

And They Neighbor as Thyselves
By Zachary Ross

Dear Mister Abrams,

Here is everything left of Jacob's diary, including the pages I found under a rock on my windowsill. Make of it what you will.

The last time I saw Jacob was on Sunday, on my way out of church. My heart was up in my throat, waiting for him to bring up those love letters, but he never did. He only told me about the notice from the bank, and we discussed which animals I would be taking from him. That is how I knew about the sheriff sale early enough to convince Dad to buy the property. It will be waiting for him when he gets back from wherever he is.

It was Joe who found him missing. He called me first, thinking I was with him, and I drove up to HOA after he called the sheriff. There was no sign of him anywhere, so we went through his things. That is how I found this diary. Whatever you think it suggests when you read it is probably fair, but know this: Jacob was in his right mind the last time we talked. Just heartbroken. So am I.

I would have fallen into his arms if he had just told me, the stubborn idiot. I was waiting for it. Who knows now how long I will have to wait just to see him again? In the meantime, Joe and I have gone through a lot of trouble to place the animals he left behind. I have one of his coyotes on my lap right now (not the one he writes about – both of its eyes are brown). It is a horribly imprinted thing. I do not know if it was like this when he got it, or if he babied it too much, but it can never go back to the wild. It follows me around like a puppy, and curls up in my lap and sighs every time I sit down. The wildlife rehabber in me recoils at it; still, it reminds me of him, and I just want to give it a great big kiss on his behalf.

I am so sorry about all of this. Rest assured that I will call you the minute I hear from Jacob, and I know you will do the same. He and you are in my prayers.

Sincerely,

Rachel Friggard

Saturday, March 7th, 2026

"And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said."

I need a vacation, Rachel. I said it last month when those squirrels died of aspiration, after that widow from Altoona, in her zeal not according to wisdom, tried to bottle feed them before finally surrendering them to me. I said it last week when that fawn stepped in a groundhog's hole and broke its leg. I'm saying it again now, having just euthanized four opossums that someone peeled from their dead mother on the side of highway 99. We're always swimming in opossums here at HOA. Where do they all come from? You would think that a creature who lives a year or two at most would have trouble keeping up when its greatest natural predator is the American Eighteen Wheeler, and yet they make enough babies that we have to turn some away. Not that I'm complaining, of course. They're God's perfect little angels, every one of them. They must be so full of love to persevere the way they do. It's a funny thing: I named the rehab center Hospitality of Abraham, thinking that in caring for these animals I would be doing service to God. But to look at the incubators, the enclosures, and my own shoulders, I could have named it Noah's Ark. Maybe I should grow my beard out. What do you think? Maybe I'll ask you about it next time I see you.

It's fitting that I should start this journal talking of love. I've never been one to journal; I tried it two or three times when I was younger, but the truth is that I hate talking to myself the most in the moments when I have things to journal about. That's why I've decided to write to you, Rachel, even

though you'll never read this. You're much easier to talk to than myself, and I can tell you things I wouldn't dare tell Joe or the volunteers. You'll scold me about that fawn, I can hear it already. That's all right: I deserve it, and your scoldings are as sweet to me as the rhododendrons already blooming around your father's farm. I'll burden you with a few of these opossums too, and we can complain about them together. Abraham wouldn't have dared.

Sunday, March 8th, 2026

"Then after they came, there swarmed by night upon their enemies mice of the fields, and ate up their quivers and their bows, and moreover the handles of their shields, so that on the next day they fled, and being without defence of arms great numbers fell."

Given how easy it was to write all of that last night, I was afraid I would have to keep an eye on the length of these entries. I want to keep them brief – I'm not trying to write a book.

It turns out I shouldn't have worried. I wouldn't have time to write a book if I wanted to (or read one either, as my professors will tell you). Thirty minutes of uninterrupted scrawling is the best I can hope for, apparently. I'll aim for that, unless I can't sleep, which happens too much these days.

