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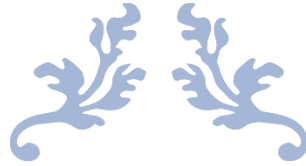
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A MILE AND MORE: A NOVELLA AND A REFLECTION ON BODY-SWAPPING

April 2, 2021



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Reflection

For this thesis, I started with the project portion, for which I wrote a story of a topic I find interesting. My story centers on the two high school juniors with no prior knowledge of each other, but they find that they have switched bodies without any explanation or hope for a solution. These two characters have different racial backgrounds and genders, but they are of the same socio-economic status and attend the same school. This, however, is the extent of their commonalities.

Jerome-Tyler Hodge, a seventeen-year-old African American young man, is an extremely introverted deep-thinker. He reveres the isolation needed for deep introspection and actively seeks quiet spaces where his mind can wander undisturbed. He values his privacy and is willing to do almost anything to keep it, even pretending to be a girl.

Conversely, McKenna McKinley, a seventeen-year-old white young woman, who needs to be surrounded by other people, is only dwarfed by her drive and dedication to excel in school and in extracurriculars. While her focus in the classroom suggests she has what it takes to endure a few weeks by herself, Jerome's lifestyle is on another level.

When they wake up on the roof of their school, clothes grafting to their skin and in each other's bodies, Jerome and McKenna make a pact to keep the switch between them, to see if the problem fixes itself. However, the situation deteriorates faster than they could have anticipated, and a choice is made that ensures neither of them sees a moment's peace for a long time.

I decided to write this story for this project because, considering the research element of the thesis, I was interested in looking into the origin and history of body-swapping. I wanted to analyze what other works had done on the topic and see how my piece might add to it. I wrote my story before I began my research so that I could write without being influenced by the way other authors went about explaining and detailing the phenomenon. I wanted the work to be as original as possible.

For research, I read articles on what makes a good body-swap story, some tropes that are associated with body-swapping, and looked at FictionFile's list of the top seven body-swap examples. I read three books and watched three movies. I also read two articles about virtual experiments on body-swapping; "Body Ownership and Experiential Ownership in the Self-Touching Illusion" and "Can You Tickle Yourself If You Swap Bodies with Someone Else?" The books I read were *Freaky Friday*, *Art of the Swap*, and *The Swap*. For the movies, I watched *Freaky Friday*, *The Swap*, and *Face/Off*. I chose to watch the movie *Face/Off* to provide an example of a scientifically based switch. I watched movies based on the books to get a feel for how each genre presented swap and how the motives of the swap changed based on the premise of the storyline.

I found that in the books, it was easier to keep up with what was going on (where the swap was concerned) and that the written introspective scenes worked better in the books than the scenes of spoken thought in the movies. I saw this the most in the movie, *The Swap*. Because of the time constraints, the film lacked the exposition and build-up of the novel.

In the two articles that I read, the conclusions for each experiment suggested that the research done in both could be significant to neurological research. They both explore how our bodies react under the illusion of being someone else. These experiments helped to contextualize

what can be done with body-swapping in a real-world sense. While it was interesting to read about how participants experienced the swap and believed the illusion, the research showed that the experiment was only effective to a certain extent due to the limitation of the technology. The most distinguishable feature between these experiments and the body-swap fiction I read is the mental process that the idea of body-swapping in fiction allows you to explore. Because the experiments could only record the physical reactions of the participants, the act of introspection and self-reflection was not a priority. Because of this, I prefer the fiction.

In comparing my work to what has already been done, I noticed that what I wrote matches with what has been established as body-swap fiction, in that it presents an initial crisis, involves a swap, contains troubles created by swapping, and shows the struggle to switch back. Where my work differs from the examples I found, is where it has no established purpose for the swap and there is no defining resolution-- success or failure.

When writing my story, I knew that I wanted to leave the end open to the interpretation of my readers to add another element of mystery to the story that added to the confusion for why the swap happened in the first place. The unknown element of what happens to Jerome and McKenna also contributes to the severity of the atmosphere I am trying to create at the end of the story. While I found in my research that these elements of explanation are considered part of creating a good body-swap story, I do not think that not having them in my story detracts from the writing.

In writing this story, I wanted to explore what happens when we are taken outside of ourselves and forced to view the world through someone else's experiences. I wanted to ask while pretending to be someone else in action, what effect does this have on our thoughts? How

does this new discovery of what the world is for someone else affect our perception of ourselves and our personality? These are some of the questions present in the story. I think it important to reflect on these questions because when writing about body-swapping, you are talking about introspection and showing acknowledgment that our differences should be respected.

A Mile and More

Scarlet's Crystal

(Week 1- Friday Night)

The halls of Anderson High are generally empty at this hour. All the faculty and staff have turned in for the day and club meetings have long since ended. On any other given day, the arrival of dusk would mean complete abandonment, especially on the cusp of the weekend. However, on this particular, muggy September eve, McKenna McKinley sits at the table in the chemistry lab running through the same equations, testing her experiment repeatedly.

Earlier today her chemistry teacher, Mr. Yule, expressed his acute displeasure with her performance in his class while handing back last week's quiz. He held her after class, and with much emphasis, suggested that she properly study for next week's lab quiz.

As if she didn't work her butt off in all her classes; she's simply weaker in chemistry, is all. Mr. Yule is simply strung too tight with the need to keep the averages in his class high. And because he can't do anything about slackers, he hounds the honor students like a slave driver. Pushing them past their limits. While most would consider this being a caring and diligent role model, McKenna can see through his entire facade. It's all for the salary increase.

No, she isn't at the school because she bought into his assiduous act; she's there because he was right. Not understanding the subject was no excuse for that B-. She slacked off and her grade reflects that. Plain and simple. Being the unrelenting go-getter that she is, McKenna would settle for no less than her absolute best.

She slides her notebook and the beakers to her left and rests her head on the counter. Thirty minutes into her studying, her eyes glaze, and her head begins to fog as she assesses the symbols and elements. Regardless, McKenna persists. Three hours later, her head begins to pound, and her thoughts lag, but still, she refuses to quit until something clicks and there is a mutual understanding between her and covalent bonds.

Now, four hours after the fact, she can no longer process information--internal or external. The words in her book register as meaningless swirls and her thoughts stand outside of a sheet of soundproof glass, knocking up against it so that she at least knows they're present.

She raises her head to check the time on her phone, and it's almost midnight. With a deep sigh, she drags herself off the stool and begins to pack up her stuff; she cleans and puts away the equipment. Her plans for the weekend are toast at this point. She'll need more practice if she hopes to score above ninety on Wednesday.

As the classroom door is sealed behind her, McKenna stands still and takes a second to admire the silence on either side of her. There is no light save for the moon's glow coming from the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the left wall, just enough to guide her. She starts down the hallway, towards the

student parking lot, and as she turns and cuts through the gymnasium, she realizes the lights are on leading to the athletic director's office.

Without a second thought, she heads for them and once she reaches the office, she can see it is empty through the door window. Still, she tries the handle, and sure enough, it is locked. Shaking her head slightly, McKenna begins to leave when two soft metallic squeaks sound from the other end of the hall.

Now, on any other given night, reason would steer her from the ill fate that would undoubtedly await her if she followed the noise. However, her mind hasn't cleared enough for the leisure of practicality. And so, curiosity reigns supreme as McKenna makes her way down the hall. The walkway is longer than she imagined and seems to narrow the further she goes. She'd never been to this part of the building in her three years at Anderson, and it was beginning to feel like she was no longer on school grounds.

The hallway comes to a dead end. She finds it quite strange that there is just a metal wall in the back of a hallway like this; it didn't seem to serve any purpose. The last room was about twenty yards back and was too small to need as much space for the wall to be pushed back so far. There were also a lot of grooves and carvings in the back wall that didn't seem necessary. Especially on the right side; it had evenly spaced ridges that were dug out in the wall.

Man, I must be tired, thinks McKenna as she follows the path of the carvings up the wall to the ceiling where she finds a hatch that connects to the roof. Continuing to act on impulse, she begins to climb.

When she opens the hatch, her eyes are immediately drawn to the sky. There are no stars visible, and the moon is momentarily covered by passing clouds, but the sheer vastness of it all snatches her breath as well as her fatigue.

With her body only halfway through the opening, McKenna lets the hatch-door fall to the roof with a bang; she remains undisturbed as she climbs onto the roof and takes in the sight of the starless sky above. When she begins to lower her eyes, a second wave of awe hits at the picturesque view of her town. There's nothing particularly dazzling about her quaint little home-scape, but she's never viewed it from up-high before, and the few lights that dot the space seem to be pulling towards the obsidian sky. Shining hands reaching up, begging to be part of the muted spaces stretching into the horizon. For a moment, it is a sea of darkness with light buoys, she cannot look away from

She is still living in the moment when she hears another sound, like a scuff on concrete. She directs her attention to the source only to find that someone staring back. Her initial reaction is panic, and her mind begins to race with radical murder scenarios. The person across the way is seated on a metal grate and remains motionless, just staring without saying a word. He is wearing a grey hoodie with the hood low over his eyes. His broad shoulders tense with her attention.

When her irrationality subsides, she realizes there is a backpack leaning against the grate, and despite the poor lighting and his obscure features, he appears not much older than herself. He shifts uncomfortably but still says nothing, he only stares as if he can't believe she is real. McKenna bends down

to shut the hatch then begins to approach the guy. The closer she gets the more failure he appears, she's sure she's seen him around before, maybe in one of her classes.

“Hey,” McKenna says into the night, her voice echoing off the air. It sounds strained and foreign, lacking its usual confident command. She clears her throat and tries again. “Tyronne, right?” she says shifting her bag on her shoulders, just to have something to do with her hands.

She stops in front of him, probably closer than what's comfortable, but his position makes it hard for her to see his face. He rubs his face in what comes off as exasperation, but still refuses to speak.

“Um,” McKenna begins, “We have a 3rd Period together. My name's Mc...”

Without warning, the boy stands with so much control and power the air rushed towards him. The action is so sudden that due to their proximity, McKenna is knocked down. She puts her hand out in time to break the fall, but the landing is hard. The sensation of the pain that shoots through her wrist is stalled by the dread building in her stomach. From the ground, the angle she peers at him casts his face deeper in shadows under his hood.

A scream lodges itself in her throat as he begins to crouch in front of her. Once he is eye level, she turns her face and squeezes her eyes shut, fearing what she might glimpse in his. Then, in a sudden burst of agony, McKenna remembers her hand. Her head snaps back around to find the boy, hood thrown back, examining her hand gently in his. When he realizes he has her attention, he looks into her eyes, and suddenly her pain is replaced with the

overwhelming admiration she had when she first came to the roof. The starless night sky was reflected in his gaze.

“It’s not broken.” He proclaims, the depthless view winks out, replaced with a stern gaze. No room for questions.

Without another word he stands, helping her to her feet as well. Though McKenna can tell that nothing is fractured, she still has trouble believing it, considering the pain. He returns her hand and starts for the hatch in the roof. McKenna has heard rumors about the aloof loner. Granted there are a few at Anderson High, but she’s pretty sure he fits the stereotypes about the black kid, built like a football star. Doesn’t say much, keeps to himself, stand-offish, borderline rude, Yah, that checked out.

“What the hell, man?” she demands rushing in front of him, cradling her injured arm.

His eyes regain their ethereal appeal, and instead of answering her, he looks over his shoulder at the sky, longing to stay a while longer, but resigned to leave. When he looks back instead of making eye contact, he walks around her and opens the hatch. As if her interruption has made him terse.

“I’ll help you down.” He asserts, and without waiting for her reply he begins to climb down. McKenna stands there for a bit. Annoyed, but unable to do anything about it, she poises herself to go down the ladder. Stuck on the first rung, she grinds her teeth.

“What now?” She grits, with no intention of hiding her irritation with the situation. Her good arm is already beginning to buzz from the strain of being her sole anchor. The last thing she expects is the sensation of a palm being

pressed to the small of her back. A short quake runs through her and she nearly releases her hold on the rung, a small sound chokes its way out of her. The pressure on her back increases, as the boy instructs, "Step down." Another short command. They continue down in silence. She, at a genuine loss for words, and he, because it seemed his nature.

When they reach the ground, she continues to follow him in silence. Out the gym doors and to her car. McKenna can't even find the words to ask how he knew where her car was or even retort when he states she is in no shape to drive and that he could take her to a hospital, but she would probably be fine just icing her wrist. Of course, not in so many words. She nods and gives him the keys.

McKenna is genuinely surprised when he asks for directions to her house. She'd expected him to just know where she lived. What a night this is turning out to be. They drive mostly in silence, save for a 'right turn here' or 'go all the way down this road then turn left.' They pull up to her driveway, it doesn't occur to her how he is going to get home until they are on her porch.

"Wait," she says, shifting the balance between her feet awkwardly avoiding eye contact. This moment is so weird. The vibe between them makes it seem like he is dropping her off after their first date. But she has a boyfriend and all of a sudden, she feels like she is cheating. She shakes her head to clear those ridiculous thoughts.

Before she can continue the boy says, "You can get in from here, right?" He's already beginning to turn away. "If that's all..." He calls over his shoulder, and just like that he disappears into the night.

McKenna fumbles for her keys and unlocks the door. She notes her parents have already gone to sleep and she sets her stuff down on the living room sofa and goes to the kitchen. 'Tyrone,' she thinks to herself. For the most part, he seems like a jerk, a really stupid jerk with really pretty eyes and maybe a good heart. She shakes this thought out of her head as well as grabs an apple from the fridge and an ice pack from the freezer; closing it she makes her way up to her room.

She stays up at her desk for five minutes checking messages and posts on her laptop. When she finally gets bored, she slithers into bed waiting for sleep to take her. Sandman seems to be taking his time, and she lies in bed awake.

In the time that she lies there, she can't help but picture the sky the way she saw it on the roof. Like it was the first time she'd ever seen it in her life; so vast and beautiful and expanding with nothing in it save the moon and some wisps of clouds. Like something, she could have to explore over an entire lifetime to see and never be able to see the complete picture. Her thoughts drifted back to the boy she met on the roof. He seemed very familiar with those surroundings. Like he'd lived there. What? Did he just spend most of his time sitting in that one spot watching the sky, watching the town, and just...? She didn't know. Despite the feeling the site provided, she honestly couldn't imagine spending all of her time up there. It was weird to her, but he seemed completely in his element. Comfortable. McKenna never really considered herself a dreamer but watching him sit there; she supposes she could see the

appeal. And as her thoughts bloom with concepts of space and eternity; without even knowing it, she begins to sink into slumber.

~

(Saturday)

When McKenna wakes up the next day, she feels like she was waking from a dream. As if her life up to this point has been nothing but a dream, and when she sits up in her bed, she knows that her life isn't the dream. Last night was the dream because nothing that happened then could be real. She didn't want to believe it. She isn't actually sure what happened but the melted pack of ice sitting on her dressing table is enough to persuade her that something did happen.

She just isn't quite sure what though. She knows she met someone, someone ... *Tyrone!*

That's what it was. That was the dream she had. Except it wasn't a dream. She did meet a strange boy on the roof of her school. And the sky, well that had to be a dream. She had never seen anything look so *ominously captivating*. So real and impossible at the same time.

