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## THE PHONE CALL

Dougie had been home from the hospital only an hour when Bob, Dougie's uncle, opened the bedroom door and flipped off Dougie's light without saying a word. The door creaked shut, and footsteps grew softer as his uncle retreated.

Dougie wanted the light back on. He was six years old and couldn't sleep, his throat still pulsing from where his tonsils had been removed. In his room at the hospital he could at least turn on the TV or buzz for the nurse, with whom he had fallen in love, but here at home he had to remain in bed, and all there was to do was study his walls, which he had decorated with covers from his favorite magazine, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. With the light out, he couldn't even do that.

Dougie had no idea what time it was. He passed the hours thinking about Nurse Jill, who had long, straight, blonde hair like Susan Dey in *The Partridge Family*, and how she had rubbed her hand over his hair and said, "I know girls who'd *kill* for those curls." She leaned close to

him, almost to his mouth, and whispered, “But you probably hate them, don’t you?” With her mouth so close to his own, Dougie wanted to sit up and kiss her. Instead, he stared into her foam-green eyes until she touched his nose with the tip of her finger and stood up.

Dougie replayed that particular memory over and over, because if he let it fade away it would be replaced by the man he saw right after he’d woken up from his surgery. The man lay motionless in the bed next to him—tubes running into his mouth, a machine beeping continuously, his skin the color of Silly Putty. When the doctor saw that Dougie had come to, he nodded angrily toward Nurse Jill, who swiftly pulled the curtain shut between them. Dougie, barely able to keep his eyes open, eventually fell back to sleep. The next time he woke up, he saw two men wearing white shirts and white pants rolling the man out of the room, a blanket covering all of him, including his head, the way Dougie liked to sleep with a flashlight under the covers whenever he stayed awake to look at his magazines with their photos from *Dracula* and the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

“What was his name?” Dougie asked Nurse Jill later that day.

Nurse Jill smiled. “Mr. Belvedere.”

“Where’d he go?” Dougie asked.

Nurse Jill reached down and rested the tip of a finger inside one of Dougie’s curls.

Testing the curl’s buoyancy, she said, “To a better place.”

*A better place*, Dougie thought now, in his bedroom, in the dark. Over the years Doug would meet other people, strangers mostly, with remarkably similar stories, of waking up in a haze of anesthesia next to a dead person whose soul was being spirited away. *Did everyone have such stories?* he would wonder.

The phone in the hallway rang.

The ring was so loud, Dougie's heart sped up.

The phone continued to ring. Wouldn't Uncle Bob or his mother answer it? Bob was his father's brother, but Dougie didn't remember anything about his father. The man had died when Dougie was still a baby. A hunting accident, he'd been told. No, his earliest memories of any man in the house were of Uncle Bob, who came sniffing around every few days like a stray dog, often spending the night.

On the fifth ring, Dougie slid out of bed and, feeling his way from one end of his room to the other, eased open his door.

In the hallway, he could lean against the banister and see the living room below, where aquarium light sprayed gently up toward Dougie, causing the walls to look like they were alive and moving, as though he were the one inside the fish tank. He picked up the phone.

"Hello?" he whispered.

A man called out from the earpiece: "Hello? Hello? Who is this? Is this Dougie?"

Dougie did not recognize the man's voice. "Who are you?" he asked. And then a chill blew up under his pajamas, causing him to shiver. "Is this Mr. Belvedere?"

"Who's Mr. Belvedere? Tell me about him."

"He's in a better place now," Dougie said.

"He's dead?" the man asked. "Did someone kill him?"

"He's in a better place now," Dougie repeated, but he felt like weeping this time because he didn't know who this man was or why he was asking questions.

"Listen," the man said. "I don't have much time, and you won't hear from me again for another couple of years, so I want you to do something for me, okay? I want you to remember

who I am. I want you to pay attention. Because something terrible is going to happen, and only you can stop it.”

The harder Dougie cried, the worse his stitched and bleeding throat hurt. He began to moan from the pain.