What tore me away from it last night was simple darkness. The lights in my bedroom went out; and thinking that I had tripped a breaker, I went downstairs to check the fuse box. You already know about the rats, Rachel, I don't need to tell the war stories here. Right under my nose, one of their little kamikaze pilots found its way into the house and made straight for the broken panel door (which I've been meaning to fix but haven't had the time). In a kind of suicidal ecstasy it chose to chew through the hot wire to my bedroom specifically. It died with the lights, and I fed it to that caiman we rescued last year. It's a funny thing, having just written about those opossums. The rats are their foils; they want so badly to die, and they want to die in ways and in places most inconvenient to me personally: in the attic, in the walls, in my engine bay. I find a little of them both in myself these days, so I suppose I shouldn't love the rats any less than I do the opossums.

The truth is that I'm disappointed, Rachel. A wildlife rehabber learns not to be disappointed by very much, and I've had plenty of practice there. Animals die, trucks break down, homes need repairing (especially homes as old as mine). But I am disappointed, and it feels good to say it without being a bad influence on the volunteers. I'm disappointed in myself for dropping the ball in school, for skipping so many classes because someone found a mangy raccoon in his garage or a concussed woodcock in his dog's mouth or half a litter of rabbits under his lawnmower. I'm disappointed in myself for choosing Classics, combining the two most dead-end fields imaginable. I'm disappointed in Blair County for rezoning the lot next door – God only knows what I'll do if they won't let me keep the pens there. I'm disappointed in Altoona, Holidaysburg, Huntington, Mount Union, and Broad Top City for the dearth (and quality) of volunteers. I'm disappointed in both myself and them for how poorly we're scraping by here; donations are so sporadic and unpredictable that I wonder how I'll be able to afford more antibiotics every time we run out. I tell Joe all the time that God will provide everything we need: so far he has, but would it kill him to let me catch up before throwing the next thing at me?

Hey, would you look at that? I've complained for half an hour. Maybe you were right about journaling, I feel a few pounds lighter now. I think I'll leave most of this out when I give you those opossums tomorrow.

Monday, March 9th, 2026

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned."

I knew you would scold me about the fawn. Maybe you didn't know that I'd been scolding myself about it ever since it happened. Maybe you did, and just thought you could do it better. I don't mind it either way, because you can and did. Scold me all you like, if it keeps you talking. Even your ire is divine; Venus's velvet voice, in praise of Paris's golden gift, would not be half as fine as your

knowing laugh upon reception of the refugees from my overpopulated opossum polis. You are fairer than any fawn, tramping in your muck boots down the quarter-mile driveway, your sun-bleached denim jacket falling over rounded mountains grander than those that hug my holler, dusted with hay like fresh snow.

And I am an unshorn sheep, just as stupid and with no lovelier a voice. My beard could not be more of a rat's nest than the untidy curls atop my head, and to shear them both would only reveal a hard face with a big nose and flat, foolish cheeks. I don't know what to do with my lovesick sighs, Rachel. As long as I'm clinging so tenuously to HOA, I can't offer you anything more than sick animals for your own rehab. You love them even better than I do – would that I were one of those baby opossums, hiding against your breast in the front pocket of your jacket. Would that I had the chops to get away with saying something so foolish to you. Until then, I really ought to settle down.

An electrician is coming to replace that wire tomorrow. Joe would have spliced it for me, but I really had to go to class and he had to cover for one of the volunteers who didn't show up today. Tonight I'm writing by the light of a lamp plugged into an extension cord to the hall.

Friday, March 13th, 2026

"The men who know the speech of birds and more

Do learn from other livers than their own —

'Twere best to hear, I think, and not to heed."

You would rub it in my face, Rachel, if only you knew how superstitious I've become. I used to make fun of you for it, for insisting upon mowing the lawn and cutting your hair on Tuesdays, filing your taxes on Wednesdays, and feeding that ball python of yours on Saturdays – and yet here I am, twirling an eagle's singed primary feather at my desk, playing at one of the Argives and wondering how many omens I miss every day. Maybe I'll cut this into a quill and use it to write my next journal entry – or maybe that's a good way to curse myself, or you, and I had better not.

It fell down the chimney early this morning. No, I don't know how. But it became wedged in there, and because the fire was up it suffocated before smoking out the entire living room. There were hot ashes scattered all over the hardwood floor; nothing caught fire, thankfully, but dislodging the bird and scouring the chimney took me and Joe most of the morning. I think it's the one that I took in, to tell you the truth, the one who got a little too friendly. The carcass was as black as a buzzard's when we finally pulled it out, so I can't say I saw a resemblance, but that's the only way this makes any sense at all. I've had birds tearing up shingles before (looking for bugs that will become my problem someday, no doubt), I've had wild turkeys come through and peck the chickens to death, but this is almost comical. Almost. If this were Delphi, I would be on my way to the nearest augur already.