As usual, she gets up and goes about her usual Saturday morning routine; thoughts of a mysterious boy and an incredible sky flutter in and out of her head as friends call and ask what she's doing today, asking if she'd want to hang out. She tells them that she can't because she can't. She has to study for her lab quiz on Wednesday. She understands absolutely "nothing" that is supposed to be on it and she needs the boost in her grade. She spends most of

the day at the dining room table studying. Or at least it appears that way. With every new equation, she finds that the paper would merge lines of text, blending everything to the background, just like the sky she saw yesterday. Like the city below it. And every time it did, it reminded her of him. She cannot concentrate like this. Her focus is shot, and it is beginning to seem hopeless.

Before McKenna knows it, the clock reads a disheartening 8:30 PM. She knows that forcing herself to sit through another hour of study will be meaningless, as nothing has gotten through. She hasn't seen her family for what feels like the entire day. Her mom usually spent the weekends with friends at the local shelter or clothing drive, on one of her improving the community kicks. Her father, well she actually didn't know what he was doing, it had been unusually quiet in the garage all day, so she assumed he was probably spending some personal time in his section of the basement. As for her eleven-year-old brother, Tucker had popped up in the dining room a couple of times to bug her, she had shooed him away in false hopes of learning something and staying focused. Light noises coming from the living room tells her he has taken up space there.

Deciding to call it a night, McKenna peaks out the window to find that it is pitch black outside. There isn't a star in sight, yet it is different from the starless wonder she had seen yesterday. The passion evoked in the picturesque scene missing from tonight's display. Disappointed McKenna gets up and goes to the living room where the steady drone of commotion has been filtering from for the last five hours. Tucker is on the couch playing *Smash Bros.* on the PlayStation.

Leaning over the couch above him, she asks, “Did you get something to eat?” He doesn’t even look up at her as he mumbles something incoherent and shakes his head, blasting Wala Weegy from an icy landing in the Frost Dome stage. “Any leftovers?” Again, a head shake. “I’ll make us some hotdogs.”

The weekend is uneventful, typical. McKenna gets acquainted with the furthest left seat at the dining table, but it's worth it. She can distinguish between signs and elements with almost no hesitation, and she is on her way to reading equations with acceptable proficiency. Back to the mundane, she almost forgets about her encounter on Friday. Almost. The night sky is a consistent reminder, and her dreams recur to swimming in pools of black. And eyes. Eyes capable of taking in that vast sky, with a deep and steady understanding, return to her each night. Eyes that speak volumes for the silent countenance of a young man who doesn’t say much.

~ A Choice encounter

(Week 2- Monday Morning)

McKenna waits all day, not to mention the entire weekend. She could barely focus enough to study. She’d wanted to talk to the guy from Friday, but she was wrong, he isn’t in her 3rd Period, and she can’t find him anywhere. The day passes like every day prior in her life, her friends, Marcus, teachers, all act the same; not that they are aware of the strange occurrence, and she didn’t tell anyone. Strong evidence that Friday was a fluke, or probably something her exhausted imagination concocted to let her know she was pushing too hard.

But just in case she wants to see him if nothing else then to prove she isn't going crazy.

She has a feeling she will find him tonight. On the roof where they met. She isn't sure how she can be so certain he will be there, but as she makes her way to the ladder five hours after the final bell, she knows.

She is right.

Her approach isn't noisy; however, he still should have heard her coming. He doesn't react beyond the same tightening of his shoulders and his hand reaching for his bag, like he is getting ready to leave, put out by her existence in his space. The insult of being considered a nuisance has McKenna jumping in his face before he can leave.

She inhales deeply to give him a piece of her mind, but before she can begin, he says, "My name isn't Tyrone."

Just as quickly as she inflates, the gathered air rushes from McKenna and is replaced by confusion.

"What?" She asks.

"It's Jerome-Tyler." He replies.

"What do you mean?"

"You called me Tyrone," he says, finally meeting her stare. There's a new light in his eyes, with it McKenna notices that tonight's sky is graced by shimmering specks scattered far and wide.

"You're talking about what I called you when we met on Friday?" McKenna asks cautiously.

In response, Jerome looks back to the sky, his gaze quickly reflecting its grandeur.

“Hey...” McKenna says, grabbing his shoulders. His lack of response fraying the edges of her patience.

At that moment, a piercing shriek sounds from the sky. McKenna whips around in time to see the ball of flames racing a thousand yards ahead of them. The closer it gets the smaller it becomes, but it seems like it is heading straight for them.

In an instant, Jerome is up and rushing them to the hatch. They make it a quarter of the way when the roof begins to rumble, and a barely bearable wave of heat knocks them to the ground. McKenna lands on Jerome, enough to break her fall, but the heat is so intense they are both sweating in seconds and it feels like their bodies dissolve into each other -causing a different sort of pain. Their heads spin, and nausea creeps up from their stomachs just as oblivion takes over.



(Tuesday Evening)

When she regains consciousness, McKenna is on the ground. Her clothes cling to her body and the sun weighs heavily on her back. At first, she thinks she is alone. Her ears ring and her vision is blurred. She slowly gets to her feet, but it isn't until she stands straight that her memory returns. In a panic, she whips her head around looking for Jerome, causing her to lose balance and fall to her knees. Her disorientation is made worse by the evening sun.

The realization that it is evening strikes her harder than the wave last night, and she is once again on her feet in seconds. This time she steadies herself enough to look over to Jerome's seat. He isn't sitting in it but crouching over a spot on the roof a little to the left.

"Hey," she yells over to him. As expected, he doesn't answer her, just continues to stare at the roof. Once she gathers enough of her strength, she begins to make her way over to him.

"Hey," she says again but stops short.

He is standing over a scorch mark on the roof. When she takes in his appearance, his shirt is as drenched as hers, his dark skin blanched and clammy. He looks as likely to be sick as she feels.

"What is that?" She inquires. Still, he ignores her. "Tyrone," she exasperates, yanking on his shoulder.

Without warning, he falls over landing face first. McKenna barely registers this as she falls back, fainting.

When she comes to, she is lying with her cheek melding into the concrete. Her body feels strange; is buzzing with electricity that locks her joints. At first, she can't move, breathing is a labor, and there is an additional sensation of being stabbed all over by needles thick enough to draw blood.

Then, just as suddenly the feeling disappears, and she is once again in control. She pushes herself up on her hands and knees; feeling stronger than before- before she'd fainted, before last night. When she looks down, her hands do not belong to her; they are not the right size, not the right tone. Her nails

are clean but unpolished. Weird how she notes that something important as a buzzing fills her head.

In realization, she whips her head backward to find her body lying face up on the ground. She rushes over to herself and begins to shake the vessel. Her body's shoulders dwarfed by the hands.

"McKenna. McKenna." She screams, panic bubbling in her chest. "Get up McKenna. McKenna. McKenna." she yells frantically in its ear.

As if answering her call, her body begins to move on its own. Its hand comes up to shade the sun from its eyes, and then its eyes open to squint. However, when she looks into those eyes, they don't belong to her body. They are the eyes of the sky.

"What's going on?" McKenna demands leaning over her soulless body.

Suddenly, with a start, her body sits up and looks at her with piercing eyes she's never seen in a mirror.

"T-Tyrone?" McKenna asks. "Tyrone is that you?"

Her body's facial features contort in mild annoyance and its eyes harden. Instead of answering, her body gathers its legs beneath it, steadying its hands on the ground and pushes to its feet. The motion is jerky and unnatural, but stable for the most part. Until McKenna quickly grabs its hand and drags it back to its knees. Then she grabs her body's shirt collar and pulls it towards herself.

"Seriously, Tyrone, if you don't answer me."

"Please let go," Jerome says, but it's her voice in a deeper register and strained with his irritation. Her body's hands attempt to remove his own.

Instead, McKenna holds tighter and pulls him closer to herself. Her stare is fierce and unyielding. It is the stare she saves for opponents right before a match. However, this famous gaze is met with an equally unyielding amount of indifference. It reminds McKenna of the previous night and she recalls the action she was going to take to resolve the situation. She doesn't fancy herself a violent person, but she finds a good knock on the head encourages the most stubborn of people.

Without any second thought, she pushes her body away from her then pulls it back in, directing its head towards her own. The collision is backed with such speed that not even her original body's reaction time can avoid it.

The pain, while not registering immediately, is two-fold what it should have been. The injury dealt on both sides is only a small part. The real pain that McKenna and Jerome feel, is the pain of the bodies they are in, along with the pain of their own bodies.

~

He is a girl. And not just any girl. He is McKenna McKinley, and she is him. He realizes this when she is screaming at herself, using his voice. He is so full of regret at that moment, it is almost too much. He'd wanted to stay with her until she'd woken up to answer any questions she might have had. Questions that he definitely didn't have the answers to. More importantly, he wanted to observe the meteorite, or whatever it was that landed on the roof, but the only thing that remained of space rock was a long flare of midnight streak.

Jerome had never imagined a body swap would take place. If he had known, he would have left her there to switch with someone else. He could have been attending his classes as if nothing happened. He would have just missed the first three, but now, it is done. This thing has happened to them and there's no point in contemplating what could have been. The only thing they can do now is figuring out how to reverse it before anything crazy happens. This determination is what makes him open his eyes. Or, uh, her eyes.

He sits up to speak to her, but she won't let go. "Tyrone?" she asks.

It is enough to shut him up. He stands, planning to ignore her. If she can't pay attention to what he says, why should he listen to her. Had he known it would lead to this he would have coolly corrected her, but he let emotions become involved, and she rewarded him by splitting his skull. Her skull

The pain is immense, but also unnatural. He hunches over in anguish that makes it impossible for him to remain silent. His voice breaks free in a frequency so high; it only worsens the pain. McKenna's body, or his, seems to be in just as much pain. She is in the fetal position with tears streaming down her face. His face.

Once it subsides enough for him to think, his first take on the pain is due to him being in a fragile body. However, he quickly realizes that was nonsense and re-assesses. His head pounds, but there is an ache behind his own pain that feels misplaced. He raises his hand to wipe sweat from his cheek

and that's when he understands. While he is still sweating a great deal, it is tears that are leaking from his eyes. Tears that aren't a response from this body. He tries to wipe them away only for more to replace them. They are McKenna's tears, and since she is in his body, he can feel them too, or something. Mabey.

The whole thing is just much too complicated right now. He wipes his face again and walks over to his body.

"Are you okay?" he asks, gripping his shoulder with a hand that isn't his own. With great effort, his body raises, and eyes that are not his own stare back at him. For a moment, they stand staring at each other as unbelieving and shaken as the other. For Jerome and McKenna, the experience is nothing like looking into a mirror. It is like staring at a picture of what you want to look like in your head but not completely visualizing the entire thing. Jerome is the first one to regain his senses.

"Is that a yes?" he asks, tearing his eyes away first.

"Yes," the higher tenor in voice makes him cringe. "Tyrone," she says, not realizing her mistake. His grip on his own shoulders tightening and then tightening some more.

"My name is Jerome!" he grits out.

"Oh," she laments. "Sorry." The tears run down Jerome's face in an endless stream. His features don't look like they are in pain, yet she can't seem

to stop crying. Jerome is still in pain. His head aches and pulses in the spot where she hit him, and he wants nothing more than to put an ice pack over it. The sun beats down on them and he really doesn't know what to say to her.

The longer the quiet goes on, the more irritable McKenna becomes. But what is Jerome supposed to do? He has no idea where to go from here and he doesn't think it would be beneficial to propose any plan without having thought about it considerably. Yet, as he silently ponders courses of action, McKenna begins to unravel.

~ **How to deal with it**

“Stop” Jerome lets McKenna rant and freak-out for thirty minutes while the sun beats down on them. This is his place of comfort, but he feels so uneasy as his soul settles into a body that isn't his own and the Solar Giant's rays make his blood throb and kick in his veins. He feels like he's wearing a full-body suit that is three sizes too small.

He can sympathize with the girl's frustrations as they are in the same predicament, but the more she talks, the faster she spirals, and Jerome can't see any end to her breakdown, so naturally, he intervenes.

He approaches his body from the small fan he usually sits on. It is surreal, to say the least. Looking at yourself from the outside. It is monumentally different from looking at yourself in a mirror. From McKenna's perspective, he doesn't look quite like how he thought he would.

The first thing he notices is that he is a tall dude. He notices his legs are longer than he thought as McKenna paces the length of the roof. His build is

solid, but his shoulders aren't as broad as he'd expected, not like his father's, whom everyone claims he takes after. Those shoulders are hunched like his posture as McKenna folds in on herself, arms hugging her sides while she continues to make tracks in the concrete, but he still has a decent view of himself.

McKenna isn't short, she's probably of average height. She even considers herself pretty tall for her age, but he is tall. Whenever his body comes near, he has to look up into its face.

He also notes that he's pretty muscular, not like a bodybuilder or anything, but he never thought of himself as muscular before. The tension his body holds as McKenna paces shows the definition in his shoulders, back, and arms.

As the noon sun washes over them, he notices the color returning to his skin despite the fear and anxiety locking up his body. Despite McKenna's emotions twisting his features with expressions he rarely makes, his body looks fine. He was not feeling so good when he'd woken up earlier on the roof, drenched in sweat with McKenna on top of him, their clothes and skin melded together; when he separated them, it felt like a tongue being pulled from the roof of a mouth full of molasses.

If she did hear him, she still paces and panics. When he reaches her, she stands there a second then grabs his shoulders and begins yelling in his face. Something about how he is the one that did this to them and to put her back in her body.

He tries to calm her, but she continues to ignore him and pushes him back screaming in his face, demanding he returns her body to her.

Finally, Jerome plants McKenna's feet on the roof and braces her hands on his own. McKenna has a surprising amount of strength that Jerome doesn't give himself a chance to consider as he actually stops his body's advances. McKenna looks confused a second before she decides to push harder.

Before she can act on it, Jerome removes one of the hands from on his shoulder and slaps his face with considerable force. That gets her to stop. McKenna stands frozen, the shock evident on Jerome's face. It was forceful but seems to calm the situation. Until...

McKenna looks back at herself and swings Jerome's hand towards her cheek. Jerome knows the delicacy of the situation, but McKenna's attack registers as a challenge to him. And if he backs down at this moment, he'd be handing over the reins. For McKenna to decide how to handle the situation, which would probably involve more violence and panic. So, he does the only thing he can. He slaps her. Harder than the first time. And when McKenna whips her head back towards Jerome, her eyes are flames.

She seems intent on fighting. She balls her fists for another assault and Jerome raises his left hand, palm facing his body. Then points at it and then points at the fist aimed at his face.

This drains most of McKenna's will to fight if not all of it. Bringing her back to their current predicament. She seems like she's about to relapse into her panic when Jerome grabs his left hand. McKenna's gaze flicks from their joined hands to Jerome's eyes and there it is. The empty galaxy she had seen

at their first meeting. The remaining tension slides off her as she waits for him to speak. It feels like he has the answers. But he blinks and just like that the void that sucked her in is gone and she realizes again with terrifying newness, that she is looking at herself. She yanks her hand, or his hand, or...

Her panic is building again. She really can do nothing to contain it. She feels like the reins she is holding are now tying into a noose around her neck and she's suffocating. A sob chokes its way from her constricting throat.

Jerome slowly raises his hands. When she focuses on his movements, he inches around her so that he is facing towards the sun. As McKenna follows him with her eyes. The sun's warmth becomes a warming comfort against her back, calming her further.

"McKenna?" She finally hears him speak. But it is with her voice. She'd be laughing at the gravitas in her own voice shaped by Jerome's identity if she weren't so disturbed by it.

