

As soon as Thomas closed the front door, leaving his call with Kerrin on Skype open so that she could enjoy the view of Canoe Mountain, an old, stooped man came into the yard and walked up to the computer.

The old man shuffled to the bottom of the landing that the computer was perched on and, because of his stoop, was eye-level with the computer's camera. He peered into the screen and saw Kerrin, her eyebrows raised and her posture stiff, surprised and mildly uncomfortable.

"Well, hello there," the old man cooed, his voice gentle and even but deep and weathered.

"Hi," Kerrin said, unsure. The man she saw peering into the camera had a large, bent nose, the septum red and translucent and his nostrils gaping. His eyes were an impossibly fresh brown, light with a hint of gold. They could've been the eyes of a much younger man, but for the left eye which had a faint milky film covering it. His skin, white, almost starched, rested in thick folds about the contours of his face. He suddenly produced a handkerchief and wiped his nose before shoving it roughly back in his pocket.

Assuming this man knew Thomas, or one of his roommates, Kerrin started explaining, "I'm Kerrin, a friend of Thomas'. He just went inside..."

"Oh, never mind that," the old man said gently. "You know it's funny, I knew today was the day, but I didn't know how or where I was going to find a witness." He smiled with candor and deep compassion into the camera. "Yet, here you are, Kerrin." His eyebrows arched and his eyes brightened, his smile deepening. "God works in mysterious ways, doesn't he, Kerrin. Do you believe in God? Wait, don't answer that. No matter." He shook his head and closed his eyes for a brief instant.

Kerrin was uneasy. *Where's Thomas?*

"Well hippity-hop, let's get going Kerrin." The old man took a hold of the laptop and started walking back towards the road.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Kerrin's screen was showing blurry, erratic movement: a flash of sky, then the grass, then the old man's blue corduroy pants, then asphalt. He was carrying Thomas' computer down the street! Kerrin started screaming.

"Hey! You! What are you doing?? You can't just take the computer! Hey!" Feeling ignored Kerrin didn't bother forming words any more. "Heeeeeeyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy! Aaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

But it wasn't doing any good, because the old man had climbed into a sedan. He placed the computer on the passenger seat and pointed the screen towards where he sat in the driver's seat.

“Now listen, Kerrin. I need your company for just a little while. I’m such an old, lonely man, and I need some company, but not for too long, I promise you. I know you’ll stay on the computer because, well, how else might your friend get it back? You’ll have to tell him what you see and hope he can follow your clues. So if you’ll just stop your screaming, because you can see it’ll do you no good,”—he looked at the rolled-up window—“we’ll just spend some time together. Alright, dear?”

Kerrin realized the old man was right. She sat, dumbfounded, staring at him as he began driving. Out the driver’s window she could see trees and mountainsides blurring by, but not any distinct features that she could relay to Thomas as clues. Meanwhile, the man began to talk.

“I’ve lived in these here mountains my whole life, you know.”

Kerrin wasn’t really listening. She had begun surfing the web for the RCMP’s contact info in Valemount. She didn’t know what they could do, or what she could tell them, but she couldn’t just do nothing.

“...and my great grandfather, he was one of the first white settlers out here in these parts some hundred and twenty years ago. My whole family, my whole life is built into these mountains, flows in these rivers...” the old man droned on.

By now Kerrin was offscreen on her phone, but when the Valemount detachment of RCMP answered her call, she didn’t know what to say. And she suddenly realized that to say anything would jeopardize Thomas’ computer. *Won’t the old man just end the call if he knows I’m talking to the RCMP? And I don’t have enough information yet for the RCMP to ID this man.* Kerrin put the call onto speaker phone.

“You won’t get away with this, you know,” she said very loudly, addressing the old man. “You can’t just steal my friend’s computer, my friend THOMAS who works for THE GOAT in VALEMOUNT.” She shouted every second word, but when she looked at her phone, the RCMP had hung up. And the old man had barely noticed.

“...and my second son, he died in an avalanche in 1973. That was a bad year for avalanches in this part, you know...”

Kerrin could see that the old man had started driving up a mountainside road. The sun was setting and light was fading; Kerrin’s screen showed dark, nearby shadows, blurred into abstraction by the bumps of an obviously rugged road.

“...and then my youngest son died. Or disappeared. The police said he’s dead, drowned in Fallmore Lake. That’s up Mount Robson way, some 1500 meters above sea level, you know. Gorgeous part of the country. But I don’t believe the police. Felix, that was my boy’s name, he never fit in around these parts. He didn’t want to

be a mountain man, or a forestry man, or a mining man. God knows what he wanted to do. He was just unhappy and restless..."

The car was slowing down in a small clearing. Kerrin was busy writing down any details the man related, listening very closely now. *As soon as I get enough information from this crazy bastard, I'm ending this call and calling the police.* So far, Kerrin only had some of the personal history of this man to go on, and who knew how much of that was true.