I appealed to the Zoning Board again on Wednesday, knowing that they would have their meeting in the afternoon, but they seemed just as uninterested as ever. Given that I'm way behind on house payments, they may just be waiting me out. I wonder if things like that get around. Certainly in Altoona, if anywhere. On Friday we had to call the sheriff out on another volunteer who was stealing medetomidine, so that's one less pair of hands around here.

Even the animals seem ill at ease lately, either reclusive or aggressive depending on the day, as if something is spooking them. Granny, my mare, has been gnawing the top of the fence. I haven't even seen that bobcat since the fawn broke its leg; it's eating, so I know it's still in there, but it wants nothing to do with me. I suppose that's ultimately a good thing. Still, I don't have a clue what it could be, so I'm keeping an eye out. I wonder sometimes if I angered a ghost or a witch up in the hills, cutting it off in my van on one of those blind bends or stealing a semi sacrifice meant for it. If it's a witch, she's probably on the Zoning Board.

Monday, March 16th, 2026

"Then wise Penelope answered him: 'If verily the gods are to bring about for thee a happier old age, there is hope then that thou wilt find an escape from evil.'"

There are few things in life that are not made well by seeing you, Rachel. Your sympathy alone is enough to soothe the troubled waters of my soul, and like the angel at the well to stir them up to healing. I think of you every time I pass the big mural of American Gothic in the campus cafe, imagining the two of us together out in front of this place I only aspirationally call a farmhouse. I'll look like that man before I'm thirty, at this rate, but you will only ever look like Helen in all her glory. Helen with the circumspection of Penelope, to boot – I hope you'll have her patience too, until I have a farmhouse I can offer you.

Strange how many wild animals the Humane Society has been getting lately. I don't know where people are finding them, or how they're getting them into their houses, but I'm getting tired of explaining the difference between a fat cat and a groundhog. As a matter of fact, these wild mink were never someone's pets, and you cannot feed them cat food! Ah well, I'm happy to take them off your hands anyway; whatever little I can do for you is worth any amount of trouble.

Sirius has been feeling unwell all day. I don't know if she caught something from one of the other animals or ate something she shouldn't have, but she's been sick several times since I woke up this morning. She's drinking plenty of water, thankfully, but if it keeps up I'll have to take a closer look, and after that take her to the vet. I made up some pumpkin and rice that I'm going to carry out to her now; the rhododendrons are starting to smell magnificent on the hill going up into the woods.

Wednesday, March 18th, 2026

"But as for Argos, the fate of black death seized him straightway when he had seen Odysseus in the twentieth year."

Sirius died last night. She ran up a high fever, so I took her inside to keep an eye on her, and around midnight she had a seizure. I was afraid of rabies, of course; but she had her shots, and there was no aggression and no real drooling. She passed some bloody urine during the seizure, then died shortly after. I stood in the kitchen by myself for thirty minutes, just looking at her. It felt like Granny was standing on my chest with all four hooves. Do you know what I mean, Rachel? I'm not confident I'm making much sense today.

It was mushrooms. I went out to her kennel with a flashlight after she died, and there was a cluster of red mushrooms growing out of a little crack in the corner. I thought I had made the whole thing watertight, but there they were. She'd taken a big bite out of them.

We're responsible for these creatures, Rachel: creatures who understand the world so much better than we do, but who can't be taught not to eat strange mushrooms if their own instincts don't warn them. I have so many such creatures under my care, and I kill them myself if I have no reasonable expectation that they'll heal and return to the wild. I try not to lose sleep over that – but Sirius was my own girl, and she should have been able to trust me not to poison her.

That's another advantage of this journal, I guess: I need to say these things, but if I were to say them all to your face I would exhaust you with misery. This way I can get up from my desk and walk to the mailbox unburdened, and we can make fun of the Zoning Board together next time I see you.

Back from the mailbox. I wasn't planning to write any more today, but the strangest thing happened on my way back to the house. There was another warning in the mail: I'm on pace to lose the race against these payments if nothing changes. I would pick up some work part time down in Altoona if I wasn't already borderline truant in my classes; as it is, I might need to do it anyway.