"McKenna, please. Just focus on my words, okay?"

He cringes like he's also unsettled by this foreign sound. McKenna nods once as she waits for Jerome to continue. He honestly has no idea what to say in this situation. Before McKenna had woken up and lost it, he was trying to glean information from the streak the meteor left on the roof. But it was just burnt roofing. It held no answers.

He found no trace of what attacked them the previous night. Yet, there is no excessive damage to the building. Only the streak... No indication of the brutal force that knocked them unconscious or the heat or shock from the impact. Just a black mark like someone had something stuck on their shoe

and wiped it on the concrete. Jerome doesn't know where to start, but it is probably a good idea to handle the most pressing matters first. But what exactly are they?

They are on the top of the school in the middle of the school day. Luckily, this part of the building is mostly hidden thanks to the generators and service storage shed. So, it is safe to assume they haven't been discovered. But the longer they remain, the more likely it becomes that they could be caught.

Jerome lowers his hands slowly, afraid sudden movements would flare McKenna's panic again, but she remains calm. He tries to do the same as he decides what he should lead with. In a situation like this, there is clearly no good news.

But... Well, as he sees this becoming an extended trial, at least they don't have to go through it alone. He takes a deep breath, steeling his nerves.

"This is bad."

At first, it doesn't seem to register, but when it appears that she hears his words, it hits her like a physical blow. Irritation and impatience twist Jerome's features as McKenna rallies a retort, but before she can, Jerome continues.

"We don't know how this happened and we don't know how to fix it. That makes our options limited. As of right now we can try and move forward like this or... we can look for help."

Suddenly, McKenna is at a loss. That is the most she's ever heard Jerome speak. And while he's finally saying something, she wasn't in the mood for this type of rhetoric.

"What do you mean by options, obviously we get help. There's nothing to discuss or question. If we don't know what to do, then we go and find somebody who does.

"And who is it that we go to?" McKenna tries to interject, but Jerome continues.

"Have you ever heard of this happening to anyone? In reality!" McKenna scoffs at his implication that she would look into their problem on a fictional level.

"And even if there is someone with knowledge, what role do you even think they'd play in fixing this? You think they'd just be some phantom savior that waves a magic wand and poof, I'm back my body and you're back in yours. Or they'll have some kind of potion that will fix this with a snap of a finger?"

"What. Of course, not--"

"And what about anonymity. Or are you okay with the world spying on you, because you're an anomaly? Do you really think that once anyone finds out what's happening that you'll have a moment of peace?"

"So what? You want to go prancing around like me like nothing's wrong? No, wa..."

"Of course not, but I don't want the attention of the press and scientists treating me like a test subject. Do you understand how much this will affect the trajectory of our lives? I'm not saying that it's not worth considering. I'm

saying we need to consider it. I'm sorry if you don't need that time, but I've worked hard to remain unknown, and I'd like to find a way to stay that way."

"But you're not you, anymore. You're ME!" Jerome sighs and looks away, only for McKenna to grab his shoulders and turn him to face her once more.

"Your trajectory or whatever has already changed, can't you see that. We can't wait to make up our minds. We need to act now."

"And what if we go back. What if we're returned the moment, we stand in front of someone to let them know what's happened? Then we become two people with no previous known acquaintance but are suddenly caught up in some outrageous prank. What do you think that does to our credibility?"

"You're overreacting. It might be a thing for a while, but it would blow over eventually."

"And when they ask why we did it? Years later when strangers recognize you? When your lies and excuses drive family and friends away?"

"Why would that happen?"

"Because it happens. Do you think for a second there will be a moment of peace for us? And when the novelty of our situation settles, they'll want to know why we were up here. What we were doing together. And I'm guessing that will be a question we'll have to answer sooner or later."

Jerome feels a twinge in the pit of his stomach as he realizes that at this moment, he is beginning to coerce McKenna's thoughts. All he wants is for her to consider the consequences of all their choices, but he can't deny the second option is the least appealing to him. He is a firm advocate for suffering in silence, weathering the storm, and coming out on the other side stronger for it.

But he doesn't want to force McKenna to do the same. He wants her to have a voice in this too, but... Jerome inhales deeply.

“Look just take some time, okay. That's all I'm saying. We do not know what this is, it could be temporary.”

“And if it isn't?” McKenna sounds defeated and she looks at Jerome as if he once again has all of the answers.

“I'm not saying we do nothing. I think we should look into it ourselves. Just while we consider things,” McKenna nods slowly and again Jerome becomes aware that he is standing outside of himself. He looks down at the body he's in, noticing for the first time that there is a different feel in places that goes beyond just being in someone else's body. He is a girl.

He pushes away those thoughts to contend with later, for now, he needs to focus on how to keep them from being found out. That leaves the other issue. If they are going to try and take this on themselves, then they have to figure out how to be each other. Make it convincing enough so that nobody catches on. Jerome suddenly feels as if a forklift has slammed into him with the impossibility of the task ahead. He sways on his feet.

McKenna rushes forward to steady him, already on the brink of another panicked outburst. Jerome steadies himself internally. McKenna is definitely unstable, which means he has to keep it together. It is his nature to avoid interactions with his peers and enjoy that seclusion, specifically so he doesn't have to deal with anyone's problems, that alone makes him want to reject the idea of doing this together. To try to figure this out by himself. But he can't, because McKenna has his body, and she can go out and do whatever in his

name, and whatever stigma he incurs through her actions will expectantly be attached to him for the foreseeable. He wants to throw up.

Granted, he understands that the situation goes both ways, but he has never done anything like that. Not that he'd assume McKenna has done anything... But he doesn't know her ... and anything can happen... *If his body got into an accident before they switched back... Would McKenna return to her body? What would happen to his soul?*

Okay, now he's spiraling.

Jerome squeezes his eyes tight trying to force the negative thoughts from his mind. He doesn't hear McKenna calling his name until she starts shaking him. His throat feels like it's sealing shut, but he manages to swallow to reply. Then suddenly, it occurs to him.

"You called me Jerome."

"Well, that's your name, right? You said, Jerome," McKenna looks away, then back towards him.

"Ya, but you said it."

McKenna chuckles, it amazes her that she can find any humor in this situation, but he just looks so serious. "Well, you've corrected me enough times. I was bound to get it eventually."

She smiles and Jerome feels his heart ease, despite the kick it gives when he sees the smile stretching his face isn't his. McKenna is one of the more well-known students, but all of her reviews are positive. From what he's heard she's relatively a good person, but aside from second-hand sources,

Jerome's encounters with the girl are practically nonexistent. In any case, he supposes there are worse people to have switched bodies with.

"Okay," he says, removing her hands from him. "Now for the hard part."

McKenna snorts, "What can possibly be harder than finding out you've actually traded places with someone and decide not to seek help."

"Deciding to pretend to be each other. Pulling it off," Jerome says this with a grave tone that wipes the smile from McKenna's face. "If we're going to give this time to fix itself before we get someone else to intervene, then we need to talk about how we're going to live from here on out."

McKenna remains silent and thoughtful, so Jerome takes this opportunity to present his ideas.

"We need to explain our basic personality traits and what our circumstances are. We have to reduce the amount of knowledge we don't know about each other. We need to-- McKenna are you listening?"

"Yeah, I hear you. Go on," She makes her way to the small fan on the roof and sits on it. Jerome follows her, finding it slightly off-putting to watch his body perform an action that he has done so often, without being the one to do it.

"So where do we start?" McKenna says.

"Names. Family. Friends. Anyone we'll have to interact with over the next couple of weeks. We can write down schedules for classes and any extracurriculars," Jerome says and bends down to wear his bag is leaning on the grate and reaching for a notebook.

"My name is Jerome-Tyler Hodge, I'm seventeen, and I'm a junior."

“Nice to meet you, Jerome. I’m McKenna McKinley. Some of my friends call me Mc2. I’m a junior too, I turned seventeen this summer.”

Jerome nods once storing the information and hands her the book to write in and pulls out another one for himself. “Okay, family first. Do you have any siblings?”

“Yes, I have a little brother. His name is Tucker and he’s eleven. What about you?”

“I have a five-year-old sister and brother named Jakayla and Jeden. They’re twins,” Before McKenna can voice her interest, he moves on. “What do you call your parents?”

“Mom, Dad, like everyone else.”

“You need to address my father as sir.” McKenna wants to ask if he’s serious, but it is clear from his face that he has probably never told a joke in his life.

“Is your father strict?” She asks instead, the unease from returning.

“Not usually, he’s just set in his ways.” Jerome shrugs. “Besides, if you didn’t, he’d be able to tell something was off. As for my mother,” Jerome pauses, “You can call her mom, she might say something about it, but it’s fine.”

“What do you mean it's fine? What do you usually call her?”

“Sometimes I call her Ma or Mama.”

“Why can’t I call her that?”

“You can, but it’s worse if it doesn’t sound natural.”

“And? I can make it sound natural” McKenna says, folding Jerome’s arms across his chest. Jerome motions for her to try.

The word is stiff coming from Jerome’s tongue. Though it’s one he’s said since before the time he could make coherent sentences, it lacks its usual endearment. McKenna recognizes that it isn’t quite right and tries again, to the same effect. She sighs and relents.

As they continue to swap information, the noon sun begins to sink, they move on to practice. It’s awkward and at times redundant, but they work on understanding and memorizing the life of the other. Jerome thinks they can use more practice, but McKenna insists she can’t handle it anymore and needs sleep. Jerome relents and now they’re standing in front of McKenna’s mini cooper in the empty school parking lot. Jerome didn’t have a license, but he knew how to drive. McKenna didn’t question this as there is no room in her mind for the answers. She just gets in the passenger seat as Jerome reverses and pulls away from the school.

Their drive is as quiet as the first night and as they approach Jerome’s residence, the tension grows. McKenna isn’t familiar with part of the town. It is louder than her quiet neighborhood, but there are more interactions between the residents. It looks like there is some kind of block party, but the festivities spread from one house to another in a joint gathering. It’s an unusual sight for her, but not unpleasant. When Jerome pulls in front of his driveway, he turns the engine off and turns to face McKenna.

“You’ll be fine in there. Just remember what we talked about and maybe go to bed early, but not before you finish your chores.”

“Geez, I remember. You’re gonna freak me out if you keep talking like that.”

“Just stay calm. Okay. That’s the best way to get through this. If you feel like you’re losing control--”

“Hold my breath and count to ten. See, I remember.” McKenna attempts to leave when Jerome places a hand on her shoulder. She looks back at him, blinking at short registration that she is staring back at her face. Jerome points to a stop sign ahead of them. “That’s where you go to catch the bus. At 6:45. Got it?”

“Yes,” McKenna exasperates. She has a feeling that Jerome’s nagging so that she doesn’t focus on their impending struggle. She steps out of the car and hesitates before sticking her head back in. “Are you going to be able to get there from here?”

Jerome shrugs, saying he’ll use the GPS if he gets lost. McKenna stands there for a beat longer staring at herself. When Jerome is about to speak, she forces a smile and says good night. Shutting the door, Jerome waits for her to fish his keys out and open the door. He watches the door three minutes before starting the engine.

~

Jerome stares up at his ceiling. Well, the ceiling in McKenna’s bedroom. It is the first night and he can’t help the unease that settles after he parked the car in the McKinley’s drive. It stays through dinner and an impromptu family

meeting. The focus was on Tucker's report card. The results of which are cutbacks in his gaming privileges until he brings his grades back up.

Jerome thought the verdict was relatively light, but it isn't his place to parent the kid. Especially considering his current predicament. Conversely, Mrs. and Mr. McKinley seemed to have been minimally concerned that McKenna was working too hard and asked if she needed a break.

There is a lot of back and forth before they finally ask for her not to stay out so late by the school again. They aren't sure when she got back home the previous night, and her leaving so early was of concern to them. Jerome just gives the excuses McKenna had instructed him to use and her parents relent with no struggle. Jerome is certain he gave McKenna enough warning of what to expect from his household, but he hadn't expected the security to be so lax for her. He made the mistake of making his confusion obvious and McKenna's parents offered to provide him with punishment. He had to fight the instinct to accept the offer. There is no shame in the proper discipline.

They didn't know the location of their teenage daughter for about twenty-four hours. And their response is to tell her to take it easy on her studies. Despite that fact, they had been shocked when Jerome insisted on not studying for the night. It seems they have a high amount of trust in McKenna's sense of responsibility.

He wonders if he can entrust that same level of trust to her as her parents. The worries from earlier have been following him around like a shadow since he'd entered the house. When he got home, he needed to pee so bad, the first thing he looked for was the bathroom on the first floor. Then, once he was

inside, he stood in front of the toilet for three solid minutes debating the ethics of relieving McKenna. It was her body, but he still felt every ache and cramp from holding it long. He had no say in the matter, really. It was a natural process no matter what gender you were and...

Jerome had gritted while looking up at the ceiling as he undid the buttons on McKenna's pants and slid them and her underwear down. He felt ridiculous. A body is a body after all, but then he remembered that she had his body, and he would want her to treat it with the same respect. Still, a body has functions, and he could be trapped in her body for a while.

Jerome shudders at the memory, but it wasn't nearly as bad as when he took a shower. He'd considered tying one of her cloth belts around his eyes, but his hands would have still had to... He spent the entire event glaring up into the showerhead, letting the sting of the water on his eyes distract him. Repeating the phrase, 'A body's a body,' in his head to drown out any necessary thoughts.

Looking over at the digital clock on McKenna's nightstand, Jerome sighs and flips over. It is already 2:00 AM and his mind is still racing. He told McKenna to call him if anything happened and she had not. He texted her at 10 PM and she responded half an hour later, saying that he undersold the adorability of his younger siblings, which was inaccurate as he never mentioned the state of his brother and sister's appeal.

McKenna had stated that after finishing Jerome's chores, she sent the caretaker away and spent the rest of the evening with Jakala and Jeden, then

put them to sleep. Jerome asked if McKenna had caught his mom before she left for the night shift, but she hadn't.

He told her about her family's meeting but didn't bring up the lack of discipline he'd experienced. He did ask why they brought her brother into it, which she replied was because her family had a policy of not singling anyone out. Which explained why in the end, Mr. McKinley brought up a parking ticket he received, and Mrs. McKinley admitted she didn't make a donation when she stopped for coffee this morning.

He knew his father would be out for maybe another hour and suggested McKenna get some sleep before having to give the explanation they'd discussed as to why he hadn't come home last night. That being about four hours ago, Jerome was anxious. If McKenna still hasn't called, that probably means that things are fine.

Jerome rolls back onto his back and continues to stare up at the ceiling. This isn't his room. Holding a hand up to his face, he acknowledges for the millionth time that it isn't his body. He clasps both hands, holding them to his chest, closes his eyes tight, praying that the next time he opened his eyes, he would see his own hand and his own ceiling.

A Stint in My Shoes

(Wednesday Morning)

McKenna wakes in a panic. She doesn't remember falling asleep, but she must have drifted off sometime around a quarter past two. That was the last

time she checked Jerome's phone. She had kept reaching for it with the intent to call him, but she didn't want to risk waking the house. Jerome's father had returned about four hours ago and came to check on Jerome.

Jerome had warned McKenna that explaining to his father why he hadn't come home would be difficult. Jerome had definitely gotten his stature from his father. The man was downright menacing and when he called McKenna out of Jerome's room, the man was almost two heads taller. He had a stern face that suggested his smiles were rare blessings; something that when happened seemed like a gift.