“Don’t cry, Dougie,” the man said. “Don’t cry. I’m your friend. You have to believe me. I’m your . . .”

Dougie hung up and returned to his bedroom, leaving behind the room with walls that looked like they were breathing and a phone call he would barely remember in a week. He could have turned on his bedroom light now, but he was afraid to. He wouldn’t see those walls again until morning, when sunlight seeped through his curtains, waking all the monsters.

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Thirty years later, Doug sits at the Tick Tock Lounge with a baker’s dozen of his coworkers from Rockwell International. The three tables they had pushed together earlier in the night now harbor a collection of beer mugs and pitchers and shot glasses, glasses for highballs and martinis, peeled-off beer bottle labels and soggy napkins. Someone had slammed her beer down onto the last jalapeno popper, squeezing cheese out at both ends, causing it to look like a thick worm that’s been stepped on.

Across from Doug sits Louise Malgrave, who keeps touching Doug’s ankle with her toes and then acting as though it’s an accident.

“Is that you again?” she asks, smiling. She reaches over and taps his hand with her fingernails. She can’t *not* touch him, it would seem. “I’m sorry.” Louise is a supervisor at Rockwell while Doug does data entry, typing in long strings of code that he doesn’t understand.

“It’s okay,” Doug says. He considers asking her to go home with him—why not?—but when he leans toward her, what comes out of his mouth surprises even him: “This is the anniversary of my mother’s death,” he says. He forces a grim, hopeless smile and, almost as an afterthought, adds, “She was murdered when I was fifteen.”

“Oh no!” Louise says, and her face droops, as if sympathy and muscle control are incompatible. She looks a dozen years older now, and whatever vague plans Doug had had with her in mind crumble before him.

What Doug has said is true—his mother *was* murdered, and today *is* the anniversary—but he can’t stand the way Louise is looking at him, the pity, the anguish, so he shakes his head and says, “I’m kidding.”

“What?”

“I’m drunk. I’m sorry.”

“You’re a jerk,” Louise says. His coworkers stop talking to see why Louise is so angry. “He’s a *jerk*,” Louise says to her captive audience. “You know what he told me?”

“Actually,” Doug says, keeping his voice low, “it’s *true*. It’s just that . . . I don’t know . . . the way you were looking at me.”

Jerry, Doug’s boss, stands up from his end of the table and walks over. He’s eighty pounds overweight and speaks in a voice that sounds like every businessman Doug’s ever overheard: deep, loud, fake. “Hey, now,” he says, smiling. “Everything okay over here?”

“Fine,” Doug says, standing. Louise is crying but shrugging away those who want to comfort her, even though it’s obvious she wants the attention. “It’s fine,” Doug continues. “A misunderstanding is all.”

Jerry nods. He escorts Doug to the Tick Tock's exit, and together they stand in the glow of neon beer signs. "Let's talk on Monday, shall we?"

Doug nods. "Okay. All right." He reaches out to shake Jerry's hand, but Jerry turns and heads toward Louise Malgrave, leaving Doug with his arm outstretched.

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Doug hits three more taverns on his way home. By the time he reaches his apartment foyer, he's having a hard time inserting the miniature key into his mailbox lock. He rests his head against the wall, shuts his eyes, and tries inserting the key one last time. This time it goes in. When he opens the door, a fat phone bill falls out onto the chipped tile floor.

"Dammit," he says when he sees it's the same phone company he's been having problems with. His long-distance phone service had been slammed. Doug had heard the term *slammed* for the first time only recently when news reports popped up about a local renegade phone company taking over people's long-distance service without the customers' approval. It's illegal, of course, but extraordinarily difficult to stop once it's set in motion. The name of this company is Blue Skies.

Doug tears open the phone bill as he mounts the stairs to his apartment, and after banging open his door and flipping on the kitchen light, he examines the bill. Amount Due: \$3,456.72.

"Three thousand and *what?*" he yells. "Are they *kidding?*" He squints at the phone bill.

