-large grass stain.

A gentle, rhythmic thud of sneakers filled the quiet atmosphere of the park as Harvey followed the running path, running at a steady pace. The chilled air made up for the lack of a breeze, Harvey's skin staving off sweat the best that it could. A nice coincidence- maybe Eun-Mi wouldn't refuse to kiss his sweaty face when he got back. A small downside to a grander scheme… It was relaxing, a moment of peace for him. A short little window before the hustle of life caught up. He focused on his breathing, letting the familiar park fade into the background as he ran. Before he had to job hunt again, before the bills came in, before Toby's homework would have both of them struggling, before anything mattered outside of him and the path. The path that had something laying on i-

Harvey's elbow hit the pavement first, then his nose, then his knees. Small stones dug into his thighs and forearms as they smacked into the path, bouncing off the ground slightly with the speed of the impact. Harvey hissed in pain, slowly pushing himself up and into a sitting position to keep the weight off his knees. Clutching his aching nose, he reached up to check his hair. Damn it. Well, at least it was early. He could go home and fix it. Rubbing his scuffed elbow, Harvey turned to see what had tripped him. A pair of well-manicured legs in comfortable-looking sneakers laid behind him on the path, motionless. His annoyance quickly turned to worry and a twitch of guilt. God, he'd just mowed down someone! Are they even okay? They're lying on the floor- oh, God, what if they hit their head? Were they already laying here? A tree sat between Harvey's view and the person on the ground. Quickly he scooted over, avoiding crawling on his hurt knees, to check on the person.

It was Harvey. Laying there, by the tree. It was *him*. From the shape of the nose to the curve of the jaw, down to even the tank top and shorts he had picked out for his run. It was like a photograph of him, exact in entirety, laid out gently in the grass. Completely still, not even a rise of the chest. Like the bird that struck the window months ago that Toby begged to bury. A dead body with his face, placidly smiling. Harvey's breathing became more shaky than before.

"...Wha-"

And like his muttering was a magic command, the eyes of the other him snapped open, wide and glossy. Harvey gasped softly, and the eyes rolled in their sockets to stare at him. Almost unsettlingly quickly, the stranger pushed itself up, first onto its elbows and then with its hands beneath it as it sat. It turned its head to face Harvey, its smile twitching just a touch in the corner.

"Wha?" mimicked the stranger, blinking slowly with thick lashes. It seemed entirely placid, contently staring at Harvey. Perhaps a bit past him.

"Are-..." Harvey struggled to find his words. "Are, um. Are you… okay?"

"Okay?" it repeated, "Okay! Are you?"

“Me? Oh, uh- I’m fine! Doing good! More, uh- Moreso that you’re doing fine!”

Harvey attempted to give a smile back, feeling himself shake a bit. He didn’t want to be rude, but this was all a bit uncanny. The stranger seemed perfectly at peace, eyes flitting up and down Harvey. It slowly pulled its legs in, sitting the same way he was. Never once did it look away from him. Harvey sniffed, laughing a bit nervously. The stranger smiled just a bit wider.

“You, uh…..” Harvey wrestled internally with how to present this, the stranger’s gaze making him feel almost pinned. “....You seem familiar.”

“Familiar,” it spoke slowly, as if feeling out the word. Even its voice sounded like his. The stranger shifted to fully face Harvey, settling on its knees. It tilted its head just a touch like a dog, seemingly intrigued.

“Yeah. You…” Harvey’s eyes flitted away from the stranger for only a second. “You look kinda like me.”

“Like me?” Its eyes crinkled at the corners, tone playful. Harvey tried to calm himself, though something still nagged at him.

“Yeah…. Yeah. We, uh, look like each other!” Harvey’s smile wavered just a touch. The stranger began to show its teeth.

“Like *me*!” More forceful this time, the stranger emphasized its insistence by hitting Harvey’s chest with its knuckles. The action was playful but rough, too rough, Harvey’s sternum aching gently with the impact.

“Hah, yeah, like y-”

Suddenly the stranger lunged forward, gripping a hand tightly in the hair on the back of Harvey’s head and dragging him to crash against its body. He could barely even gasp in surprise as it quickly locked its lips with Harvey’s, pressing itself down on him and pinning his head in place. Harvey struggled, trying to push the stranger off, but it wouldn’t budge. It felt like pushing against a brick wall, and was just as effective. The stranger’s launch forwards had left it seated on Harvey’s lap, straddling him, and despite Harvey’s best efforts stayed firmly in place, almost comically still as its other hand gripped Harvey’s side uncomfortably tight. It laughed heartily, forcibly deepening the crude kiss, pushing a tongue far too thick and cold into the back of Harvey’s mouth. And then the stranger began to gag.