He sat McKenna down and they had a conversation. To be honest, McKenna had expected yelling and maybe some physical punishment, but Mr. Hodge seemed like he never raised his voice. Which would probably be less effective than the gravel timbre that raked down McKenna's nerves?

Then when McKenna was thoroughly convinced that she committed the most heinous of crimes, Mr. Hodge thanked her for putting Jerome's siblings to bed and taking over for Ms. Hardy. It was such a complete 180 that Jerome's jaw hung open as Mr. Hodge rose. He clapped McKenna on the back of his son's shoulder with a deep chuckle and went into his bedroom.

Now it seems like a dream. At least that is how McKenna feels when she wakes up this morning. With those events at the forefront of her mind, it all feels more like a nightmare the more she considers it. She refuses to open her eyes as her heartbeat kicks up. But as unfamiliar scents and sounds drift in, she can't deny the truth. She opens her eyes to the still unfamiliar ceiling of Jerome's bedroom.

~

Jerome has two AP classes, and the rest are honors. How and why? are questions McKenna asks herself throughout the day. She could tell that Jerome was smart. When she met him, she assumed it was a predominance of emotional intelligence. She also thought that he might have a therapist, otherwise, what was with the whole sitting on the top of a building thing. But no, there is no therapist, just extremely hard classes that he is Ace-ing. With all the personal preparations they'd discussed, he somehow forgot to mention that.

These facts serve to make McKenna further believe that it is a stupid idea for them to pretend to be each other. Considering their situation, school isn't really a high priority on her list of concerns. McKenna has had to walk the halls by herself the entire day. Jerome said she could talk to people, but when she tried, they seemed surprised, yet not unwelcoming. Those that knew Jerome, understood that he liked to keep to himself.

Sometime in the day she spots Sue and Ella, and approaches them, forgetting her appearance. What's more, they seem to recognize her and approach smiling. Relief floods McKenna as she makes her way to them. She feels like she hasn't spoken to anyone in weeks. While she's usually quiet in class she used to use these short breaks to catch up with her friends.

Only they're not looking at her. They are looking past. They give Jerome's body a good amount of space as they passed him and continue on their way. Upon regaining her senses, McKenna turns to see her friends approach her

body. Her heart stutters as she watches herself open her locker with a slip of paper as if she has forgotten the combination. When her friends arrive, they speak and are ignored. They look at each other confused before tapping McKenna's shoulder. Her body jolts and looks as if it can't believe the pair are talking to her. McKenna watches on as Jerome manages an awkward smile with her features.

The two who approach him talk animatedly before gesturing down the hall, an invitation for Jerome to walk with them. Jerome nods reluctantly before closing McKenna's locker. Before he turns to follow McKenna's friends through the halls, he halts when he sees his body standing in the hallway, catching McKenna's eye. They spend a good minute openly staring at each other. Her friends and a few people in the hall notice and watch with rapt attention. Then her friends tug on her body's arm to get him to follow them, excitedly shaking him while glancing back at her.

For the rest of the day, McKenna is otherwise left to her own devices. She had guessed that Jerome is a solitary person but grossly underestimated his inclination to solitude. People were civil towards her, but none approached to make open conversation. Jerome seemed like the type to not have friends, and McKenna thought she was mature enough to go a day without laughing with her friends or seeing Marcus or doing all the hundreds of other things she normally does, but she isn't equipped to deal with the level of loneliness a single day as Jerome could bring her, and she's fairly certain she can't handle another day of this. By the time the dismissal bell rings for the end of 7th

Period. McKenna is beyond ready to leave. She is the first out of the classroom and one of the first to exit the school building.

She made a beeline to where she usually parks her car. Upon arrival, she shrugs her pack off and digs through it searching for her key, which is obviously not there. In frustration, she throws down Jerome's bag and slides her back down the side of her car. She tucks his knees to his chest and folds his arms on top of them, resting his head.

She understands what Jerome is saying about not seeing a moment of peace if their situation gets out, but right now it is too quiet for her liking. Everything is too quiet. Her mind, or Jerome's mind she supposes, as she has never experienced this in her own body. But Jerome's mind seems to turn even the most present and obnoxious sounds into background noise, which leaves her with this... She couldn't understand how Jerome managed it. Bad and scary thoughts fly through her mind all day and she had no one to vent to. No one to comfort her. She's never known this kind of detachment before. This separation from the moment.

There were truly people in the world who could live like this.

She had to hand it to Jerome. It seemed like there were a great number of responsibilities his family expected of him, yet he managed to do so many things on his own.

He was incredibly independent. She found herself wishing that he was there. Even if his words couldn't calm her. She would have appreciated his starless gaze. An open and lonely universe that proved you didn't need stars to be beautiful.

She jerked from her thoughts by the sound of a car door unlocking. And the approach of Emma and Sue, leaving for the day. They are in the middle of a conversation.

“... Seriously what’s up with that?” Emma exclaims.

“I know, right,” Sue speaks fast with excitement. “She just shoved him. Like wow! They’re totally breaking up.” Emma gasps like her mother was just insulted and chastises her friend for making such an outrageous statement. McKenna rolls her eyes wanting to join the conversation. She wants to nag them about paying more attention to their schoolwork and less on the latest gossip. She’s about to do just that, once again forgetting whose body she is in before she hears what Emma says next.

“McKenna and Marcus are golden,” McKenna freezes in her crouched state, ears perked at the mention of her boyfriend.

“They’re not like cliché couples you see in the movies, but they’re still great together.”

“And let me guess, if that’s not love, then you don’t know what is?” Sue teases. McKenna sees Emma shove Sue.

“I’m just saying they are so cute together, why would she want to ruin a good thing?”

“You sound a little jealous, are you sure you’re not just worried about Marcus?”

“Why would I be worried about Marcus?” Emma asks incredulously.

“Because you’ve been crushing on him for the past two months, duh.”

“Are you insane! Seriously, don’t say stuff like that,” Emma jumps on Sue to cover her mouth. “You know how people like gossip. If anyone heard that, they’d think I was some kind of home-wrecker.”

Sue breaks out in a peal of laughter that Emma follows with subdued chuckles. McKenna is stunned by this new information and tucks it away to bring it up later at a more opportune time. They begin moving again and McKenna finally remembers she is in someone else’s body, and it would probably look like she was eavesdropping, which was technically true, but that wasn’t her intention. So there. She sees Emma coming around the front to get into the passenger side and moves towards the trunk of her car before she can be spotted. They continue their conversation.

“But, still, who was that guy she was staring at. I mean what is the deal with that. It was like a scene in a Kate Hudson movie. So dramatic...”

The rest is cut off when both young women get in the car and close the doors. So, people have taken more notice of her and Jerome than she thought. She acknowledges that she’d been so preoccupied with her test on Wednesday, that she told Marcus to leave her alone until she got through it.

And then there was the whole weird kid on the roof thing that was distracting her, but she was going to make it up to him after her test, that was her last thought when Marcus talked to her on Monday, asking when he could see her again as if they hadn’t eaten lunch together or had the same 6th Period. She had just texted him Monday, playing along, saying she’d give him her full attention on Wednesday after her quiz. Wait, wasn’t that today?

Oh god, her chemistry quiz. With all the madness going on, it completely slipped her mind. She shoots to her feet and sees that the parking lot is already clear of half of its occupants. She looks around for any sign of her body approaching, but there is nothing more than a few students still milling around. A flash of realization comes to her and she stomps from the lot in search of herself.

She finds him on the roof, of course.



(Thursday Morning)

Come Thursday Morning, McKenna's phone goes off before her alarm. How is it possible for her friends to be up this early? Jerome learns that even though his mind is in her body, McKenna's body has an imprint of its owner that can't be erased. He finds it incredibly difficult to get up in the morning. After convincing her parents that there was nothing wrong-- they were concerned that McKenna was skipping her study time. He went to bed at 8'o'clock sharp, trying to get as much rest as possible. But it's no use.

The buzz of McKenna's device only stirs him from slumber as he turns to face away from it.

It seems like only seconds before her first alarm sounds. The obnoxious siren makes him jolt and he slams his fist down on the disarm button.

Yesterday, he hadn't set them, and Tucker came to wake him up. Jumping on McKenna's bed and hurtling onto her body. Jerome just groaned

and rolled over. Which only barely registered as weird as he hardly ever had trouble waking in the morning, even on little sleep.

He makes to roll out of bed when McKenna's body seems to go limp and sinks back into the mattress. Before he knows what hit him, he is unconscious again.

Ten minutes later the alarm on the other side of the room goes off. Jerome sits up, his back stiffened as blaring sounds in the room. He pinpoints the source and shuttles warily over to it. He didn't set this one. He recognizes the small star figure that is always by the door, but he didn't know it was an alarm. One of McKenna's parents must have set it for him. He sighs gratefully before shuffling to the bathroom to start the day.

Jerome finishes breakfast at the dining table with McKenna's brother, who is excitedly explaining that his favorite teacher, Mrs. Fletcher, is bringing her horned lizard to class to teach them something about something, apparently.

Honestly, Tucker doesn't seem to know what he was talking about, though he likes pretending otherwise. The point of his story is that his class will be feeding the thing crickets and watching it blow fire at a fake town or something.

Jerome chuckles to himself as Tucker compares the reptile to Godzilla. Mrs. McKinley had asked him to take Tucker to school, so he'd stayed later while the kid got ready, and they ate together.

Tucker shoves two spoonfuls of Lucky Charms into his mouth and chatters on, no longer in the realm of reality. Jerome thinks Tucker would flip if he found out his sister's body was being inhabited by someone else.

Tucker began humming action music softly as he finished off his cereal. Probably fantasizing about a great battle between a giant lizard and the air force. A beeping light on his left side catches Jerome's attention and he looks down at McKenna's phone. It is a message from Marina, One of McKenna's many, many friends.

He didn't think people could have a large number of friends at once. Not in real life, anyways. And for the most part, it is true. The people that approached McKenna's body came at different intervals and when one group met another, their only interaction was through McKenna. She definitely fixed herself in different circles.

While Jerome can sympathize with the need to live like this, he is discouraged by the fact that participating in this whole charade means that he will never get a moment of peace. It made the alternative more and more appealing. The only exception was in her classes when the teachers were lecturing.

It seemed McKenna had a strict policy of *No Funny Business* while classes were in session. But that didn't stop some people from trying. Chelsey tapped McKenna's shoulder during their Lit Period and Jerome had turned to see what she wanted. Chelsey had just passed him a note asking why McKenna wasn't at school yesterday. When he turned to reply, the girl nearly jumped out of her skin, then mouthed, 'later'.

If she didn't want to know then, then why ask?

Jerome just nodded and turned back around. Then when they were in the hall. Chelsy seemed to forget about her earlier question asking Jerome if McKenna was feeling okay and asking if she was recanting on her *'No Funny Business'* decree. McKenna hadn't mentioned it in their discussion, but from Chelsy's expression, it was probably important to McKenna. He already guessed she was one of those study hard types, but he didn't know she took it so seriously.

Jerome taps the phone screen and enters McKenna's passcode. When he reads the text, he has little time to let his shock settle as Tucker jumps up from his seat, screaming, "Done," at the top of his lungs. Jerome flinches and smiles over at the little boy. Tucker was starting to grow on him.

Thankful for the distraction, Jerome pockets the phone and grabs the key to the car. The tips of his fingers vibrate with his nerves. He was never one for gossip. But he understands what rumors are capable of and how fast and far they spread. No matter how people seem to whisper as they discuss matters that have nothing to do with them. Sometimes it felt like they were being that loud on purpose, and thus secrets no longer remained secret. That was how he had heard of the prank in Mrs. Grisellie's class and that the uni-sex bathroom at the end of the hall in the science wing of the school was for passing messages and other things between the sexes. Knew that Rachel Michaels was hooking up with Trenton W., that Victoria G. was on birth control, and that Romero Tulsa was on probation.

Of course, he didn't know who those people were, but he knew their secrets. Seemingly, he now found himself in a similar predicament, though, obviously it wasn't true. At least McKenna didn't mention anything about cheating on Marcus.

~

Marina and Kelly walk Jerome from French to McKenna's locker going on about what Jefferson did during the pep rallies and how cute October is when he was falling asleep in class. He nods along and giggles, feigning interest. Jerome really wishes someone would come put him out of my misery. He can't believe that he has to listen to this "girl talk." What were they even talking about? He honestly has no idea, but they are significant members of McKenna's party; and if they want to continue living their lives as normal as possible, then he has to put up with this charade. But all Jerome wants to do is tell the girls that he doesn't care and to go bug someone else about it.

But he is McKenna. McKenna wouldn't throw away her friends. Though she should. It's just his opinion; friends are overrated. Jerome can feel his patience flicker as they ramble on. Nothing against them of course, he just simply isn't a people person.

Jerome shuts McKenna's locker door and turns in time to see his body heading down the south hallway, storming in his direction. She's moving with such purpose that the other girls look her way too. At first, he cringes to think about all the attention his body's getting, but then he notices McKenna's not

only walking towards his direction, she's walking directly towards him.

Towards him and her friends.

She stops in front of him, his facial features set with a livid sort of fury he doesn't think he's ever expressed.

"I need to talk to McKenna." she puts emphasis on the name, grabbing her body's hand. Kelly makes a show of taking the other one, stopping any further action.

"Um, excuse me. Who are you?" she demands pulling Jerome away from McKenna. He can see this turning into an unfortunate situation quickly and pulls McKenna's hands out of both of their grasps, turning to Kelly and Marina.

"Hey guys, I'll meet you in math okay. Let me just talk to... Jerome real quick."

"Are you sure?" Marina whispers in McKenna's ear, "He could be really bad news. You don't wanna get caught up with a guy like that, do you? And imagine the stories John will spin when he hears. He'll have a field day spreading the rumors of how you let yourself be whisked away. You know how he is, Kenna."

"Yeah," Jerome gives her a tight smile to hide his grimace, attempting to mask the displeasure at the "a guy like that" comment, and the presumption that McKenna was even his type. "I know, okay. Calm down, I'm just gonna talk to him. It's no big deal, just wait for me. Give me two seconds, alright."

They exchange worried glances as Jerome walks to the opposite side of the hallway with his body following suit.

“I thought we were gonna keep a low profile and act as if nothing happened. You know, I would never have approached you when I was still... me. So exactly what are you doing?” he asks.

“No, what are you doing?” McKenna says, stepping a little too close. People gasp as they walk by and give them suspicious looks.

“What are you talking about?” Jerome asks, pushing her away. “I thought you didn't wanna make a scene,” Jerome says, making more space between them, at this, McKenna only steps closer to make her point.

“I'm talking about YOU. Avoiding Marcus,” McKenna exasperates. Jerome avoids making eye contact with her and continues walking down the hall, moving around his body on the left but McKenna just catches up with him, grabbing his shoulder.

“What do you ...” he begins.

“Don't even try it,” she says getting closer to his face. Now Jerome starts to worry.

“Maybe we should do this some other time,” he says looking around noticing that a few people have pulled their phones out.

“You agreed to be me and live my life,” she says jabbing her finger at my chest.

“I'm sorry, he was being a little too friendly if you know what I mean.”

“He's my boyfriend. He's supposed to be more than just friendly. And you said that you could deal with that so I'm going to need you to keep your word,” McKenna seethes as quietly as she can. Nobody is close enough to hear their words, but...

“But I'm a dude,” Jerome hisses a bit too loudly and gets a strange look from someone passing in the opposite direction. There is a crowd beginning to form.