He walks into his bedroom, where he has hung all the old covers from the magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, the same covers he'd hung on his wall in childhood. They are torn now and fading, but he can't bring himself to take them down. The thought of doing so fills him with an inexplicable sadness. He clings to his monsters, the way others cling to old blankets or favorite coffee mugs.

Doug climbs into bed with his shoes on. The heavy black rotary phone sits like a purposefully silent and endangered reptile, the last of its kind, on his bedside table. He picks up the receiver and dials the number for Blue Skies.

“Blue Skies,” a woman says. “My name is Bethany. How may I help you?”

“How may you help me,” Doug says coldly, staring into the eyes of Lon Chaney as Mr. Hyde. “First off, Bethany, you can tell me how it’s even possible for my bill to be over three thousand dollars.”

“The amount due,” Bethany begins, “is based on how many calls you . . .”

Doug cuts her off. “*Look*,” he yells. “I didn’t even sign up with your company. What you’re doing is illegal. I want you to switch me back to my old provider.”

“I’m sorry,” Bethany says, “but it’s too late. There’s nothing to be done.”

“What the hell do you mean it’s too late, that there’s nothing to be done?”

“Sir,” Bethany says. “Please lower your voice.”

“I *won’t* lower my voice. I . . .”

The phone goes dead.

“Hello? Bethany? Hello?”

Doug slams down the phone. He calls back and Bethany answers again.

“Are you calm now, sir?”

“Look,” Doug says. He shuts his eyes. He’s drunk and sleepy. He can feel the room spinning, the way the playground merry-go-round felt when his Uncle Bob started to push it faster and faster—Dougie crying, begging him to stop because it was going too fast and he could barely hang on. He starts dreaming about that time in his life when he hears a voice in his ear:

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“Who is this?” Doug asks.

“It’s Bethany.”

“Hi, Bethany,” Doug whispers. He waits for her to say something, but when she doesn’t, he asks, “What are you wearing?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m in bed,” Doug says. “Where are *you*?”

“Maybe *that’s* why your bill is so high,” Bethany says sharply. “Those sorts of calls are expensive. Now, goodnight, sir,” she says and hangs up.

Doug falls asleep with the phone against his ear until he’s woken by a loud beeping, a phone off its hook. He returns the phone to its cradle, stares at it for a good while, then picks up the receiver again. Every year, on the anniversary of his mother’s death, he dials his old home’s phone number, a number that has remained etched in his mind, even though it’s been disconnected for years.

Concentrating, he puts his finger in the rotary’s dial, draws his finger to the right for each number, and lets it go. He expects the familiar we’re-sorry-but-you’ve-reached-a-number-that’s-no-longer-in-service message, but a woman answers on the second ring, an actual human being, and Doug quickly sits up.

“Hello?” she says. A baby is crying in the background.

“Hello?” Doug says. “Who’s this?”

“Hey, who’s *this*?” the woman asks. She laughs, and a chill runs through Doug. *He knows this woman.* The baby cries louder now, and the woman is saying, “Hush, hush, Sweetie.” A doorbell rings. “Hold on there,” the woman says to Doug. He hears the phone getting set down; he hears footsteps, a door opening, voices. And then he hears what sounds like a hurt

animal, a sound that frightens Doug, has always frightened Doug—the plaintive wailing of grief. What’s happening?

“Hello!” Doug yells into the phone. “What’s going on there? Hello!”

He hears someone moving toward the phone. The receiver is lifted, and a man says, “Who is this?”

“It’s Doug. Who’s this?”

“Doug?” The man sounds confused, disoriented. “I don’t know what you’re selling, Doug, but you’ll have to call another time. There’s been an accident here.” The phone is hung up with a thud.

Doug removes the receiver from his ear and stares at it. He knows he shouldn’t do this, but he dials the number again, just to confirm that he did indeed dial his old phone number. If the same man answers, he’ll simply hang up. But it’s the woman this time.

“Hello?” She sounds tired now. Doug hears a young child in the background calling out, “Mommy, mommy, mommy.”

“Hush,” the woman says sharply to the child. And then again: “Hello?”