The stranger’s body shook with each retch, hands white-knuckling on Harvey even tighter. Desperately, he tried to pull himself away, but the hand on his side grabbed his wrist and squeezed hard. Harvey reflexively whimpered and stiffened, just as the first round of bilge hit the inside of his mouth. This… wasn’t normal vomit. As far as Harvey could tell through the overwhelming feeling of pins and needles beginning to fill his mouth and hit the back of his throat. Desperately, he struggled to breathe against the thick torrent, free hand scrabbling for any place he could leverage the stranger off of him. His mouth burned with pain despite the cold, the sludge feeling like hundreds of icy pinpricks across every inch of the soft flesh. Its hand let go of Harvey’s wrist with a final squeeze, reaching up to pinch his nose shut. Harvey gagged desperately, weakly trying to squirm away, as the stinging icy bile kept coming. With their

mouths bound together so tightly, the sharp buzzing vomit had nowhere to go but down. And with a vain attempt at a gasp for air, the sludge pushed into Harvey's throat, thick and heavy.

The stranger pressed more of its weight onto him, pushing the pair closer to the ground. Its body shuddered with convulsions as it retched, keeping a steady stream of the painful vomit forcing down into Harvey. He could feel his throat almost icily burn with the sharp pins and needles, the piercing buzz settling heavy in his stomach and making his abdomen ache. The more that filled his body, the colder and weaker he felt, the pain starting to make his head spin. His hands weakly pulled at the stranger, in dire need of a breath. Between the pain heavy in his gut and mouth and the lack of oxygen, Harvey could feel his strength sapping as the pins and needles sensation felt as if it was spreading further through his body. His struggling and pawing had grown almost pathetic as more and more of the deluge polluted him.

With no warning, the stranger suddenly let go of Harvey, pulling its mouth and hands away and letting him fall to the ground. He gasped for air, choking on the thick sludge still in his mouth and throat. Suffocating on his back, he kicked the stranger off of his legs and rolled over, propping himself up on his hands and knees. The sting of his scrapes was drowned out as he gagged and spat, the thick black substance left unpromptedly in his mouth dribbling out onto the grass. The sludge flickered with static, the pattern rippling and undulating like it was alive. Harvey's lips and chin stung as he tried desperately to spit out as much as he could. The pain in his stomach began to radiate into his back, as if someone was driving needles into his muscles over and over again. Harvey pressed a hand to his churning stomach, pushing on it in a vain hope to make himself expel the filth in his body, but the buzzing mass seemed to simply press back. His arms felt weak and tingling in the face of the lead weight in his gut, and he choked desperately for breath as his coughs forced the crackling substance up and into his nose.

A crackly laugh started behind him, soft at first but quickly growing in volume. It warbled and split as if being run through an old tv speaker, sharp and prickly just like the vile sludge running freely from its nose and lips. The stranger's smile stretched too far up its cheeks, jaw rocking up and down loosely as if on broken hinges. Its head bobbed more like an animal than a person, eyes trained on Harvey. Placing its hands before it, the stranger mimicked his stance and crawled forwards, still cackling as it moved. Harvey frantically pushed himself up, getting his feet back beneath him. He began to run, unsteady and choking.

Harvey made it only a few steps before, with a loud rustle and a crack, he felt something grip his calf tight. At once a sharp pain radiated up his leg, and he cried out as the limb was pulled out from under him, sending him crashing to the ground. Harvey looked back to the stranger, hand tightly locked around his leg, howling with laughter. The hand was coated in the thick black sludge, seeping more of the static-y fluid onto Harvey's leg and into his cuts. Cuts that had come from the sharp tools protruding from the stranger's fingers. A pair of scissors, a needle, a knife… The hand wasn't holding them. Rather they were a part of the hand, throbbing with the dark filth, rivulets of the stuff pouring down directly into the gashes and mixing with Harvey's blood. The pain was getting worse, not just in his leg but in his stomach and throat, spreading like fire on a kerosene rag. Weakly, he struggled against the pain and the grasp, failing

as the stranger dragged him towards itself. It hoisted its body forwards, leaning over Harvey's prone form. With a wet disgusting snap, the stranger's jaw dislocated, hanging lower and lower, the skin and muscle almost seeming to stretch as it shifted. Its mouth was coated thickly inside with the buzzing filth running down its face, as black and empty as the blown-out pupils that seemed to take up more and more of its eyes by the second.

With the strength he still had, Harvey flipped himself onto his back and with both hands pushed at the stranger's chest as it leaned closer to him. The stranger cackled harder, and in an instant its chest gave way, Harvey's left hand sinking into it like a bog swallowing a body. The pain was prickly and overwhelming, his hand burning coldly with the sensation. With a cry he desperately tried to pull his hand out, but the foul flesh his hand was trapped in seemed to clamp down, holding the limb in place. The pain in his gut radiated itself into his chest and up his arm, as if it wanted to return to the stranger. Tears began to roll down Harvey's cheeks as he frantically pulled at his trapped hand, breathing fast and shallow, the prickling of bile and pins rising in the back of his throat. The pressure on his wrist only increased, the sharp sting becoming crushing. Harvey pulled again, and something strained. Badly. He could feel a clamping sensation around his hand, dragging at it. The tension and pain grew worse as Harvey fruitlessly hit the stranger's chest, breaths coming quick and shallow as he cried out in desperation. The stranger howled with laughter, and bracing itself with its hands, twisted its torso to the side.