“No, I'm a dude, and you. You are McKenna McKinley. You got that,” It wasn't a question. “So act like it and stop messing up my relationship.” She stops dead in the hall and the onlookers hold a collective breath as she gives her body a critical once over then nods once before storming off in the opposite direction; leaving Jerome there to endure the awkward stares and presumptuous smiles by himself. He can do nothing but watch as she storms down the hallway, a force of nature in his own body.

~

“Hey McKenna, wait up,” Marcus pushes his way to the front of McKenna's locker.

Jerome's been avoiding him since McKenna's scolding when she told him to remain engaged, but he just can't. So far, Jerome's gotten away with it by telling Marcus he needed space to study so he could bring McKenna's grade up. Which is sort of true. At least the, bringing her grade up part. McKenna's averaging about a 93, but Jerome doesn't need to study to raise her average. Her classes were pretty easy.

However, her parents have the expectation that she's spending some of her time doing a daily study session, so he has to keep that up. It's weird her schedule is 75% filled with study, yet she finds time for the rest of her life.

Jerome has to give her credit. It's pretty impressive that she even has the time for this guy.

"Hey," Marcus says once he finally reaches Jerome. Marcus moves to kiss McKenna's cheek and Jerome fights the urge to move away. "I feel like I haven't seen you since last week."

"That's not true," they had the last class together. Jerome was hyper-focused on the teacher so he wouldn't have to interact. Also, there was the rushing out of the room before Marcus could harass him.

"You're not avoiding me, are you?" Yes.

"What? Don't be ridiculous," Jerome shoves Marcus playfully in the shoulder before closing McKenna's locker. Jerome turns sideways and lets Marcus fall in step beside him as he moves down the hall.

"I know. I'm just kidding. I remember. You take school very seriously," Marcus says with a mocking lithe.

What a jerk.

"But I really do miss you. Your tournament is this weekend, isn't it? Why don't I come by afterward and we can hang?"

"Well, I would, but you know there's probably going to be a celebration after, you could always show up earlier to show support and then join us for dinner or something."

"Yeah, okay. Sounds cool. Text me the address of the gymnasium. I gotta go or I'll be late for practice. Call me later tonight." He kisses McKenna's forehead and Jerome can't hold back the shudder that runs down the body's spine. Marcus gives him one final smile before taking off.

Despite his apparent obliviousness, Marcus doesn't seem like a bad person. Just a little self-centered, maybe, and too clingy. Jerome can't outright hate the guy, but if he is going to be this involved Jerome might just crack first.

~

(Thursday Evening)

For someone insisting they keep the act up, Jerome can't understand how McKenna comes to the conclusion that going to her house together is the right move. Obviously, she doesn't understand the concept of discretion. She re-explains to Jerome, for the sixth time, how them investigating their condition will be a "non-issue." Jerome has no choice but to listen to her, as she corners him on the roof, *again*, for the second day in a row. Honestly, he is considering finding a new place to find solace.

They wait for most of the parking lot to clear, then McKenna begins her trek from the school entrance down the road as if she's walking to Jerome's house. Jerome waits ten minutes before he starts the car and drives. He stops near her as inconspicuously as possible and when she gets in, they drive in silence.

When they pull into the McKinley driveway, McKenna's father is at the mailbox. He smiles sweetly in Jerome's direction before it fades as his eyes move to Jerome's body. McKenna stiffens in her seat under her father's scrutiny. She is quick to break eye contact as Jerome turns the engine off.

McKenna swears under her breath. "I forgot they would be here." Jerome looks at her incredulously.

Then he schools his face into neutrality as Mr. McKinley makes his way over. “Do you want me to take you back?” Jerome asks, lowering his voice. He sympathizes with McKenna. He imagines it would be hard having his father look at him without any recognition.

McKenna responds to this sympathy, shaking her head once before determination settles on her face. Jerome nods as he exits the vehicle.

“Sweetie,” Mr. McKinley calls from a short distance. Jerome can’t help the smile that finds its way to his lips as Mr. McKinley makes a territorial stance. “You’re home, and you brought a friend,” he throws daggers McKenna’s way and Jerome’s smile falters.

“This is Jerome-Tyler. He is an honor student at school. He’s in my year, dad.” Jerome tries not to cringe, “I asked him here to tutor me.”

Mr. McKinley’s eyes narrow as he purposefully rakes his eyes over Jerome’s body’s towering form. His body is as tall as McKenna’s father, which must be weird for her, being eye-level with her father.

“Is that right?” He directs the question to where McKenna stands in Jerome’s body, probably considering the motivations his daughter could have in bringing a boy, who isn’t her boyfriend, home. Motivations that have nothing to do with schoolwork most likely.

“It’s fine. He is really good in school, he’s in advanced placement, so I thought he could give me some pointer.” It wasn’t a total lie. Though that isn’t why McKenna is here. Jerome had seen how she’d set up her schedule. She was definitely overthinking things when it came to the classes she was taking.

He could give her some tips to reduce her study time and help her direct focus on particular areas. Maybe when they found a way to switch back.

When they enter the house, Jerome is followed by McKenna with Mr. McKinley close behind. McKenna doesn't say much, which isn't helpful. She needs to make a good impression so they can be trusted alone. But that isn't really a problem. McKenna's parents have a lot of trust in her. Which does explain how they could hear she missed a whole day of school and not totally lose it. That being said, Jerome didn't expect Mr. McKinley to just let his body waltz into his daughter's bedroom with no objections. Yet, that is pretty much what happens.

Jerome doesn't dwell on the situation. He simply sets up shop at McKenna's desk and gets to work.

~

Now, this is tricky. They haven't found anything in their initial searches other than articles and reviews on Freaky Friday and similarly themed movies, some light novels, and then there was that Chis Brown parody. They decide to split some of the information and go through it, but there's really not anything helpful there.

It's hard to focus with McKenna's parents taking turns checking in on them. They keep her chemistry book open against the wall in front of where Jerome's sitting, just in case.

When they first entered, Mr. McKinley made a point of shoving McKenna's door stopper under the door to keep it from closing, even the tiniest bit. McKenna and Jerome got the message loud and clear.

The only time Mr. McKinley actually gets involved is at the end when McKenna heaves a sigh of frustration. They didn't find anything, and she is relieved to have the break, but disappointed in the results. She throws his body carelessly into her bed as Mr. McKinley is passing by. Jerome is still sitting at the desk not paying her any mind until her father practically launches himself into the room.

McKenna sits up quickly and waits for him to explain himself, instead, he remains staring his daughter down. He makes a show of dragging his gaze from Jerome's body to the bed and back. Instantly, McKenna is on her feet. An apology on her lips when her father finally breaks his silence.

"Stay for dinner, Jerome." It's more of a command than an invitation, but either way, there is no way... that McKenna is passing up the opportunity to spend time with her family.

"Okay, I'd be glad to."

Jerome shoots McKenna a look but her gaze remains fixed on her father.

"Thank you, sir," she says. Something like gratitude makes its way into her eyes and Jerome watches as her father's demeanor softens.

"It will be ready soon, why don't you two wash up. Jerome, you can use the bathroom in the hall." Mr. McKinley says pointedly before stepping aside so McKenna can slip past him, and out of the room. When McKenna is out of

earshot, Mr. McKinley looks over and scrutinizes his daughter's face before making his way over to her.

"Is everything alright with you and Marcus?" Jerome stiffens in the chair. Surely teen gossip hasn't gotten this far.

"It's just, we haven't seen him in a while, and you bring this new boy home... Is everything okay?" He repeats.

When Jerome finally speaks, McKenna's voice is edged with nerves. This seems to be one of those father-daughter conversations that are no one else business.

He chuckles trying to lighten the mood. "Jerome's just an acquaintance. Mr. Yule saw I was struggling and suggested I ask for his help. He's been tutoring me but his schedule's tight, so we've been working at odd hours. But that's it."

"So, he's one of those brainy jocks?" Mr. McKinley asks, still not buying it.

Jerome has no idea where he is going with this. "He is not a jock. He doesn't play any sports." That seems to surprise the man.

"What do you mean? Are you sure he doesn't play a sport? How can you be certain?" Jerome doesn't answer, just gives him a questioning look, so he continues.

"How is he so... fit, then? "Oh. Well Jerome has to admit his inner self is probably the skinny nerd type, but from the moment he could, he's been helping his father with strenuous tasks, but also from looking at his father, there is no doubt it is genetics.

“He’s pretty good-looking.” Jerome looks at the man like he’d grown a second head. Mr. McKinley is still trying to feel out what his daughter thinks of the boy she brought home, specifically if there are any romantic feelings.

Thankfully McKenna returns and Mr. McKinley tells her to follow him to the dining room. Jerome makes a silent commitment to avoid McKenna’s parents for the rest of his stay in her body.

At the table, McKenna manages not to draw any more suspicion and endears herself to her parents. It isn’t hard. She just displays characteristics they love about Marcus and avoids the ones they don’t. In the end, she is really just displaying what she knows about Jerome’s personality with her knowledge of her family’s interests.

She talks to Tucker and realizes how badly she misses him. She had hoped her parents would ask her to stay. Despite the looks, Jerome was giving her. She knew her parents would hound him later, but she needed to see them.

By the end of dinner, McKenna has her father laughing heartily and her mother looking at her fondly. Jerome’s a good kid and she is more than happy to endear him to her family.

Said person is quiet throughout the whole exchange.

~

(Friday Afternoon)

Sweat slides between Jerome's shoulder blades and McKenna shivers. Mr. Hodge had asked her to come home earlier today to help him lay tiling for the neighbor's roof.

The school day had been incredibly uneventful. She took the bus home at 2:45 and got there at 3:15. From there, it was all manual labor and by the time they were done, it was 5:04 and she still had chores. She was exhausted and Mr. Hodge had gotten a call from work about a busted pipe, Mrs. Hodge's would be leaving for her shift soon.

McKenna wonders how the sun could still be so hot at six in the afternoon as she pushes the lawnmower across the shared yard of the Hodge's and the Stevenson's next door. She swipes Jerome's forearm across his forehead, stopping for a quick break. This has been the most active she's been in Jerome's body since the switch. She would have thought the experience would be more awkward, but when moving through tight space, Jerome's body easily makes adjustments, the movements are second nature as if she'd always moved through the world this way. But she supposes it is only natural that his body responds the way it always has. And for this she is grateful. You would think that switching bodies with someone meant you had to command every motion by force, but everything is pretty much on auto-control.

Even *that*.

That thing, that is the first considered distinction between boys and girls.

Sure, she faltered when she went to the bathroom the first time. It was so awkward. Having to pull it out... and... she still uses the stalls at school, and she still wraps it in toilet paper so there isn't any... *direct contact*.

No, with *that*, the thing that is on autopilot is where *it* goes and what *it* does. Also, Jerome's body's overall reaction to *it* is on autopilot.

For instance, when McKenna was getting dressed on that first day--she could bring herself to strip his body the night before-- Jerome's hands had moved on their own, fixing *it* in place. She didn't really notice; she was too busy trying not to freak out. Performing the actions as swiftly as she could to be done with it. But after her first shower... Well, let's just say she learned that *it* needs to be tucked in... for optimal comfort.

Honestly, McKenna's never worked like this before, and despite everything she's done already, she isn't too tired. Not physically anyway. She doesn't mind having to cut the grass or take out the trash or sweep the stairs.

She doesn't mind cutting the grass, but the chopping blades and burping motor are starting to set her teeth on edge. The aggressive sounds violating the truce of the evening silence. A silence that she was most familiar with when accompanied by Ella and Kelly relaxing beside Marina's pool. Though, usually, those times were accompanied with relatively less silence.

McKenna is beginning to notice that this is a common occurrence as Jerome.

The silence.

His body seems to naturally gravitate towards spaces that were vacuums for quiet. Like peace was a physical necessity for it.

But it isn't a problem, not really. She didn't expect to be dealing with it for much longer. Besides, Jerome had shown her how to cope with the silence. When it felt like it would consume her, she just needed to look out at the

people surrounding her and imagine how their experiences colored the expressions they wore.

Though the block is completely deserted at this time in the evening.

He told her to take her mind out of its present moment. Think of all the infinities that had yet to be considered. And for the most part, it worked.

Imagining all those possibilities.

McKenna lets her thoughts sweep her away from her reality while she listens to the mower drone on. She still longs for the security of others, but this will do for now. At this moment she can handle the quiet. It won't be long until she is back in her own reality, anyways.

She can handle it.

~

(Saturday)

Jerome had felt it before. The way McKenna's body seemed to have a mind of its own. It shines a new light on the term muscle memory.

McKenna gave him some pointers when they went over the moves, he was supposed to display. It is something called a Kata. They had spent the rest of last night practicing, but honestly, once he'd gotten into the groove of things, McKenna's body was practically moving on its own.

Now sitting in the front of the judges in a packed auditorium with over twenty-five stations set up for different events, Jerome goes through the motions again in his head. When it is finally his turn, he moves like liquid crying out with each extension of his hands and feet.

It had taken him by surprise when McKenna showed up going on about how she totally forgot about her Karate tournament and that he had to attend as her, which meant he needed to know what to do. Honestly, he thought it would be better if she just dropped out, but she insisted. Something about belt advancement and maintaining her place at the dojo.

Although it was new to him, Jerome found he enjoyed going through the motions. Maybe he would join a dojo when he went back to being himself. Of course, McKenna was just as popular in her class at the Rashin Dojo, as she was at Anderson High. She was also close to being top of her class. Which didn't really surprise Jerome, aside from the fact that he couldn't understand how McKenna kept up with all of these things.

The day is abuzz with the nerves of the contestants. For his performance, Jerome wins 2nd place. This surprises him because after his turn he sits and watches the others attentively. Their forms are strong and passionate. He expected that the boy two people away would receive a higher placement, as his form seemed more complicated, but apparently, points were given more so for the precision, not flashy moves.

Jerome meets with McKenna's parents for a quick lunch before he moves to the sparring mats.

This is the event that he was particularly worried about when McKenna was explaining what to expect. Jerome isn't a pacifist, per se, but he has never been in a real fight. His specialty is in de-escalation. McKenna told him to consider this the sport where the object is to gain the most points by landing

legal hits to your opponents. Which Jerome recognizes is the actual point of sparring.

The girl he is fighting is light on her feet and moves quickly. As the match opens, they circle each other once before the girl makes her move. She swings her leg in a roundhouse and Jerome steps back in time to dodge it. The girl takes this moment to move around and lifts her leg for a back kick. It lands on his chest. Jerome stumbles as the ref blows the whistle, signaling the first point goes to his opponent.

The crowd around the ring hollers words of encouragement to both parties as they reset. When the ref signals for them to continue, Jerome moves fast throwing three jabs that are blocked. He follows up with a front kick that is sidestepped. He mirrors her around the ring in defense as she counters with her own barrage.

Jerome doesn't have to remember to keep the arms up as McKenna told him as this is something her body accomplishes on its own, but Jerome's movements are jerky and stiff. He is having trouble keeping up with his opponent and is even flagged for holding on to her leg after he's blocked her kick.

Ultimately, the match goes to the girl. It doesn't surprise Jerome, though he hadn't expected to enjoy himself as much as he did. Martial Arts is definitely something he is going to look into when they switch back.

When Jerome leaves the mat, Tucker runs up and hugs his sister's body. McKenna's parents come up to Jerome shortly after and they're all consoling him on his loss. It would seem McKenna didn't often lose, or maybe she didn't

handle losing well. Either way, when they see Jerome isn't as distraught as they'd expected, they head over to watch the rest of the matches.