“Hi,” Doug says. “I was just calling to make sure everything is okay.”

“I’m sorry?” the woman says. “I think you have the wrong number?”

It’s the way she ends her sentences as questions that exhumes the past, confirming for Doug who it is he’s speaking to: *his mother*. He hasn’t heard her voice in over thirty years, a voice he thought he would never forget, but as one year folded into another, one decade after the other disappearing behind him, he found it harder and harder to conjure her up as she had once been. Her voice had been the first to fade, until he couldn’t remember her inflections on certain words or the precise way she still carried her own southern childhood in her speech. For the first

time, he experiences what everyone else who's ever stepped into his bedroom has experienced, that all the monsters on his walls are staring directly at him.

"This is Shirley, isn't it?" he asks. His own voice cracks. He's trying not to cry.

"It *is*," she says suspiciously. "And who are *you*?"

There is no way he can explain to her who he is. He can only try to keep her talking.

"We met a few years ago," he says. "I worked with your husband, Tim." Silence. "My name's Frank Ivers. You wouldn't remember me," Doug says and forces out a laugh. He hears the child in the background again. The child is him. He's listening to his younger self. "I didn't know Tim well," Doug says, "but I always liked him. I'm just calling . . ." He pauses. He's shivering but trying not to. "I'm just calling to see how you're holding up."

He hears his mother lighting a cigarette. This means she's settling in for a long conversation.

"It hasn't been an easy three years," she says. "The day Bob came home with the news . . ." She blows smoke into the mouthpiece. She's sitting down now, Doug imagines. "It was the worst day of my life."

"I'm so sorry," he says. "I just want you to know that I'm a friend."

His mother makes a noise of assent, but she's lost in her own world. How many times had he seen this, his mother sitting on the couch and staring straight ahead as he tried to get her attention, showing her the cover of his new *Famous Monsters of Filmland*?

"Something's not right," she says finally. "I can't put my finger on it, but . . ."

"Yes?"

Doug hears something rumbling in the background. A pickup truck?

"I've got to go," his mother says.

“Who is it, Shirley? Is it Bob?”

The phone goes dead.

Doug is pacing the room, two fingers holding the heavy black phone, the phone’s base resting against his thigh. He sets down the phone, hangs up the receiver. After his father’s death, Bob began coming over more frequently, sometimes spending the night on the couch. Doug’s earliest memories are of his uncle snoring on their sofa as his mother tiptoed through the room and scolded Doug for playing too loudly with his Hot Wheels. “You don’t want to wake that man” was how she put it.

Doug was fifteen when his mother was murdered. A homeless man, who had been Dumpster diving, discovered Shirley’s body in a large trash bin behind an apartment complex. She was wrapped in a large blue tarp. People who lived in the apartment building had thrown leaking bags of garbage on top of her, unaware that a body was there. An autopsy revealed that she had died from severe blunt head trauma. Police had detained the homeless man as a possible suspect, but there was nothing to connect him to his mother, and no weapons of any kind had been found on him. No weapon of any kind had ever been found. Bob had been questioned, too, but he’d provided an alibi—a friend claimed they’d spent the evening together watching the Cubs game on TV, the same friend who had been with Bob during Doug’s father’s hunting accident. Doug had been away at a high school speech tournament, spending the weekend in a dorm room downstate. The story of his mother’s death stayed in the news for several weeks, lingering longer than most, but eventually, like everything else in life, it faded.

Doug dials the number again. He isn’t drunk anymore. In fact, he feels more lucid than he’s ever felt. For the first time, he believes he can undo the terrible things that have happened, that he can turn time back, that he can control the outcome. On the eighth ring, a boy answers.

“Hello?” the boy whispers.

“Hello?” Doug says. “Hello? Who is this? Is this Dougie?” Doug knows without a doubt that he is speaking to his younger self. He doesn’t even realize he’s crying until his knuckles, wrapped around the receiver and pressed against his face, pool up the wetness.

“Who are you?” the boy asks. “Is this Mr. Belvedere?”