That isn't the strange part. The strange part is that my wood box was whining when I climbed the porch steps. I hold the latch closed with a carabiner clip to keep out anything looking for bugs. The clip was still there where I had left it; but when I removed it and lifted the lid, what should I find lying

on the splits but a young coyote, barely out of puppyhood, emaciated, trembling, and streaked with what seemed to be burns. It looked at me with a kind of delirious interest, then returned to its whining. I went to get a pair of gloves.

Joe was out back when I brought it in. I called him over from the back door, but he didn't know a thing about it, and we had no volunteers today. You've been to HOA, Rachel. You know that my driveway isn't that long, and that there are hills on three sides. Did someone drive up earlier, unlatch the wood box, dump a dying coyote inside, latch it again, and drive off without telling us? I would swear that it was empty when I went out to get the mail; I didn't hear any whining, at least. Did someone sneak it in during my quarter-mile walk to the mailbox? How? Why? I've been puzzling over it all evening, but it doesn't make a lick of sense.

What happened to this coyote? He looks (and smells) like he jumped through a bonfire. The burns are more or less superficial (though by no means negligible); but he's critically malnourished, infested with fleas and worms, and possibly septic judging by his high fever. He can't move his legs without them shaking, and he gave up trying shortly after I picked him up. Despite all this, he's surprisingly alert. He stared at me (pretending that Joe wasn't even there) constantly during his flea bath, almost without blinking, so intently that I couldn't help but stare back. I told Joe that one of his eyes may have been burned, and that if it were the cause of his infection we would have to euthanize – I don't believe that now, and frankly I didn't believe it then. But his right eye is a stark, bright yellow that I've never seen in a coyote before: not quite as yellow as a lemon, but at least as yellow as a sunflower. Its pupil is fully dilated and has yet to contract, and follows my finger only intermittently when the left eye is covered, so that I suspect some partial blindness. It could be a head injury. If it's simply heterochromia, it's one for the books. I guess we'll see. I'm still not sure he'll make it until morning. He had fluids and antibiotics: the rest is between him and God.

Wednesday, April 1st, 2026

"But thou biddest us be obedient to birds long of wing, that I regard not, nor take thought thereof, whether they fare to the right, toward the Dawn and the sun, or to the left toward the murky darkness."

It feels like I wrote in here just yesterday, but I can see now that it's been two weeks. I've been too exhausted lately to do much more than collapse in bed at night, trying to juggle all of these hot coals that will burn my life down if I let them touch the ground. It's a testament to God's mercy that I've managed to keep them aloft for two more weeks, although I'm starting to feel like poor Odin doing it.

Odin is what I've taken to calling that coyote, by the way. It's a sin, and a grave one, to name an animal that will go back to the wild someday, especially so soon. I know this, and yet with his discerning gaze and one queer eye I just can't help it. I called him that without thinking when I was still afraid he would die; Joe laughed at it, and that was that. No doubt Sirius has something to do with it: the timing of it, losing one and finding the other so soon, must have doomed me.

I'll try not to baby Odin any more than I have to. It was touch and go for that whole first week: fighting against the fever, against the worms, against what I can only call extreme overexertion. It resembles what I've read about animals rescued from wildfires, but of course the hills are way too damp for that at this time of year. I expected him to die until he accepted some food last Sunday; but while he still looks like hell and can hardly take ten steps without tiring, he gets a little livelier every day. For now he's in a little pen in the spare room downstairs. When he gets strong enough to give me trouble, I'll put him in one of the enclosures out back. He has more opossum in him than rat, that's for sure.

Oh, and speaking of rats, I have another good turn to report: I've discovered where the rodents have been coming in. Well, credit where credit is due, an animal discovered it, and I discovered their discovery. Something was digging against the side of the house last Saturday: possibly a fox looking

for mice. There was a big hole at the southeast corner of the house, anyways, sod thrown up everywhere, and as I was filling it in I saw the breach in the wall. Joe and I patched it up, and wouldn't you know it, I haven't seen a single unwelcome guest in the house since. That's a first since I moved in.