When everyone's events are finished someone suggests they go out and celebrate. Though McKenna would have definitely accepted the offer, Jerome isn't used to his Saturdays being so eventful; and it's already late. With that in mind, he declines and makes the excuse of having prior engagements.

Fortunately, Marcus appears in that moment and everybody lets Jerome off the hook, most likely making dubious assumptions. McKenna's parents take Tucker home and Jerome grabs a ride with Marcus. Once they are alone, they talk, and Jerome gets to know him as more than a varsity tennis player and student council secretary.

Turns out he is a politically minded person and has an internship at Brown with the treasurer, Naomi this summer. On the ride to McKenna's place, Jerome asks him what he thinks about the climate in the political atmosphere and if he thinks conservatism is a disabler of progress. Marcus laughs and goes into his stance on the subject.

Apparently, Jerome is showing more interest in his interests than McKenna usually does when she and Marcus speak. Marcus asks him about it and Jerome laughs nervously, trying to remember who he is supposed to be. For a moment Marcus looks skeptical, but he continues the conversation.

When they arrive at the McKinley home Marcus walks Jerome to the front door. There is a pause as if Marcus wants to say something. Instead, he leans in. All of a sudden Jerome remembers McKenna's lecture for refusing Marcus the last time, but that was probably because of the publicity of the

rejection. Though Jerome is just as caught off guard as last time, he manages to react. Jerome throws his arms around Marcus and squeezes him to McKenna's chest. For his part, Marcus is a little thrown, but he wraps his arms around McKenna's body.

"Thanks for coming today. I really appreciate it," Jerome whispers into Marcus's hair. He pulls away slowly to see if it is a sufficient distraction.

"Of course. I missed some of it, but I had a lot of fun. I should come to watch your competitions more often," Marcus says. The smile on his face is genuine. He doesn't seem to notice he is being diverted. Feeling relieved, Jerome unlocks the door. He steps in and turns to see Marcus smiling contently before walking back to his car.

A Turn in My Own Disillusionment

~

McKenna misses the competition. And honestly, it isn't so bad. Jerome had texted Sunday morning, inquiring about her whereabouts. She had to stay and watch his siblings because his mom got called in for a pop-up shift and his father was on duty.

She just inquiries about the outcome.

It definitely went better than she thought it would and he told her about getting to know Marcus. She asks about just how close they had gotten. And Jerome admits he refused to kiss Marcus, but he pacified him with a hug. McKenna laughs it off.

She can't shake the feeling that Jerome is being a better her than she was. Sure, she made Jerome appear more engaged with his family, but they seem more concerned about this than anything. They keep telling her that they appreciated her helping out more, but she could take time for herself. She had to admit that when they did ask her for help, it was a lot and left her drained. They probably wanted their son to have time to himself.

She found that Jerome was a writer. When she discovered his writings, she tried not to be nosy, but as that telltale emptiness fills her, she gives up on her moral dilemma.

There is a lot of ranting on the economy and what he sees on the news. It is mostly opinions but there were a few essays with research and everything. She scoffs at that. What shocks her most, are what appear to be poems. Something about the arrangements strikes her as strange. When she turns the page, she finds notes.

Jerome isn't a hopeless romantic, droning on about a special someone who will fulfill his mushiest fantasies. He considers the world as someone's experiment gone wrong, with the subjects taking on personalities they were never meant to have.

'When lab rats tire of running the wheel, they stop to ponder their existence. Then, after coming to the conclusion of their potential, they revolt.'

McKenna supposes this is why Jerome insists on secrecy for the circumstance. While it isn't certain they will become lab rats after asking for help, McKenna understands that in doing so, they will be subjecting

themselves to scientists to be poked and prodded. And if in the end, they are stuck in the roles of the experiment, they may not have the power to revolt.

Still, McKenna is willing to take that risk. She looks over Jerome's room one last time. She places his writings back in the chest she found them in and returns the chest to the top of the shelf. They cannot stay this way anymore; they need help. And she is determined to convince Jerome of this. It is in both of their best interests.

At least that's what she tells herself as she exits the room. Trailed by that dreaded silence.

~

(Week 3- Sunday Night)

Jerome tosses and turns in her bed. It is nothing like the first night. He's gotten used to the room, the mattress, the crooked moonlight from the window to his left. He's even gotten used to the smell. Because he was McKenna, and the quicker he made good with that, the easier it would be to pretend. He won't forget himself though, he is still Jerome after all. Still, until they find a way to switch back, he can't do anything but play his role. And so, these thoughts keep him up night after night. He stares at the ceiling wishing. Only wishing he could fall asleep.

Click, click.

He looks up in time to see another stone hit the glass as another click sounds on the windowpane. Moving groggily, he goes to the window and throws it open. McKenna is standing on the grass below him.

“So, you are awake,” she says waving her arms.

“What are ...”

“SHH,” she hisses louder than necessary. “My parents are really light sleepers; they'll hear you if you say anything.”

Without any further warning, she begins to climb up the metal scaffolds on the side of the building. When she reaches the window, Jerome steps aside to let her in.

“You can't sleep either? Hmm?” he says, helping her through.

“Nope,” she says lifting her leg over the side and closing the window behind her. Then she chuckles to herself. “My dad would kill me... You... This body, if he knew you... I was in here.”

They laugh at the truth behind her words. Amazingly, sharing each other's bodies allows them to experience each other's lives. It's also disturbing.

“Shh. Are you trying to get us busted?” Jerome says moving to sit on the bed. He was wearing one of her more revealing nightgowns, but it didn't bother either of them as McKenna comes to sit down next to him. “Everything's fine at home, right?” he asks worriedly.

She sighs deeply and crawls over to the other side of the bed and gets under the covers.

“Yeah, everything's fine. Just the usual quiet,” She pulls the covers over her head.

“I kind of understand you better,” she continues after a brief pause.

“With the silence that surrounds that house sometimes. I get how you turned

out the way you are now,” She turns to face the wall, no longer able to meet his gaze.

Starting with his broad shoulders, Jerome drags his eyes down the length of his own body. He recalls the comment she made about his figure. Complimenting how defined it seems.

“What about you?” she says, drawing his attention back up to his head. “Why are you up at this hour? Shouldn't you be... I don't know, sleeping? Don't you have a big day tomorrow or something?” She says, nestling deeper into the covers.

“I thought you were keeping track of all of your schedules. Don't you care about what's going on in your life anymore?” he asks, getting under the covers next to him-- Her...

McKenna turns over, pulling the covers away to look him in the eyes, bringing a hand up to caress her cheek. He allows her smooth circles over the surface of her own skin. He could relate to wanting to feel connected to your body. This thing... What happened to them is draining. It is exhausting. Not just pretending to be someone else, but also being physically separated from yourself. It taxes the spirit.

For the first few nights, it was adjusting to this new form that kept Jerome up. Being in a different body is so uncomfortable, it actually hurts sometimes. He feels stiff and boxed in. Like the skin is too tight around him, and he is always on the verge of a claustrophobic attack. And when that feeling faded, he was left with an empty pit, the feeling of general wrongness. Like he is missing something that never really belonged to him, but he needs it.

These are the feelings reflected in the eyes as McKenna begins tracing the features of her face. Jerome understands. So, he closes the eyes-- trapping his spirit behind the vessel-- and wishes for sleep. Sleep that will come to take him from this nightmare, and to drown out the silent weeping that begins minutes later.

~

Jerome wakes and he is being suffocated. No, he is being embraced. Tightly. He managed to shift the head away from the broad chest eclipsing his vision to look up. He stares into his face. It looks serene. He briefly indulges the idea that he is dead before reality rushes back in.

“You wanna quit.”

“What,” the statement throws him. It takes him a moment to realize that McKenna is even awake, as the eyes are still closed.

“It's fine, that stuff was all pointless. It's not even working,” McKenna refuses to look at Jerome, she is being uncharacteristically cryptic.

“What are you talking about?” Jerome asks, sitting up. He stretches the arms and looks down to see McKenna looking at him with a hard gaze. It is far too early for that kind of severity.

“We don't have to do this anymore. I... I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to keep pretending. So, you don't have to keep up this charade.”

“But when we switch back--”

“And what if we never switch back? Are you going to play me for the rest of your life, Jerome? Because two weeks is enough for me. You said we should wait, but so far nothing has changed.”

“I know that, but we still don’t know how this happened. And it's not like there is a precedent for this kind of thing. If we tell anybody about it, they’ll never believe us. You’re right, nothing’s changed. If we exposed ourselves then-
_”

“Then what? You’ll lose your precious normal. News flash, nothings been normal for a while now,” McKenna throws the blanket off of his body and stands. She moves to storm out through the window.

“The peace you’ve wanted to maintain no longer exists, and if you think otherwise then you’re delusional.”

“Where are you going, McKenna, wait.”

“Keep your voice down. The sun is already up; Tucker could be in here any minute.”

“We have to talk about this,” Jerome says moving to the window as she throws her foot over the windowsill.

“There’s nothing to talk about. We haven’t even been trying to look for a solution.”

“That’s because I’ve been busy living your life. The least you could do is put some effort in.”

“Then stop. I’m telling you to stop pretending, ‘cause I am done.”

“So what, you’re going to walk up to your parents and tell them who you are and expect them to just believe you? Hate to break it to you, but that’s not happening.”

“I’m going to go find help,” she says hanging over the side, making her way down.

“No one can help us!” Jerome yells out the window as McKenna’s bedroom door opens.

“Uh, McKenna who are you talking to,” Tucker walks in rubbing his eyes. He joins Jerome by the window and looks out.

“Is that Jerome?” he asks as McKenna makes her way across the backyard, trying to shake the ground beneath her feet with every step.

~McKenna’s Search

(Monday)

McKenna skips school. She can’t stand another second of this. Jerome doesn’t know anything. He is wrong. It won’t fix itself. They’re never going back to their bodies. Not without help. At least that’s what she tells herself as she uses his computer, looking for anyone who’s claimed to have any out-of-body experiences. She finds an online chat where people discuss possibilities, but the dialogue consists of abduction theories and government experiment conspiracies. She engages in as little conversation as possible but lets them know she’s looking for anyone who knows what they’re talking about.

Other sites come closer to reflecting her circumstances, but the deeper she goes into the web, the further she gets from reality. The last place she

browses turns out to be a forum site for fiction writers. She spends some time reading some of the concepts and the material's pretty good.

A quick look at the clock shows that she's been at it for four hours now with nothing real to show for it.

Suddenly, a notification dings in the bottom-right corner of the screen. She sees that it's an email with the web address of one of the communities she'd visited. She opens the link but hesitates. She did leave Jerome's email for anyone to get back to her, but now that she's facing it, she is worried that there could be a real threat at the end of the line. Still, McKenna shakes that feeling, attributing it to Jerome's hysterics rubbing off. She opens the message. It's from a Teller Scott.

He introduces himself as an investigator of the "Paranormal." *Okay*. He says that her story seems legit and asks if she's recently experienced a celestial event that could alter her perception of reality and if she has had any mental impairments after this event. He asks her if she believes in the unexplainable.

She responds immediately, overjoyed that someone is taking her seriously, though she tries to temper her excitement, in case this is a scam.

She asks if he thinks she should go to the hospital. He says that if it has been over a week since the incident, she's probably fine. He offers to give her a check-up personally, this gives her pause once again. But instead of responding with suspicion, McKenna politely declines.

They go back and forth like that for some time, then they exchange phone numbers and Teller tells her to contact him anytime. She considers this progress.

McKenna is shutting down Jerome's computer when Mr. Hodge walks into the room.

"Good afternoon," McKenna greets. He nods taking in the state of the room. McKenna had noticed that Jerome is tidier than she is, and she did try to replicate his behavior. But she realizes as she follows Mr. Hodge's gaze to the pile of books, clothes, and chargers dispersed around the space, that her effort is lacking. She wonders how she and Jerome could have thought they were going to pull this off.

"Are you alright, son?"

"What do you mean?" McKenna is thrown off by the question.

"You've been spending a lot of time in here these past couple of days. If there is something wrong? You know you can talk to me."

"I know, sir. There's nothing wrong." For a moment, Mr. Hodge stands staring into his son's face like he might know something. He especially takes time to look deep into McKenna's eyes, as if he could see that the soul behind them didn't match the depthless abyss he'd nurtured for the last seventeen years. But then he nods and gestures to the room, opting not to comment on whatever it was that he saw in those eyes. If he noticed the impossible.

"Make sure you clean this up," he says and exits.

McKenna feels like she has lied enough. She wants this to be over. To see her parents, and for her parents to see her, too. The real her. They don't have time for this thing to work itself out. It's hurting people outside of McKenna and Jerome. If Jerome wants to wait, that's his business, but she will not be taking any more chances.

McKenna sends another email to Teller asking if it's possible for them to meet in person. When she doesn't receive an instant reply, she gets nervous.

Five minutes go by.

Then fifteen.

She decides to tidy up while she waits to keep her mind off the quiet, but the silence follows her around the room. Thirty minutes later, McKenna returns to the laptop to find no reply. She turns the notification sound on and plays some music to distract herself.

There's not much for her to do but wait. With each passing song, she counts the minutes. It's not as soothing as she intended. The music is another reminder of the passing of time until the notification dings, and she rushes to the screen. A quick glance at the clock shows that two hours have gone by, and she has no recollection of how she'd spent that time. But it's unimportant because Teller responds saying that they could meet in public in two days.

The digital clock reads 10:23 pm. Mr. Hodge hadn't said anything about Jerome missing school today, but he was concerned. If McKenna wants to act without getting their families involved, then she needs to keep up the act. At least for two more days. She decides to go to school tomorrow. Though she dreads having to watch Jerome parade around in her skin, she can't afford to draw too much attention to his body. Not if she is going to keep him out of it.

Two days. In two days, she can begin the process of fixing this mess. In two days, she'll be closer to ending this nightmare. And she can do it alone.

~

Teller is a calming non-present presence. Given that they haven't met yet, McKenna fills him in on the situation as she understands it and he mostly listens. Sometimes he throws out theories that sound reasonable and she believes him when he tells there is a way out. She hasn't told him about Jerome, but she understands that for Teller to believe that she is telling the truth-- as he does-- means that he has to know there is another person. He doesn't pry though; he just tells her that there is someone who may be able to help. A psychologist who specializes in dissociative patients. Teller says that he has been depositing hints about McKenna's situation to the doctor, and he has not dismissed the possibility of it.

McKenna points out that what she is going through is not the same as having a dissociative disorder, but Teller says that is a non-issue.

They are meeting today for the first time in a diner in the next town over just in case anyone recognizes Jerome's body. She leaves school during lunch.

When McKenna arrives, she gives the hostess Teller's name and is led to a table that is occupied by a dark blue rucksack and a denim jacket thrown over the chair. Their owner is nowhere in sight. The lady gestures to the seat across from the denim and inquiries about a drink. McKenna says sweet tea and the woman briskly walks away.

Sitting there alone, McKenna takes a moment to really take in her situation. She is meeting a complete stranger so they can discuss her being in the wrong body. There are so many things about this situation that should jump out at her, but she pushes away all possibilities of danger in favor of feeling like this is a step in the right direction.