Doug takes a deep breath. The name is familiar. But why? “Who’s Mr. Belvedere? Tell me about him.”

“He’s in a better place now,” Dougie says.

“He’s dead?” Doug asks. “Did someone kill him?”

“He’s in a better place now,” Dougie repeats.

“Listen,” Doug says. “I don’t have much time, and you won’t hear from me again for another couple of years, so I want you to do something for me, okay? I want you to remember who I am. I want you to pay attention. Because something terrible is going to happen, and only you can stop it.”

Dougie starts crying into the phone, and Doug remembers now how easily he used to fall apart, Uncle Bob always mocking him, matching little Dougie’s snivels with his own fake snivels, mashing his ugly, scrunched-up face against Dougie’s, his uncle’s sour breath like poison. He could taste that man’s breath for hours afterward.

“Don’t cry, Dougie,” Doug says. “Don’t cry. I’m your friend. You have to believe me. I’m your friend. Okay? I’m your . . .” He senses something has happened. “Hello? Dougie? Hello?” The call has disconnected.

The phone calls are jumping in time, but by how much?

Doug quickly calls back, but the old phone is slow, and each number he dials on the rotary requires patience. It's one of the reasons he has continued using this old phone, to distinguish himself from his coworkers who are always distracted by their cell phones, texting even as he's trying to talk to them. "Go on," they'll say. "I'm listening." Doug thought the rotary phone would keep him grounded, but now he desires speed; he desires whatever technology will allow him to stay in contact with his old life.

"Hello?" It's the boy again. Dougie. Himself. His voice—the boy's—is deeper now.

"Dougie," Doug says. "How old are you?"

"Who is this?"

"Quick. How old are you?"

"Nine," Dougie says.

"Nine," Doug repeats. "Do you remember me? We talked probably three years ago? You had mentioned someone named Mr. Belvedere?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dougie says.

In the background, a man calls out, "Who the hell are you talking to? If they're selling something, just hang up!"

"Is that Uncle Bob?" Doug asks.

"Yes?" Dougie says. He's suspicious, but he's curious, too. Doug knows this because he knows how he would feel.

"Something terrible is going to happen to Mom," Doug says. He swallows. *Slow down*, he tells himself. "To your *mother*," Doug says. "I don't know who's responsible, but I think it's your Uncle Bob. It'll happen when you're fifteen."

His voice shaking, Dougie whispers, "I'm calling the police."

“It’s too soon,” Doug says. “He hasn’t done anything yet.”

“I’m calling them on *you*,” Dougie says.

“No, no. I’m your friend.”

“No, you’re not,” Dougie says and hangs up.

Doug dials the number again as fast as he can, as fast as the phone will allow him. It rings ten times. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Has he wasted a phone call? What if time jumps six years the next time he calls? *Pick up . . . pick up*, he thinks. And then, miraculously, someone picks up. He can tell by the way the phone rattles, the way the receiver is almost dropped, that whoever picked up must have run to the phone.

“Yes? Hello?”

It’s his mother. It’s Shirley.

“Shirley?” Doug says.

“Yes?” She’s out of breath.

Doug realizes that this may be the last time he’ll ever talk to his mother. He also realizes that the phone he’s using is the same phone his mother is using: the heavy black rotary. They are holding the same receiver, but they are separated by time and space.

He decides to risk it. He’ll never forgive himself if he lets this moment go. “Mom,” he says.

Shirley says, “I’m sorry, but. . .”

“No,” Doug says. “It’s me. It’s Doug.”

There is silence. Then Doug hears her digging through her purse to find her cigarettes. She keeps them in a rectangular pouch with a snap; there’s a pocket on the side for the

disposable butane lighter. He hears the flick of the lighter, his mother puffing to get the cigarette lit.

She exhales and says, "I knew it was you the first time you called all those years ago."

"How?" Doug asks. "How did you know?"

"A mother knows her son," she says.

Doug flips off his bedroom light and lies down, setting the phone on his chest.

Doug says, "I need to tell you something."