The animals have been happier too. I can't take credit for that, and in their case I can't explain it either. Granny has stopped her nervous gnawing and no longer acts distressed when I approach. The chickens have stopped fighting. That bobcat shows itself when it thinks I'm not watching. Even my million opossums seem happier. Maybe the March Madness was particularly bad this year. Who knows?

There was an enormous ring of mushrooms growing on the front lawn when I stepped outside this morning. At first I was put off, seeing that they were the same species I found in Sirius's kennel; but halfway through my coffee I chose not to take it as a sign. I'm not quite that superstitious yet, and I wouldn't know how to interpret it if I was. Maybe I'll let you try next time I see you.

I've been thinking a lot about omens lately, more than I ever have. It always seemed like a waste of time to me, looking for signs that I should do one thing or shouldn't do another, as if God made a game of his will that I would lose if I didn't divine it. I can remember, when I was in high school, listening to one of my classmates lament to her friend that she didn't know which university God wanted her to attend, and that she was afraid of making the wrong choice. I scoffed at her then, but I don't think I would now. Life has a way of training you to expect signs, even if you never get them. How much of life's seeming chaos is really comprehensible, given enough wisdom? I could ask any of the ancients and they would tell me "More than you think, Jacob." Maybe they were right.

Wednesday, April 15th, 2026

"To Zeus, the giver of wealth, a white bull."

Another two weeks. Wednesday is becoming my journaling day, it seems, mostly because we don't have volunteers to wrangle and I don't have classes. Volunteers are supposed to give me less work to do, did you know that Rachel? And sometimes they do, until one of them leaves a gate open and three of the deer run out onto the highway to meet the Angel of Death at seventy-five miles an hour.

I feel alive again after seeing you on Sunday. It floors me, the power you hold over me with only a smile, a laugh, the slightest tilt of your head. I feel like Saint Anthony, relieved a little early of his burden of a million opossums by an angelic visitation. I laughed when I told you about the Zoning Board, even though I know I can't afford a lawyer, because no disaster can feel complete in the face of love. That's what keeps me going these days, I suppose: these animals need love. My guests demand my hospitality. Someday, maybe, you will too.

I chickened out of telling you about the mushrooms. The whole thing felt so stupid when I was about to say it, but that's my own fault, really. It's more than just the mushrooms. Things have been so strange around HOA lately that I don't quite know how to talk about it without sounding insane. That's the magic of journaling, isn't it?

Something has been leaving dead animals on the front porch every morning – small game, all of it, so you'd think it would be one of the cats paying tribute; but none of the cats has ever done this before, and I haven't managed to spy them doing it. Whatever it is, it isn't picky about the species. It leaves mice, rats, voles, chipmunks, squirrels – the squirrels are the biggest – but that's not the strange part. The strange part is that all of them – all of them, Rachel – have been albinos. Joe saw one of them, and it impressed him so much that I made sure he hasn't seen the rest. Am I sounding insane yet?

The birds have been singing at odd hours too: all of them all at once, taking up a chorus when the coyotes start whining on the hillsides. I'm tempted to say that it's like a bunch of neighborhood dogs, but the fact is that it's nothing like that. It's more organized, more musical, than any birdsong I've ever heard. It's freaking Joe out. I'm trying not to let it freak me out. There are other things, but I'm too tired to write about them and I'll dream about them if I do.

Odin is doing remarkably well. He still has a ways to go, but when I think of how he looked when I found him there's no comparison. The worms have all been exorcised. He's eating fine now (he was too weak to chew when I found him), and has some of his strength back; I stopped giving him antibiotics early on, thinking it more likely that he had heatstroke than any kind of infection. He has the sharpest face, Rachel, in every sense of the word. When he looks at me with that bright, golden eye, it's like he's about to open his mouth and sell me a bridge. He's a tenacious thing, with a wild, intelligent spirit that makes me afraid to keep him in the house any longer. He hopped his little wire fence when I swore he was still too weak and went foraging in the house. I found him chewing on the knob of one of my desk drawers. I'll move him out to an enclosure tomorrow, and we'll go from there.

Monday, May 11th, 2026

"You demi-puppets that

By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,

Whereof the ewe not bites."

I don't know why I haven't picked up this journal in so long. There are seasons, I suppose, when you have to do things without dwelling on them; and there's been plenty to do, especially with Joe visiting his folks in Pittsburgh. It will be good for him to be away for a bit, I think. He's been dwelling on things too much, and it's making him antsy and a little paranoid. Maybe he should start journaling.