Looking across from her she notices the backpack and jacket well-loved, probably Teller's favorite accenting items. There is no wallet or ID on the table, she figures he probably took them with him. He's probably a careful person, mindful of his surroundings. That thought eases McKenna's nerves some. From the sound of his voice, he seemed responsible. Someone she can feel comfortable putting her trust in.

McKenna takes out Jerome's phone to keep her occupied while she waits. She's scrolling through Ella's Snap when someone stops at her table. She looks up to find a young man who looks to be in his mid to late 20's. His blond hair is swept to the left messily like he has a habit of running his hand through it. He's wearing a collared white shirt that has a few buttons at the top with light-colored jeans. His eyes are bright, and his mouth relaxes into an easy smile.

"McKenna."

She starts to stand up, but the young man places a hand on her shoulder and shakes his head. He extends that same hand for her to shake. McKenna places her hand into his, numbly. She can hardly believe this is happening.

"I'm Teller. We've spoken on the phone," she nods.

He chuckles and takes his seat. "So, you wanted to meet in person" Again, she doesn't verbally respond, "Honestly, I hadn't intended for us to meet so soon, but you've been eager to get things underway. I can understand that, and I'll do whatever I can to help. But for now, why don't we just chat. Have you ordered already?"

As soon as he asks the question the server returns with McKenna's drink. She leaves again after taking their order. Teller talks about himself until McKenna breaks out of her stupor. Some of what he's saying, she remembers from their phone conversations. It doesn't take long until they're carrying on a full conversation. Something McKenna feels she hasn't had with anyone but Jerome for weeks. Not that Jerome wasn't great to talk to, he just didn't fancy himself a conversationalist. Which is something McKenna respects.

However, she is someone who can't stand any kind of silence, and she hates small talk. Luckily for her, it seemed Teller was cut from the same cloth. His words flowed easily and remained enticing. He really took an active role in the conversation, plus he had a very agreeable sense of humor. They talk until their food comes, then talk some more. By the time they're done, McKenna is feeling lighter mentally than she has in weeks. Teller is good at distracting from the problem at hand as well as making it seem like less of a big deal.

McKenna exits the diner as Teller holds the door open for her and the couple that is entering. She can't help her smile as he pushes his joke about switching bodies with a high school boy. McKenna throws her head back as she laughs at the absurdity of the situation. Hearing like that, she couldn't believe she never realized the humor in it.

Teller stops at a faded, multicolored van with many dents and mismatched lights. It kind of reminds her of the Mystery Machine; if no one bothered fixing it after a crash and it sat in a garage unused for years.

Teller offers to drive her back and she pauses, looks at the vehicle, then back at Teller.

“Is it safe?”

He just laughs and tells her to get in as he walks around to the driver’s seat. The drive is like lunch. The atmosphere is amiable and this time they don’t mention the switch. McKenna even manages to forget about it for a while. It isn’t until Jerome’s feet hit the pavement and Teller’s stopping at the stop sign at the end of the road that McKenna realizes she was just in a car with a stranger. The thought gives her chills that melt easily with the evening sun.

As McKenna enters Jerome’s front door, she counts herself lucky as Teller is a good person and true to his word. Still, she feels a little naive. She hadn’t expected him to be so disarming. As the door closes behind her, she thinks *lucky indeed*.

~

They meet again on Thursday. Teller called and asked if she wanted to talk some more in person. Obviously, McKenna accepted his proposal. They hadn’t talked much about her condition as he wanted her to begin to feel comfortable around him first. Though after two days of long phone conversations, she felt like they were old friends. He already knew the most important thing about her. That she was a *her*, despite appearances. Still, the lunch and the car ride had been nice. And she didn’t think twice before agreeing to meet him at Gobi’s mini-golf park. This time McKenna went after school and Teller picked her up on the walk home, as planned.

“So what do you want to do,” he asks as he swings. When he looks back at her she is fidgeting with their score sheet. She’s a little uncomfortable discussing this out in the open, but the place is near empty on a school day.

“I’m not really sure,” she trails off, getting quieter with each word.

“Dr. Hansen is busy this month, I don’t think he’d be able to come at least until late June,” he leans on his put and looks at her closely. Every now and again something would flash in his eyes, but she could quite place the look or shake the feeling that it was off. But it didn’t make her uncomfortable, just curious.

“Do you want to wait?”

“No.” the volume is surprising, and she lowers her voice. “I don’t want to wait. It’s fine. Let’s just go.”

“Go?”

“Yeah, as soon as possible. When can we leave?” she asks, setting up her shot. Teller is too quiet as he waits for her to face him.

“What are you going to tell his family?” the question stops her cold. McKenna had been trying not to think about it for the past couple of days.

She’d lost her parents the day they switched, but her parents would still have her as long as Jerome was there. If she left though, Jerome's family would lose him completely. She didn’t want to do that to them, but her options were limited. If she told them the truth, that would drag everything out into the open and Jerome would be exposed. If she said nothing, that was as good as running away. No matter what she chose, things were bound to get messy. She might as well do what she thought was for the best.

“I’ll tell them he loves them, and that he will be back soon.”

“I suppose it’s for the best,” she makes a noncommittal sound in the back of the throat and takes her shot.

“Then let’s leave tomorrow,” Teller rests a hand on Jerome’s shoulder. It is a calming gesture that helps McKenna feel like she is making the right choice. “It’ll be fine. Dr. Hansen has been giving your situation a lot of thought. I’m sure he’ll find a solution before they even notice you’re gone. And by then... Well, hopefully, the next time you get a physical, things’ll be in their proper places.”

McKenna chuckles and walks on to the course to stand near her ball. “I’m sure it’ll be that easy,” she says nudging Teller’s ball with her club.

He calls foul, rushing over to even the score. And just like that, she’s laughing again. The thought that she’s that much closer to getting her body back makes her lightheaded, and she just knows this is the right thing.

~

(Saturday at Dusk)

At 2:30 AM on the corner of a street two blocks from Jerome’s house, McKenna is standing, waiting to be picked up by the van driving towards her. She recognizes the discolored front lights.

He’s late, but that doesn’t deter her. She has long since turned off the part of her brain that flashes in warning when something seems off.

When the silver-ish vehicle rolls to a stop in front of her, she steels herself for this. Though her mind is made, she is still daunted by the secrecy of

the situation. But this is for the best. At least Jerome can have his peace while she fixes this.

The tinted windows are rolled up, so she can't see Teller in the driver's seat, but she can tell there is someone in the passenger seat. She goes to the sliding door and pulls it open. The overhead lights are turned off, so she can't see inside clearly, but she can tell that the seats have been removed and replaced with a bench that lines the side of the van. This does give her pause, but her confusion is quickly quieted by a familiar voice.

"Come on. Get in," Teller is looking back at her. His eyes flash with impatience.

"What happened to the seats?" McKenna asks, hopping up into the vehicle.

When she turns to shut the door, she notices the petite figure laying down on the bench. Something about the deep breaths and rise and fall of the person's chests strikes daunting familiarity with her. Before she can speak, Teller barks at her to close the door and sit down. He takes off down the street before she can find a seat.

There are four more people in the van; they're all wearing black and remain eerily silent. There is a heaviness in the air that McKenna cannot understand, but she can't shake the feeling that it is important. She's sitting across from the head of the sleeping figure and the more she stares, the less she wonders about who it is.

"Teller," her voice is like thunder in the silence. She can't take her eyes off of the form before her.

“You know it had to be this way. It’s what’s best for both of you,” is all he says, putting more weight on the gas.

McKenna looks to the back of Teller’s head, hoping this is some kind of joke. She realizes with sobering clarity that the stranger in the passenger seat is staring at her intently. Expectantly. Like she might sprout wings and try to fly away. Hoping for the chance to take on something... other. Her skin crawls and she directs her gaze to the four other men in the back with her, only to find that they are looking at her in the exact same way.

McKenna’s eyes shoot to her sneaker to avoid their calculating gaze. It is far too late to regret her decisions, but when she returns her gaze to her unconscious body, guilt boils under the skin of the body of the boy she has betrayed. Eyes as depthless as an abyss flash into her mind, and a single tear slides down Jerome’s cheek. She has made this final decision for them both and will see it through. When they go back to their own bodies, Jerome will understand that this was for the best.

This is what she tells herself as she stares and stares, praying to avoid those critical eyes a bit longer. McKenna hopes that at the very least, Jerome is having a nice dream.

Research

Body-Swapping in Film and Literature

At one point or another, people find themselves wishing that-- even just for a second-- they could become somebody else. The dream of walking in someone else's shoes-- to escape, to explore, or to learn-- has led to the creation of the body-swap genre. An official description of body-swapping describes it as being an event that usually takes place between two individuals. It is defined as the switching of consciousness/mind or body/appearance between two people. This transition can occur through unexplainable magical means or through scientific human-made ones.

Magical swaps are probably the most common form of body-swapping because as there is no known precedent for body-swapping at this time, it is easier to explain the event as an unknown. This type of swap usually happens without the consent or knowledge of those involved. It is sudden and disorienting and leaves those people distressed and irritable. A magical swap can happen for a number of reasons, but in literature and in film it most commonly occurs when there is a lesson to be learned from the switch; it usually involves learning to accept one's own circumstances and appreciating the struggle of the other person. In this way, a magical swap becomes an exercise in empathy through first-hand experience of another person's life.

A scientific swap happens when there is a cause for the swap, a specific purpose that calls for two or more people to switch places with each other. This type of swap also happens for the purposes of research, for exploration of the body in ways that traverse outside what some perceive as ethical. In both cases, unlike with the magical swap, the parties involved are typically

aware of what is happening to them and consent to the process. Because of this, scientific swaps usually do not happen unless it is absolutely necessary.

In literature, the fact that a swap has occurred is conveyed through a good deal of introspection, though it can be confusing at times to keep track of who is who. The fact that while reading, we get direct access to the reasoning behind a character's behavior, while other characters who are unaware of what is going on remain in the dark about the situation, help sort out the confusion. It is slightly more difficult to achieve this in film, however. On one hand, it can be complicated for actors who are already playing one role and must embody the role of another actor. They must emulate characteristics of a character already established, such as body language and speech patterns. On the other hand, the viewer has to recognize that a shift has taken place and remember that the characters to whom they were first introduced have become someone else. Voice overs and scenes of spoken thought help to remind the audience that a swap has taken place.

What Makes a Good Body-Swap Story

Fiction is a good stage for the act of body-swapping to play out, but as in everything, some executions of the genre are better than others. According to an article by Joan Edwards, there are six key aspects of storytelling that make a good magical body-swap story. Edwards sets up a list, going through the sequence of events that play out in the narrative. The first aspect Edwards notes is the Crisis. The crisis is the catalyst event for the swap. Edwards describes the crisis as the circumstances the characters inhabit that make them desire to run from their lives to something that appears more appealing. The crisis of existing as oneself leads up to the Switch, the second aspect Edwards describes. The switch is, mostly, the unexplainable phenomenon of two individuals swapping bodies.

Consequences are the third aspect. Usually in a story, after the swap, both characters are forced to live as one another for the duration of their experience and have little knowledge of the other's life. This is often the cause of confusing and irreversible problems that have to be faced once they switch back. These consequences are often related to the original crisis of the story and have to be handled by the person temporarily inhabiting the body.

The next stage is figuring how to switch back. Along with dealing with the blowback from the switch, the two characters must attempt to solve their problem. This is usually done between them, but sometimes a trusted confidant is brought in to help come up with a solution.

At the turn of the story, we see a changing of original beliefs, the fifth aspect Edwards mentions. The crisis leads the characters to believe their lives would be better off as someone else, but as the story progresses, they learn that everyone has their own problems, and their life is not as bad as they once thought. This revelation is accompanied by a newfound appreciation for their life and respect for the person with whom they have swapped.

The story wraps up with the switch back, which can result in failure or success. In success, the characters usually remain friends over a bond from their shared experience; with failure, the characters have to learn to live in their new reality. It is, however, seldom that the characters fail to swap back. In magical swaps, the switch back is usually caused by the changing of beliefs. Everybody-swap story has at least some of these traits in them. The best-ranked are the ones that fully integrate these aspects into the story in a way that lends to a broader theme of the story, where the swap does not overshadow the plot.

Examples of a Swap

In a review by Drake Dalton in "FictionPhile," he lists the top three body-swap examples and explains why he believes them to be the best. Number three on the list is the 1885 novel, *The Great Keinplatz Experiment*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The story follows a professor doing research on the abilities souls have to communicate through mesmerism. He conducts his experiments on one of his students, who becomes infatuated with his daughter. The professor strikes a deal with the young man to let him have his daughter if he becomes a test subject. Dalton praises this work for the way it sketches out the possibility of this "switching of souls" as a probable occurrence. The novel attempts to explain how the switch could happen through pseudo-science, making it plausible, and engages the idea that the soul is more connected to a person's sense of self rather than is the body or five senses. An interesting and thought-provoking read, according to Dalton.

The second-best example of body-swap listed is the 1999 game, *Chrono Cross*. In this example, the game's plotline follows a human and demi-human who swap bodies in order for the human to find a hidden treasure in another universe. In the game, the humans in the demi-human universe are prejudiced against his kind. This is something the human inhabiting his body finds out and is moved by the vitriol against the demi-humans to take action, starting a revolution that changes the course of the game. Dalton ranks this game second because the story allows these enemy species to observe the other side in a non-hostile way that changes the direction of the story. Once in the other's body, the characters -- specifically the human-- are able to do things they couldn't in their own bodies. Dalton states, "The best body swap fiction seeks to make the swap itself become a spoke for the narrative to spin around, rather than simply using it as a single plot device." The swap is not made the center of the story in *Chrono Cross*. This allows other aspects of the story to shine and become heightened by the use of the swap.

Dalton lists the 1997 movie, *Face/Off* as the best example of body-swap. The movie is about an FBI agent who goes undercover as the mass murderer he's been hunting since his son's murder. The agent gets trapped in the lie and is stuck in prison while a killer roam free wearing his face. This film makes it to #1 mainly for the work of the actors and the action in the movie. Dalton is a fan of the work of both the leading actors and writes that despite the way the plot becomes murky, it is an interesting take on the concept of body-swapping. Dalton notes his fascination with the way the film employs the idea of the swap being disrupted by a blood test and plastic surgery. These qualities earn the movie first place on the list.

Books I have read on the concept of body-swap contain the aspects that Edward mentions in her article. *Art of the Swap*, by Kristine Asselin and Jen Malone, takes place between the twenty-first and early twentieth centuries. The story follows two teenagers, Maggie and Hanna, from different time periods, who travel through time and switch bodies with a mirror in an old, prominent family manor house that has been turned into an exhibit, a portal to view the past. Their predicament provides the opportunity to stop the art heist that takes place in 1905, a popular feature point of the tourist attraction the house has become in present-day Rhode Island. Maggie and Hanna solve the mystery of the portrait heist through time without making drastic changes to the timeline. Maggie learns the power she has as a woman during her time in 2018 and joins the fight for the woman suffrage movement. Hanna gets to spend time in her favorite era of history and solve the mystery of her most treasured place. This magical swap allows both characters to grow as individuals and leads to important shifts in their outlook on life.