"Hold that thought?" his mother says, her voice getting higher as she ends her request as a question. "I want to know about you. I want to know how you've been. Did everything turn out okay?"

*No*, he thinks. *No, it hasn't*. But he doesn't want to disappoint her. "Everything's beautiful," Doug says.

"Are you married?"

"Yes," Doug lies.

"Kids?"

"A boy and a girl."

"Are they healthy?"

"Yes, they are," Doug says. "They're perfect."

"What's your wife's name?"

He imagines his coworker from earlier tonight, the way she would touch his ankle with her toes. "Louise," Doug says. "Louise Malgrave."

"I'm so happy," his mother says.

"But, Mom. Listen," Doug says.

His mother interrupts: “Shhhhhhhhhh. Hush now. I want to hear about you.”

Doug shuts his eyes. He’s so tired. “I don’t know what else there is to tell you.”

“Tell me what your day is like. Tell me what you look like now,” she says. “Tell me anything. I just want you to talk to me.”

Doug obeys. He tells her of an imaginary day in the life of a Doug that doesn’t exist. He tells her about his three-bedroom house. It’s in a neighborhood she always wanted to live in. He tells her about the new riding lawn mower, the family portraits on the wall, the alligator shoes Louise bought him for his birthday. He tells her about the life she always dreamed of, the life he’ll never live, and he can tell by the way she laughs or sighs that she’s happy about how her son’s future will turn out.

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Doug wakes up with the phone on his chest, the receiver beeping near his ear. He’d fallen asleep while talking to his mother. His heart starts pounding. How could he have fallen asleep?

He reaches over and flips on the light. He hangs up the phone long enough to get a dial-tone and then dials his old number again. It barely rings before someone answers.

“Who is this?” It’s Uncle Bob. His voice is deep, a rumble. He sounds as though he hasn’t slept in days, weeks.

Doug says, “Can we talk?”

“I knew it,” Uncle Bob says. “I just didn’t think you’d have the gall to call here.”

“You don’t understand,” Doug says.

In the background, Shirley says, “Who is it?” and Uncle Bob says, “You know damned well who it is.”

“Hold on,” Doug says. His own breathing is shallow. He feels sick. “I’m not who you think I am,” he says. “Please listen to me.”

Uncle Bob’s voice comes to Doug from a distance now; he must have set down the receiver. “You want to talk to him one last time?” he asks Shirley. “Come here and talk to him,” he yells.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Bob,” Shirley says.

Something falls over and breaks. Shirley screams.

Doug, holding the phone, paces his bedroom. He’s yelling into the receiver: “Bob! Bob! Bob, let’s talk!”

Their voices, his mother’s and Uncle Bob’s, grow louder as they approach the phone, but it sounds as though his mother is being dragged against her will.

“Leave her alone!” Doug yells.

Clearly, Bob isn’t listening. He’s gripped by his own rage, the way a man drowning in quicksand can’t think of anything except surviving. He says, “You want to talk to him? Hunh? You want to talk to him?”

The phone, Doug can tell, is being picked up. But then there is a loud crash coupled with a scream. The crash is like an explosion in Doug’s ear. This sound repeats, over and over, until his mother stops screaming. He hears his uncle breathing heavily, and then he hears nothing, as though the phone’s cord has been pulled from the wall. Doug waits.

But there’s only silence. Just silence.

Doug hangs up and dials again. There’s a noise after the second ring, a click, as though someone is answering, but it’s only the familiar automated voice from years past: “We’re sorry, but you’ve reached a number that’s no longer in service . . .”

Doug slams the receiver back into place.

He sits on the edge of his bed, phone on his knee, shaking. He's cold, too. Freezing. He plays the last phone call over in his head and then plays it again, his uncle yelling, "You want to talk to him? Hunh? You want to talk to him?"