Who am I kidding? I'm antsy and paranoid too. Things are coming to a head with both the Zoning Board and the bank – just in time for me to be late on my thesis! The good news is that losing the second lot will cut down on property taxes, and having a break from school will give me time to find work somewhere. The bad news is that we've lost enough volunteers to make my work proportionally greater instead of lesser.

And who can blame them for leaving? This place is haunted, or else something has gotten into the water. The animals are doing fantastically well, in spite of it all. I've never had so much success with rehabilitation for so long in my whole career. So many easy recoveries in rescues I expected to euthanize. On the other hand, they act like they have mad cow disease, and any volunteer who sees them act up becomes too skittish afterward. They're universally less aggressive, even that ornery bull we've got on the second lot, but more prone to misbehave in ways I frankly don't know how to manage. Just last Wednesday I woke up around midnight to the sound of a stampede, and walked out back to find every animal not locked in parading in a perfect circle around Odin's enclosure. They stopped the second I hit them with my flashlight, staring at me like nothing was wrong, and I spent the rest of the night getting them back in their pens. There was a nice, neat rut ringing the enclosure in the morning. The same thing has happened twice more, with different animals on different parts of the property, since then.

Someone has been throwing rocks at the corners of the house too. I don't know who, but he must have a lot of time on his hands, because he does it irrespective of the hour. He doesn't hit the windows, thank God, but I can see the rocks in the grass and the dings on the siding when I run out to look. One of the volunteers quit, apparently, because someone has been dropping bouquets of rhododendron flowers at her feet when her back is turned. The rhododendrons are past their peak now, but the bouquet she showed me yesterday was made of the best I've ever found on the hillside here, tied with some sort of silver twine.

I was very interested to hear that you have a secret admirer (who isn't me) – so interested, in fact, that I let it slip about the albino offerings on my front porch. Your discomfort about it was completely understandable, so I didn't rave about the rest of the happenings like I was preparing to. Maybe someday I will, when I'm sure that the stress isn't making me psychotic. Or maybe I should now; you were always my confidant, Rachel, and I only started keeping you in the dark because I was

afraid my desperation – and now my lunacy – would seem unattractive. But cowardice is unattractive too, isn't it?

Regardless, I'm inclined to think it must be a raven leaving those gifts on your windowsill: a crow would be large enough for the crab apples, and the rings and coins and things, but too small to carry that Jaguar hood ornament very far. It's probably one of the ones you rehabbed. I can't help but feel a little smug about that; you always cluck your tongue at me when some animal imprints, but here you are now with your own unsummoned slave, made loyal by love. If only I were that bird.

Wednesday, May 20th, 2026

"Look at that Black Pig! Never have I seen one so huge and so fierce!' And Horus looked; neither did he know Seth in this strange form, and thought it was a wild boar from the thickets of the North Country."

Things are more or less the same, to the extent that I wouldn't be journaling right now if not for what happened last night. I'm writing this in the morning before I go to work, to keep the details fresh in my mind.

It was the middle of the night, I think around 3 AM, when I heard knocking at my back door – loud, ponderous knocking that woke me out of a dead sleep. Joe is still gone, so I was alone in the house, and without Sirius (and with Odin in his enclosure) there was no one inside to give the alarm. Outside, on the other hand, the animals were screaming bloody murder, every last one in its own voice. In my tired delirium, I thought that a SWAT team had come to raid HOA, a natural development of bad luck that I had nevertheless failed to predict. No one broke down the door, however, or even announced himself, police officer or otherwise. The animals only bleated and honked and wailed, so that when I finally flicked on the lights over the back door my eyes darted to the break action shotgun I keep propped against the door frame. I parted the Venetian blinds over the window and peeked out onto the back porch, then made sure the shotgun was loaded.

He was huge, Rachel. I didn't realize how huge until I opened the door, but he must have been pushing seven feet tall. The long, black wool coat and wide-brimmed hat he wore made him seem even bigger, so that his hunting rifle – cradled in his elbow and pointing down, with his gloved hand conspicuously away from the trigger – looked like a child's toy. It was cool out that night, but this man was dressed for the cold; every inch of him was covered save for his eyes, framed by thick brown curls that disappeared into a massive scarf. Those eyes were apologetic, at least, when they saw me in my boxer shorts, breathing heavily and with one hand hiding behind the door frame.

