

Mae wasn't sure if the face was looking back at her.

His squared jaw showed signs of stubble, his brow furrowed right into his black half-rim glasses. Suddenly her laptop screen refreshed, and the empty country road and breeze-blown long grass returned. The screen door flapped shut somewhere off to the left, and the screen shook back and forth as Rowan picked his laptop up and sat down. Mae's eyes darted to the Skype call time. 12:13, 12:14, 12:15...

"Oh hi," Rowan deadpanned, sipping his fresh rum and coke.

"Dude, the weirdest thing just happened. I think Skype crossed lines with another call."

"What do you mean? I don't think that happens with the internet."

"It was weird. You left, I saw the street for about ten seconds, then it cut to some businessman in a tie staring at the screen."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. I don't know if he saw me."

"Doubt it. Weird."

"Well I didn't say anything either. Maybe he was just as freaked out."

"What did he look like?"

"Think Michael Douglas in Falling Down." Rowan's face didn't move.

"Y'know, that movie where he freaks out over the bottle of Aspirin? Falling Down? Dee-fens?"

"Hey, I gotta go."

"What? You just got back."

"I gotta go. Work. It's something for work."

"Do they know you've been drin--" Mae finished the sentence alone in her bedroom.

Tuesday was barely noticeable. Mae floated from class to class absorbing nothing but the irony of wishing she were anywhere else for geography. That classroom

was lit like a forgotten alien spaceship, so bright but somehow yellowed like an old photo. Mrs. Pritchard rolled the double-tier tv stand in, and the class erupted in weak cheer. Mae considered joining just over the dimming of the lights.

“We have a special treat today,” she said, her face in its standard grimace. No one could tell if it was really a treat. But not listening to her monotone slow leak of a voice was a treat in itself.

“Some of you may have heard of Intersect. It’s a distance learning program that provides valuable work experience in another part of the country you might not normally visit.” Mae perked up. She thought of Rowan in Yellowknife, how excited he was when he got the presentation last semester. He couldn’t shut up about it for a week, and the wait after applying was unbearable. Every day a new question. Every day a new worry. Every day the thought of not seeing her best friend for two months.

“Your work helps struggling communities, so you can feel good about contributing back while you earn credits.” Is this woman for real?, Mae thought. Sell the thing, woman.

“Mae, your friend Rowan is currently in the program. Can you tell us how he’s liking it?” Mae was caught offguard. Deadpan would have to do.

“He’s getting valuable work experience and giving back to struggling communities. And that makes him feel good.” It got a couple chuckles. Mrs. Pritchard glared at her. No punishment would be given. Mae hovered in that precious spot where she was too smart to be reprimanded for being smart.

“And you all would appreciate the experience.” Aye, aye cap’n, thought Mae. The lights went out and she folded her arms and laid her head down.

The video started with the typical fanfare - flashing images of Canadian landmarks and nature until a flying gold medallion swung in and filled the screen. INTERSECT, screamed the centre. Then it exploded, revealing a short man in a tan suit standing in front of a forest.

“Imagine *this...*” the camera pulled back to reveal how massive the trees were. “was your *office.*” Oh Rowan, Mae thought. How did this seduce you so hard?

“And *this...*” Now he was in a harness in the tree. Oh, Mae thought, will this ever end? The camera pulled back again to show he was about fifty feet above ground. “was your *desk.*”

“Take a shit!” Derrick said from the back corner.

“Out!” He was already getting up when Mrs. Pritchard yelled it. Mae eyed him enviously as he left. The video was cutting through random jobs in nature. A red-haired lady pulling a net out of a pond. A black man with a giant beard driving a tractor in a wheatfield. A Chinese woman snowshoeing. A square-jawed man in black half-rim glasses with a seismograph at the base of a mountain.

Mae body jolted. Then he was gone.

The rest of the video was a blur. Images, place names, the man in the tan suit all merged together. When the bell rang, the class began frantically packing their things.

“If you are interested in the program, you can talk with me this week. I have the signup forms.” She was talking to no one. Mae slowly walked up to the dvd player and started flipping back through chapters.

“Are you interested, Mae?” She was both hopeful and in disbelief.