On a hunch, Doug lifts the phone into the air, holding the receiver to keep it secure in its place, and then flips the entire phone upside down. The bottom is black metal with perforations, four thick rubber washers for legs, stickers with numbers printed across them, a dial for turning the ringer up, and several screws. Doug feels it before he sees it. The tip of his finger hits a series of rough patches on the metal surface. Holding it close to the light, Doug can see it now: dried blood. He confirms it by chipping some away with his fingernail. It's been here all along, traveling with him from apartment to apartment, always next to him as he sleeps. Doug chips away more dried blood until his hands are covered with brown flecks and his fingertip is bleeding from scratching at the phone.

It's his mother's blood. It's his mother's blood, and Doug is holding the murder weapon. Doug drops the phone onto his bed and walks to his kitchen, flipping on the light. He picks up the phone bill and studies it up and down, searching for an address. On the back of the last page is print so small, he isn't even sure in what language it's written. He pulls from his desk drawer a magnifying glass his mother had given to him when he was a child. It has a hand-carved ivory handle and sterling silver frame, and it had once belonged to her grandfather. Before handing it over, his mother had made Doug promise to be careful with it. Doug is depressed now to think he's kept it not on a mantel or wrapped in velvet but in a drawer littered with matchbooks, old IDs, orphaned keys, a furtive golf ball, and worthless wristwatches that died long ago.

He holds the magnifying glass up to his eye, moving it close to the text on the bill and then back up to his face, until the words come into focus. In the tiniest print, he sees a street address for customer complaints. The company is local, and their offices are located in a building downtown that he knows well: the Belvedere.

Doug leaves his apartment, the phone bill clutched in his fist. He's never been downtown this time of night, after the bars have closed. The stoplights are all blinking yellow for caution. There are, however, a surprising number of cars parked along the side streets. Doug takes the first space he sees, even though it's several blocks from the Belvedere.

Doug had lived with his Uncle Bob until he graduated high school and went away to college. During those two years after his mother's murder, Uncle Bob had taken surprisingly good care of Doug. In fact, he was kinder to Doug after his mother's death than he'd ever been when she was alive. It wasn't that violence ever had been visited upon Doug, nor did he ever see his uncle do anything to his mother. It was more of a mood that Doug was keenly aware of when his uncle was around, the way a rainy day might become eerily sunny and airless before a tornado. It was intangible. But all that stopped once his mother was gone. One evening, when Doug was nineteen and home for Christmas break, he walked upstairs to ask his uncle what he wanted for dinner. When he opened his uncle's bedroom door—his *mother's* bedroom door—he saw his uncle lying perfectly motionless on the bed, on his back, a white sheet pulled up to his neck, his skin already as gray as a midwestern sky in late November. Doug's first impulse was to call 9-1-1, but at the phone he paused. *It's too late*, he thought. *There's nothing to be done*. He sat on the side of the bed and spent time with the dead man before making the call.

It's cold out tonight, and Doug can't stop shivering. It's as though the convulsions are now part of his nervous system, utterly beyond his control, so he tightens his grip on the phone bill so as not to lose it when he trembles.

Doug rounds a corner, where the tall, slim Belvedere stands like a soldier among kneeling prisoners. He starts picking up his pace to reach the revolving door when he realizes that the building's plaza, with its manicured trees and freshly painted garbage cans, is crowded with dozens of people. He recognizes Mary Beemis, whose daughter disappeared one winter afternoon after school, never to be seen again. Across the way, he sees Mr. Simon, whose elderly father wandered away one night in the freezing cold—gone forever. In front of him stand the Garcia twins, now in their twenties, whose parents were killed in an unsolved hit-and-run. These are the city's grievers, its mourners, and they are all peering up at the Belvedere and whispering, as though praying to a temple of their own lost souls.

The phone bill slips from Doug's fingers, kisses the concrete, and then skitters down the paper-strewn street. He had thought he'd come here looking for answers, but he sees now that there are no answers. He is here for the same reason so many others are here—to let the past go, to move on. Out of breath, still trembling, Doug slowly crosses the street, where in the cold pre-dawn he joins ranks with his tribe of the bereaved, over a hundred others standing together, shoulder to shoulder, but utterly and forever alone.