"Can I help you?" I asked him. I must have sounded like a little boy.

"Sorry to intrude," he said, in exactly the kind of voice you would imagine. "I'm from up by Lincoln Caverns. Someone stole the alternator off my truck, and I'm pretty sure he's hiding on your property. Do I have your permission to poke around?"

Despite my racing heartbeat, I was still so fresh from sleep that it took a while for me to realize that his request didn't make any sense. All I could think to say, after an uncomfortable moment's thought, was: "Your alternator? Don't you mean your catalytic converter?"

He only shook his head – less like a denial, I thought, and more like he didn't understand the question.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Bill," he told me. "I'm from up by Lincoln Caverns."

"Bill what?" I said, feeling angrier as the sleep left me.

He just shook his head again. I thought he might have muttered something, but the animals were still wailing so loud that I couldn't make it out.

"This is private property, Bill," I told him. "You can't take a gun onto my back porch in the middle of the night and expect me to let you nose around."

"It won't take long," said Bill. "I figure he's in one of your pens."

“Well I hope he’s not in with the bobcat, for his sake,” I said. “You already been looking around? Is that why the animals are upset?”

Bill shook his head again. “I’m not the trespasser here.”

“You’re on my back porch,” I said.

“I came over the ridge,” he said, then turned and pointed a thick, gloved finger into the darkness, where the black line of the hills met the stars.

“In your truck?” I asked him.

He might have smiled behind his scarf then, to tell by his eyes. “It won’t take me but ten minutes to scare him up, if he’s here,” he grunted. “Then I’ll leave you and your animals be.”

“If you set one foot in any of my pens, I’ll take it as trespassing,” I said, as forcefully as I could. Nothing I said or did seemed very impressive, standing in front of him. “Now I want you off my property, or I’m calling the cops.”

“Oh, quit fingering your coach gun, you won’t need it,” said Bill, growling in a way I’ve never heard from a man before. He tipped his hat to me then and turned around, and in the middle of the animals’ wailing tramped back down the porch steps and set off past the pens until he melted back into the black forest. His boots sounded like sledgehammers, Rachel; the boards creaked and bent so much under his weight that I was afraid they might break. He must have weighed five hundred pounds.

I never called the cops, but I got dressed and took that shotgun and a flashlight around the property once, checking all of the pens. No thief hiding among the raccoons. It didn’t take the animals long to calm down, but Odin was more frightened than I’ve ever seen anything or anyone. I suppose that’s one way to re-wild a coyote.

Reading all of this back, I’m not satisfied with it. Part of me wants to tear it out and start over, but I guess that’s not quite in the spirit of journaling. It just misses so much that I don’t know how to communicate, a bizarre, uncanny spirit to the whole thing that makes me feel like I dreamed it all. I didn’t dream it, and I know that because I haven’t slept since it happened, but what does that leave? Either Bill is insane, or I am. He didn’t leave any tracks on my back porch.

It brings to mind some old myth, but I can’t pin down exactly what or why. Achilles on Skyros? Orestes pursued by the Furies? Famous Orestes, stealing Clytemnestra’s alternator! Neither of those is right, of course, and I’m chewing the eraser off of this pencil chasing it down. I should set it aside for now and get to work.

Friday, May 22nd, 2026

“I know all, Odin, where you hid your eye: in that far-famed well of Mimir.”

I finally realized who Bill reminds me of. I’ve had Icarus on the mind because of that dead eagle, and that made me think of Prometheus, but it didn’t click until I made the leap to Phaethon. It’s really like nothing in Greece at all. That whole exchange, nocturnal and awkward and threatening to become a Western standoff in spite of both of our efforts, was something so perfectly American. The lack of context does it, I suppose. I haven’t seen Bill since, and I don’t expect to see him again, but I sure would love to ask him who would steal his alternator and why. One thing I do know-

Wednesday, June 10th, 2026

“Screaming, the Fire Beings flew after him. Swift as Coyote ran, they caught up with him, and one of them reached out a clutching hand. Her fingers touched only the tip of the tail, but the touch was enough to turn the hairs white, and coyote tail-tips are white still.”