The old man parked the car and slowly got out the driver's side door. Kerrin's mind raced with what she could do, but a feeling of dread was also starting to creep over her senses. *Witness? Company for a short while?* Kerrin could hear the door behind the computer being opened, and her screen showed more jerky, abstract images as the man picked the computer up and started walking, shuffling. The sun had set now, and the trees were being swallowed in shadows. She caught a glimpse of a valley floor with a small town lying, unassuming, beneath them. They must've driven just to the outskirts of town. And she saw the sunset! Judging by the sunset she now knew that she had been taken north-east out of town. She jotted this down and was considering if this was enough information to end this bizarre call, when suddenly the old man dropped Thomas' computer. It came to rest on the ground, the old man sprawled in front on his face. He moaned and muttered something. *Was that German? Another clue?*

As the old man picked himself slowly up off the ground, Kerrin saw his left cheek, just beneath the milky eye, bleeding. His curduroy pants were bunched up to his knees from the fall, and thick, hand-knitted socks were pulled up neatly up his flaccid shins. Suddenly he seemed like such a helpless, harmless old man. Kerrin hesitated and then decided to keep the call going.

The old man carried the computer, facing away from him, to the door of a small log cabin. The door was nothing more than brush taken from a pine tree, tied together, and leaned across the doorframe. Once over the threshold, Kerrin was momentarily submerged in complete darkness. Some rustling and bumping and scraping noises could be heard, the computer settled onto some sort of counter, and then the bright burst of a match put to a kerosene lamp wick, just offscreen. A soft yellow-orange glow infused the room and Kerrin could see the inside of a one-room cabin, as though it was a relic of an era long past. The floor was packed dirt, the computer faced a corner which must've served as the kitchen and bathroom and hearth, with pots and pans and a three-legged stool cluttered around a wood stove. A piece of twine was strung across the corner, above the stove, with little meddle hooks glinting in the lamp's diffused lighting.

The old man came back into Kerrin's screen. The blood from his cheek had dribbled down the side of his face, outlining his ancient cheekbones. *Why hasn't this call been dropped yet?* Kerrin wondered. But then remembered Thomas telling her that the Village of Valemount, as an ambitious, little town, had just installed wi-fi across its

municipality. The old man retrieved his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped up the drying blood. He smiled at Kerrin, his sincerity seemingly oblivious to the absurdity of the situation.

“What’s your name?” Kerrin asked. *Worth a try*, she thought. But the man disappeared from her screen only to reappear shortly holding a framed picture. He brought the picture in front of the computer’s camera. The frame was ornate, wrought-iron, and the picture was faded, sepia. The woman’s beauty caught Kerrin’s breath. Despite the faded quality of the picture Kerrin could see jet-black hair, cascading over the woman’s bare shoulders. Delicate shoulder bones matched high cheekbones, as though this woman had some Indian blood. The beautiful woman posed on the backdrop of what looked like a western movie set, except maybe it wasn’t a set, but an authentic image. She wore a dark dress, ballooned at the waist, and a corset which pushed her breasts up into the forefront of the picture. A slight, wry smile played at the corners of her mouth. Kerrin thought of Janis Joplin and Helena Bonham Carter and...that Spanish chick she went on a date with who was awful in bed.

“That’s my wife,” the old man said from behind the picture. “God rest her soul. This was taken from her days working up in Dawson City, playing the part of a prospector’s wife in a theater outfit up there.” The picture was withdrawn from the camera and Kerrin could see the old man’s face again, his side profile. He was looking at the picture with a profound sense of loss, Kerrin thought. But then a hard look came over his features. His lips tightened and he put the picture down somewhere behind the computer. “She was nothing but a whore,” the old man slurred. “God took her before she could reform her ways. And the children she bore me have all died or gone away. And now I’m all alone.”

A clattering sound came from behind the man, from the corner that was off-screen, the sound of metal on rock, Kerrin thought; the old man looked up into the corner. “Well not entirely alone. I only need a few more minutes of your time, Kerrin, dear. I think my timing was just right.” A muffled moan came from the off-screen corner, soft, slurred, delirious-sounding and distinctly feminine.

That feeling of dread flared up, but Kerrin felt transfixed, incapable of doing anything but watching...*witnessing*.

The old man shuffled in the direction of the corner with the wood stove, reached up and grabbed a handful of the small metal hooks hanging from the twine. They weren’t longer than a couple of inches. Then he shuffled over to the off-screen corner, where the moan had come from. The moans suddenly returned, sustained this time, drawn out, but still muffled, as though heard through a wall or a blanket. Kerrin’s face froze in a grimace. The moans ceased as quickly as they’d returned, followed by what sounded like a splash. And then the wail of a newborn baby. Scraping sounds and some other soft, grating sound filled Kerrin’s mind with horrific images: *metal hooks and a newborn baby and those impossibly bright, brown,*

*compassionate eyes.* The baby's wail had reached a feverish pitch, but was interrupted by a tense, saturated silence, before the silence was shattered with a new wail, increased in intensity.

The man reappeared on Kerrin's screen, a newborn baby hanging upside down, the back towards the computer, suspended by four or five hooks pierced through the soles of its feet. The baby was dripping, covered in placental fluid, a light red sheen illuminated by the orange-yellow glow of the lantern. The man's posture was now erect. A profound look, as though he glimpsed God, was fixed on his face.

"Do you see, Kerrin? Do you see it? Look!" He brought the hanging baby closer to the screen, and Kerrin thought she was going to vomit, scream, snap into an insane oblivion. Whatever she was going to do, she was still transfixed, immobilized with horror, unable to will her mind or muscles into a reaction.

The baby's backside filled Kerrin's screen, and the old man's wrinkled, crooked finger pointed to a spot on the baby's lower back. Kerrin could see a faint mark, a birthmark perhaps, in the shape of a crucifix.

"Finally, this is the one," the old man said. "I knew it would be. And you've been my witness, Kerrin."

The screen went blank, the call ended.