“I just need to... see... one part again.” She hit play. The red-haired woman pulled her empty stunt net out of the pond again. Mae hovered her finger over the pause button and hit it once she saw the mountain. It was him. He was looking up the mountain. That jaw, the firmness of his face. It was unmistakable.

Mae checked Skype the second she got home. Rowan was offline. She left it up, waiting for the telltale click. At about 7p.m. she couldn't wait any longer and opened Gmail.

To Rowan Petersen
That man!

Hey, are you going on Skype anytime tonight?

The craziest thing happened in class! We were watching a video for the program you're in and the guy I saw last night was IN THE VIDEO!!! Do u know him?

M.

Mae scoured YouTube, Google, the Intersect website, to no avail. She checked Skype again but Rowan was still offline. She went downstairs.

Mae's mother Carla was boiling the kettle.

"Want some tea?"

"No thanks." Mae jumped up on the counter.

"What's wrong?" Carla had barely looked up.

"That obvious?"

"Well, not so much. But it's pretty rare you want to hang out with your mom."

"Think of all the tea I could have!"

"Haw, haw. Really, what's up?"

"It's stupid. Just something weird that happened with Rowan." Carla's stance became rigid.

"What do you mean, is he alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, he's fine. I was on Skype with him yesterday and suddenly it cut to a random guy, then back to Rowan. Then I saw the guy today in the promo video on the program Rowan's in." Carla was still.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you."

"What's Skype?"

"It's a video messaging program." Carla's eyes went wide.

"You mean someone could *see* you?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. He wasn't looking at me."

"Well I don't want you using that anymore."

"Ok. Fine." This was the standard answer. Carla worked in a daycare. Her computer knowledge was on par with a typewriter. A compassionate woman who turned immediately paranoid in a technology environment. Her communication was face-to-face. Video messaging, as face-to-face as it might be, read to her 'open window into my

daughter's bedroom'. There would be no Skyping tonight, thought Mae. Better keep all communication down to keystrokes. She'll be listening in the hall all night. Mae hopped off the counter and went back upstairs. As soon as she closed her door, she could hear the faint footsteps up the stairs.

Gmail showed one new message, but it was just an iTunes receipt. As Mae marked it read, she remembered she'd checked Skype before she'd left. She maximized it. Rowan was online. She typed a quick 'Hey!' and sent. Then she tried a video call. No answer. She left both open in case he'd message back and flopped on to her bed.

She awoke hours later to a silent house. Rolling over she saw 1 a.m. on the clock and rolled out of bed to get properly ready. As she passed by her desk, she saw the little green light of her webcam on and rushed over to awake the computer. No Rowan. Skype didn't even have a video call activated. Why was that light on?

Mae checked through her open programs, then suddenly her hands and feet went numb. There was nothing open that used a webcam.

Someone was watching her.

She slammed Shift+Command+Q, logged out and shutdown. That man, she thought. It has something to do with that man. She grabbed her phone and opened Gmail. She started emailing Rowan so quickly that she didn't notice a new message in her inbox.

—

To Rowan Petersen

no subject

Something really weird just happened, you have to email me back asap. Let me know you're alright.

M.

Once she hit send, she saw **Inbox (1)**. Rowan had sent her an email just after midnight.

—

To Mae Gunnar

no subject

facetime://5558675309

Mae opened the link. Facetime bounced, then filled her screen with black.

“Mae,” Rowan whispered.

“Where are you??”

“Mae... I can’t hear you. I muted the computer. I’m behind the shed of the house.”

“What are you--” she cut herself off, remembering he heard nothing.

“You gotta call the police. There are guys here. They’ve been doing things, this program.” He cut off quickly. The laptop shifted. A door creaked shut in the distance.

“Rowan!” a man’s voice yelled. “Rowan!” Another man muttered something.

“I’ll check the truck,” a third man said. Mae brought her hands to her mouth, stifling a cry, a yell. It was a dream, she thought. I’m still asleep.”

Suddenly Rowan began to run. The picture was as chaotic as his voice. The blackness engulfed him.

“Help me! They’re doing experiments on--”

Rowan was offline.