The book *Freaky Friday* by Mary Rodgers is a classic and probably one of the first pieces of literature people associate with the genre. Though the 2003 film version is based off of this magical swap, this original piece carries out its swap in an interesting way. The swap takes place

between the same people as in the film, Anna and her mother. However, the story of the film diverges from the book's plot, and the lesson learned is also different. In the book, Anna is the same precocious and stubborn kid we see in the movie, but in middle school instead of high school. This younger version of Anna switches places with her mother but is not aware of this fact until the end of the story. In the book *Freaky Friday*, Anna is convinced that she has performed some type of bodysnatching with her mother that has enabled her consciousness to transfer to her mother's body, while her body retains her qualities as Anna, though she is separate from any conscious choice or thought it could make. This example of body-swap introduces the idea of secular autonomy being given to a body without a human soul to inhabit. It is the only example I have read or watched that does this, though, in the end, it isn't quite the case. Rodgers does not elaborate on this aspect of a soulless body, though she does write that Anna's body behaves as Anna. This idea engages with the question of the necessity of the soul and its impact on the body. We find out later that Anna's mother has indeed been in her daughter's body all along and is a phenomenal actress.

Anna correctly assumes that her mother is behind this swap and has done so to prove that there are hardships of being an adult that outrank Anna's childish complaints. This is an aspect similar to the movie in that both parties believe that they have the harder time in life. Through the swap, it is discovered that both plights of mother and daughter are distinguishable and valid. They leave the experience with a newfound respect for each other and an understanding of the positions they're in.

The movie deals with the swap differently. Though the crisis experienced is similar-- that both mother and daughter believe their life to be more difficult-- the swap occurs by means of outside forces. A fortune cookie given to the two in the middle of their arguments causes the next

day change that shakes their lives. This exchange is pointed out by and carried out by a third party who pushes for the mother and daughter to spend time in each other's shoes to work through their distress with one another. In the end, that result is achieved, and the family finds harmony once more.

The third book that I read, *The Swap* by Megan Shull, also had a movie counterpart. In the book, the swap takes place between two high school students. In this circumstance, however, they are opposite genders. Shull writes this aspect into the story in a way that is delicate with a good deal of humor. The book follows high school freshmen Ellie and sophomore Jack, as they try to navigate the loss of parents, family dynamics, school bullies, and regular teen drama. Similar to the reason behind the swap for *Freaky Friday*, Jack and Ellie switch places under the guise that one person has it easier than the other. Shull uses the fact that the characters are of opposite genders to have that age-old debate of the battle of the sexes. In this story, the argument becomes, who has it harder, boys or girls. As with the movie *Freaky Friday*, in the book, *The Swap*, an intermediary force causes the event between Jack and Ellie, in this case, the school nurse who overhears their argument and weighs in by giving them a firsthand experience as to who is correct. The powers the nurse has to initiate this magical swap are not explained and the character of the nurse is not seen again, not even to switch the two back. In the movie, the swap is explained to be the work of a psychic force created from the importance placed on the cell phones of both characters. Aside from this, the movie and the book follow similar storylines. The swap allows both characters to find inner strength and overcome the obstacles they believed were limited by their genders. Ellie can act outside of the constraints of a “polite society” for young women her age, and Jack is allowed to express his emotions and repair his relationship with his father.

The movie *Face/Off* was the only scientific swap that I watched. The reason behind the swap was complicated, but the execution of the swap reflected the basic premise for the genre. Dalton listed this movie as the top example for body-swap, and it is indisputable that the action-packed, high-tension drama of the film was nicely paired with fantastic acting and satisfying plot twists. Through a secret medical process that crossed ethical and legal lines, FBI agent, Sean Archer took the face of the criminal, Castor Troy, to learn the information about an attack that threatened the lives of many in a metropolitan area.

The procedure was successful, but Archer's mission failed when Troy woke to find himself temporarily faceless, but unsupervised, unshackled, and free to steal Archer's face and act in the agent's place, killing and plotting as he pleased. The circumstances under which the swap takes place in this movie are complicated as they do not suggest that there is anything to be learned from this swap. Instead, the theme that can be derived from the film comes from Archer's obsession with catching Troy for murdering his son. The lesson is akin to not taking for granted the time you have with the ones closest to you and cherish the ones you love. As previously mentioned, the switch-back aspect of this swap is interesting because it is completely contingent on the blood test performed by Archer's wife.

Real-World Applications

“Body Ownership and Experiential Ownership in the Self-Touching Illusion”

In fiction, body-swapping focuses on the results the swap has on the mind and what the swap can do for the situations of the characters. This is the case to some degree in all of the stories I have found. When looking at the real-life application of a swap, the results center on the body's specific reaction to the appearance of the soul's transference. In an article written by

Caleb Liang, an experiment hypothesizing the difference and relevance between body-part ownership and full-body ownership seeks to prove there is “no essential difference between the sense of body-part ownership and the sense of full-body ownership.” Liang writes that the outcome of this experiment could serve as a blueprint for exploring neural mechanisms.

Liang acknowledges that as a person with a body, we are acutely aware of the senses that we have and the movements we make with our body. The question of this experiment is whether or not a person can be mistaken in their experiential ownership. Liang uses the example of walking into a cafe; we feel our movements and know they are ours; we smell the aromas surrounding us and recognize that it is with our own senses that we make these connections to the world. This experiential ownership seems obvious when considering the results from an objective standpoint, but are there times when a person fails in experiencing proper ownership of their body? Take a person who has lost a limb during war. This person can begin to experience phantom pains from that missing limb. This inaccuracy of ownership is what Liang investigates in this experiment.

This experiment is carried out in a way that combines body-part and full-body illusions to keep them together in aid of the hypothesis that there is no difference between the two. The experiment is conducted through a combination of other illusion tests that had been performed earlier to test similar behaviors of the body. The experiment manipulates the visual perspectives of the participants using VR technology while allowing them to directly interact in the experiment, resulting in what Liang called the “self-touch illusion.” This illusion gives off the feeling that subjects are touching themselves. The design of the experiment is set so that it is not clear who is being touched and who is doing the touching. The purpose of this self-touching experiment is to compare the senses of full-body and body-part ownership.

Experiment I uses a basic setting with full-body conditions, which allows participants to view the entire virtual body, to set the standard, and get a sense of the effect self-touching has on the body and experiential ownership. The first condition of the experiment involves asynchronous action of the participant brushing a paintbrush against the arm of her/his virtual body across from her/him. After this, the participants fill out a questionnaire regarding their perceptions of body and experiential ownership. Next, they do the brushing again with an asynchronous action in condition 2. Thus, the participants felt as if they had two bodies and the scores for full-body ownership-- provided by the questionnaires-- show that the results were higher in the synchronous condition than the asynchronous condition.

Experiment II has the same number of conditions and measurements as Experiment I, but the second Experiment only allows for the viewing of the participant's torso and legs of their own virtual body, to ensure that the events in Experiment I are isolated. In Experiment II, the participant views his/her hand being brushed by the experimenter's hand. These being the only differences in the two Experiments, Liang claims, "This suggests that FB1 (full-body condition 1) successfully induced a new version of the full-body illusion, where the participants felt as if the body in front of them was theirs (Q6) and that they could control it (Q8), and they felt as if they were sitting in front of their own body (Q7)." The results of the questionnaires indicate that the full-body conditions in both experiments produce a version of the full-body illusion, suggesting there are multiple ways to induce a full-body illusion.

This study is distinct in that it operates on the information from six synchronous body parts as well as the full-body conditions. This paired with the self-touching and full-body questionnaire distinguishes this study from previous ones. The features of this study allowed Liang to compare the responses to the conditions in this experiment and work towards the

hypothesis of experiential ownership. The fact that participants were being touched by paintbrushes solidifies the presence of experiential ownership; the purpose of the experiment was to examine whether the fact could be correctly identified by the participant's sense of experiential ownership.

In discussing the experiment's outcomes, Liang cites and agrees with the comparison of body ownership in a previous model that concludes, "the more the viewed object matches the structural appearance of the body-part's form, the stronger the experience of body-ownership will be." The ability the participant had to view their own arm as it was brushed satisfies the need for visual evidence of the body. This idea leaves the participant free of having to identify with a sense of self-as-subject: someone who recognizes what is happening to themselves as happening to them. Liang explains this by stating, "When I am pre-reflectively conscious of myself-as-subject, I cannot be wrong about whether I am the subject of experiences." Liang notes this idea becomes a sort of immunity in his experiment, as he is actively trying to undermine the validity of this idea. According to Liang, the results of the experiment leading to the idea of "pre-reflective immunity" show that violation of immunity to error through misidentification, which has previously been understood as impossible, is in fact possible. Liang argues that the experiment proves, "It is possible for misrepresentation to occur in one's pre-reflective sense of experiential ownership," regardless of pre-reflective immunity.

Liang concludes the experiment by suggesting that the idea of the difference between body-ownership and experiential ownership has more to do with bodily self-consciousness. Liang reveals that for body ownership, the experiment of self-touch produces a valid illusory effect that shows no difference between body-part and full-body ownership. In regard to

experiential ownership, Liang argues that it “can be misrepresented by the subject’s pre-reflective sense of experiential ownership.”

Liang believes the results of this study have positive implications for body ownership and experiential ownership going forward and can be useful in other fields of study such as psychology. This study defined the relationship between senses of body and experiential ownership as bodily experience being dependent on body ownership. “The idea is that when a participant experiences a body-part or a whole body as his/her own, it is relevant to consider whether the participant also represents him/herself as the subject of this experience of body ownership.” Liang hopes that this research is a useful contribution to the neural basis of a sense of experiential ownership.

“Can You Tickle Yourself If You Swap Bodies with Someone Else?”

The second study I looked at, written by G. Van Doorn, explores the effect self-generated movement has on how the body reacts to certain stimuli. Doorn begins the article by pointing out what previous studies have explored, similar to his ideas, which conclude that “self-generated movement makes it more difficult to notice tactile stimuli presented on a moving limb through non-specific gating of incoming information” (Van Doorn). For these other experiments, this effect indicates that the perceived tickle is diminished due to the input of visual aspects made available. Meaning that the reaction of being tickled is diminished if you can anticipate what is happening. Doorn interprets this as a suggestion that the tickle effect relies on the unpredictability of the stimuli rather than being solely reliant on sensory signals (efference copies).

While Doorn agrees with the outcome of these other studies, he notes that a key issue in these experiments lies in the impact of the prime focus on passive touch conditions while ignoring the use of depriving participants of their visual input (i.e., sight). Doorn acknowledges the benefits the account had on explaining the lessened effectiveness specific to passively received stimuli but persists that it leaves out the explanation of whether the reduction of sensory input occurs as a result of self-generated movement. This is the question Doorn attempts to answer in the experiment.

This article defines self-generated movement as an action involving the intent to move. According to Van Doorn, this includes, “the planning of, the preparation for, and the execution of, movement (Grezes & Decety, 2001).” He further explains, “Self-generated movements may also involve the production of a copy of the efferent signal (a copy of the motor commands), which can be used to predict the sensory consequences of motor commands (e.g., the flow of proprioceptive input one would receive upon executing a reach movement” (Van Doorn).

Doorn’s experiment explains that the phenomenon of successfully being tickled is typically associated with externally generated movement and an amount of spontaneity. This experiment uses CCTV cameras to simulate an out-of-body experience that allows participants to attempt to tickle themselves while also testing to see if the hand being tickled can be replaced by other objects (e.g., rubber hand, baseball bat, nothing).

The comparison in the experiment reveals that the illusion rated higher when the participants viewed the scene from the experimenter’s perspective regardless of the conditions of the participants in the experiment (e.g., participant's perspective with a real hand, participant’s

perspective with a baseball bat, and participant's perspective with empty space). This is the case for both groups in the experiment. Doorn believes that this suggests that the synchronicity of the view and feel provided by the body transfer illusion has no significance to the experiment. It also suggests that the illusion was rated stronger when the participant experienced touches for a hand rather than touches for a non-hand or nothing. Doorn explores whether the tickle effect is influenced by changes in context to body image and spontaneous contact. He finds that the effect is not altogether lost when the context is changed. He noted this is due to the influence of the body transfer and rubber hand illusions.

Doorn records that in the experiment, tickles with a certain force associated with externally generated movement rated higher than those of self-generated movement, implying that the tickle effect was not manipulation by perspective, by limb type, or by the difference between asynchronous and synchronous touch. In other words, these conditions do not affect the reaction given when tickling yourself. The Experiment reveals that there is no change in pattern with regards to tickles being more effective when enacted by an external force than through self-generated movement (the touch is produced by someone else). This is the effect regardless of the context (e.g. hand, bat, nothing).

Regarding other research, Doorn submits that his findings, for the most part, reflect the established idea of sensory consequences to actions. Yet he believes his research defies theories that only define the tickle effect in terms of "prediction error in self-generated movement." Doorn set out to ask if one can tickle themselves if they were to switch bodies, and the conclusion is that this is not the case. According to the study, there is a reduction in the effectiveness of the tickle when it is performed through self-generated movement and an escalation of predictability. Doorn ties this back into the possibilities this experiment has for

shaping self-awareness, as it suggests that body image and first-person perspective do not contribute to sensory attenuation. Doorn believes this highlights the possibility of an underlying cognitive process that is independent of the body.

Examining Fact and Fiction

In looking at the examples of body-swapping in fiction, the swap can be woven into the story, and therefore, while the swap cannot be ignored, its importance is seconded by other themes in the stories. In one of the scenes in *The Swap*, the boys and girls converge at a local park from the parties they were attending where they were separated by gender. This initial meeting is offset by a kind of stand-off between the two groups. This moment in the novel is a stark reminder of the theme of pitting boys and girls against each other. This idea is presented throughout the novel and is aided by the swap between Ellie and Jack.

In the experiments for body-swapping, the swap was the entire point. While there was a reason behind testing the reaction to body-swapping, a hypothesis the experimenters sought to explore, the experiments relied on the act, or at least the appearance, of swapping bodies to carry out the experiment.

The mechanics of swapping bodies in real life, even virtually, serves more to affect the body than the mind. In the experiments, the participants were asked questions about what the simulations did to their bodies. The model of these experiments focused on the relation the perception of the body had on how a person believed their body acted. In all, it is the external that these body-swap experiments centered on. The participants were not asked to give emotional responses. This is the most prominent distinction between fact and fiction in body-swapping.

In the stories I read, there was a great deal of introspection. Writing allows this for the most part in all stories, but this is important to understanding body-swapping because it is an event that happens internally. The switching of two souls cannot be noticed physically. Speech and action might give away the transformation, but even that is not guaranteed. The best way to know what is happening to a person internally, emotionally, is to have access to their thoughts. Even if they might be able or willing to disclose what they are feeling, there are areas in expression where language fails to get across our thoughts in a way that is completely accurate.

Conclusion

It is important to reflect on life and our actions. There are times when we compare progress and failure with those around us and use those evaluations to determine our worth. We use the conclusions we come to, to make assumptions about what others have, whether it is good or bad. These assumptions we make about ourselves and others are natural parts of being human, but they can become a crutch to use against having to look deeper within ourselves and others. In wielding these assumptions, we can avoid self-reflecting. However, in reflecting on our actions, we discover what our shortcomings are and how we can overcome them.

When I decided to incorporate body-swapping into my story, I wanted to write about two people who appeared different at first glance and remained different at the core of who they were as people. I wanted to use the act of body-swapping to create a bridge in which these two individuals who would never otherwise have a reason to interact with each other, could meet and learn about the other and learn about themselves.

I found a similar understanding of the use of body-swapping and the importance of self-reflection in the other stories I read. In an article about what makes a good body-swap story by

Joan Edwards, it was written that an important aspect to body-swapping fiction is a level of introspection. This was confirmation that body-swapping was the proper tool for crafting my story.

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