The crunch was sickening. For a moment, the pain stalled as the shock rippled down through his arm. Harvey stared at the jagged, torn flesh and splintered bone where his hand used to be. The blood from the hand lodged in the stranger's chest spilled down onto Harvey's face as it rocked its body forwards, as if to show off what it had done. Harvey could barely breathe, voice quivering. The shredded bits of his musculature began to hurt. Badly. *Badly*. With a body-shaking heave, he rolled to the side and vomited. The stranger screeched and cackled, buzzing drool falling in fat drops. Harvey's vision blurred as he threw up, staring at the mess he was making in the grass. Pitch black, with only the tiniest drips of chyme. His throat burned with the sharp throb of the thick bile as his body desperately tried to empty itself. The pain in his arm rapidly grew as the stinging ache of his abdomen seemed to spread up his chest and down to the ruined stump. The sensation grew sharper and sharper, and Harvey stared at where his hand used to be in horror. The dark crackling sludge leaked from his wound, drowning out his blood in quantity as it gushed onto the ground. With a twisting feeling in his gut, the torrent flicked itself upwards in its spouting, defying all gravity as if it were alive. It squeezed around the ruined wrist, ballooning itself out in a fat droplet the size of his palm. The pain was so overwhelming Harvey began to feel his vision fade, as the grotesque blob split off thin bending tendrils. The stranger roared with laughter, body shaking and spattering blood down onto the side of Harvey's head.

The pain in what used to be his hand suddenly stopped. The cold sweat on Harvey's neck mixed with the droplets of blood, rapidly cooling. Breathing heavy and ragged, he opened his eyes wider. The ringing in his ears nearly drowned out the laughing as he stared at his hand.

Perfectly in place, as if it was never gone. Ice-cold numbness radiating down into his wrist and forearm, the attempt at a bent finger lagging slightly behind. This wasn't his. This couldn't be his. This… this was a bad dream. It was all a dream. It had to be. It-

The sharp metal instruments of the stranger's hand dug into his shoulder, shocking him back into the moment. Harvey let out a strangled sound. Oh, god. This was all real, wasn't it? The stranger pulled his body sideways like a toy, rolling him onto his back beneath itself. Its jaw stretched down to its chest, oozing static spit, the tendons perfectly taut as if dragged to their limits. It stared down at him as it laughed, inky pupils taking up every inch of its eyes. With each huff of its chest as it cackled, flecks of the sludge fell onto Harvey's face, each pinprick stinging with impact. The tears in Harvey's eyes fell faster as he held his new hand up to shield himself poorly.

"P-please," he whimpered, "please, I have a family."

"Family!" jeered the stranger, voice thick with the crackle of interference, "Family *more*! More! More! *More*!" It hit its hand into Harvey's other shoulder with each word like a poor-mannered child. It jerked about excitedly, howling and jeering, body flailing as if the joints connecting its arms had gone loose. The knife dug tighter into Harvey's flesh. He gasped in pain.

And at once, the stranger seemingly fell apart, body melting into a mass of black sludge and landing heavy across Harvey. The impact felt like dropping a bench press weight hard onto his entire body at once, pressing him into the ground. An oppressive inky blanket, it immediately sunk into him, forcing down as if consciously trying to infiltrate every available inch. His eyes stung with cold sharp pain as the viscous fluid pushed into their sockets, the pressure intense, hammering against the inside of the divots as if in attempt to break through like a pick and lobotomize him. The black static filled his sinuses and mouth, choking him of breath as it once again forced down his esophagus and practically tore through his epiglottis, filling his stomach and beginning to coat the inside of his lungs. The cuts in his calf and shoulder screamed in pain as the filth tore them wider with its hungry infiltration. Harvey felt as if he would break into pieces as the bile within him pushed into every available opening, ripping through the insides of his body, spreading a frigid agonizing stabbing through every inch of his body.

If Harvey had any thoughts left in his mind, he'd be aware of his fading consciousness, the pain and air deprivation crushing his body into a cold shock. But all he could muster in his head was terror. Agonized, helpless terror. Terror as his body broke beneath the constant pressure, as the pain grew to a fever pitch, as he suffocated helplessly. As his sightless eyes popped from his head, his skull giving way. As the crackling laugh of static came to a roar that swallowed his senses whole. As nobody came to save him. As there was nothing he could do as his body began to liquify from the inside out, becoming nothing but filth, shuddering ugly static filth. As what used to be a man, what used to be Harvey Harvington, became nothing more than a thick slurry of flesh and buzzing darkness.

As it all suddenly stopped.