What a disaster, Rachel, and on top of everything else. I don’t understand how this happened, or why, or what I did to deserve it, but I defy anyone to say that it’s not the omen encapsulating all the others. Weeks of effort, torn to shreds: the pattern of my life.

I found Odin standing on my desk this morning, surrounded by the torn remains of this journal. The sun was shining perfectly on him through the window, highlighting the whiter fur that grows from

his old burns. I swear there was triumph in his eyes when he looked at me, as if he'd done something marvelously clever and couldn't wait to be praised for it. How and why he escaped his enclosure, slipped into the house, and opened my desk drawer, I'm positive I'll never understand, even with all of the lost speculation I did in these shredded pages. As wild as he is now – wild and well enough to be reintroduced – getting him back into that enclosure was shockingly easy. He practically led me there. Coyotes really are the American Reynard, aren't they? Inscrutable, unpredictable, and fond of making fools of us.

I've pieced the journal back together as well as I could. Fortunately, everything is dated. Unfortunately, everything after May 22nd (I managed to save half of that one) is confetti, and some earlier pages are missing entirely. I could tape together a few of the larger scraps, I suppose, and clip them to the rear cover, but what's the point? This has really taken the wind out of my sails for journaling. I'm expecting a letter in the mail tomorrow that will punctuate everything I've written about nicely. I'll have to tell you about it, and that will be the hardest thing I've ever done. That's worth one more entry in here, then I'll shelve this as a keepsake if I don't decide to burn it.

Sunday, June 14th, 2026

"'Ah, fly, oh goddess-born,' he said, 'fly from these flames! The enemy holds the walls. Troy rushes down from her high pinnacle. Enough is done for Priam and our country.'"

"This is an official Act 91 Notice. You are receiving this notice because Pennsylvania law requires mortgage lenders to send it to homeowners facing foreclosure."

And there it is. I suppose I was burying the lede a little in this journal, Rachel, just like I was in person; but it's all out in the open now, and you deserve to be as disappointed in me as you are for me. I thought that Hospitality of Abraham Wildlife Rehab might just make it if our fundraising came through, if I could find work fast enough, if I was more capable or clever or resourceful. At the end of the day I simply bit off more than I could chew, and I never allowed myself to admit it at the risk of making it real. I thought I had trained myself pretty well to accept disappointment, yet here I am, weeping as I write this.

I'm glad now that I never told you how much I love you. I nearly did it after church this morning, when we were sitting on the bed of my pickup and you were fingering that letter with as much malice as Odin with this journal. It took my last ounce of willpower not to; the way you looked at me, the things you said, I could have sworn – in my feverish despair, no doubt – that you were waiting for it. But it would only have brought us both more grief. I promised myself that I wouldn't lead you on while HOA was teetering on the edge of a cliff, while I was still in school full time and couldn't provide for you. I would be no more good to you than a rescue animal, Rachel, and certainly a whole lot worse: an imprinted rescue animal, incapable of returning to the wild – someone else's burden forever. I won't be that to you. You deserve so much better. You deserve to be free; and if there's one thing I've learned in wildlife rehab, it's that to love someone is to make them free. Well, I love you. Someday, maybe, we can be free together. Until then, don't wait up for me. I'm exhausted, and need to take a very long nap.

I don't quite know what will happen next. I broke the news to Joe on Friday. He saw it coming. In a moment here I need to pick up the phone and start making calls to get these animals placed elsewhere. I love them too, all of them, the living and the dead. I wish I could have done more for them. Thank you for taking Granny, at least, and a few more of the opossums – I wouldn't have made it as long as I did without your help.

After that I'm going to coax Odin into a kennel (or try to, at least) and release him up in the hills. He's ready to go back: he paces that enclosure like an emancipated felon, staring at me with more understanding than most people. Praise God, He'll be the last of my rescues at HOA, and I think the best. I still can't believe how perfectly he recovered, given what he looked like when I pulled him out of the wood box. I'll always wonder what happened to him, how he got there. He won't tell me, even

though I'm convinced by now that he could. I swear, Rachel, sometimes I think he tore up this journal because he read it. So be it. Let the coyote keep his secrets. Let him be free. I give thanks to the God who has counted me worthy to make him so.

"Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body."