

“We can do that, in any size you like, Ms.Jordess.”

“How much is it going to be?” she asks. I smile and turn on the screen of my desktop.

“Let’s see,” I tell her. Looking intently at the screen, I type away, seemingly trying to get her a good deal. In reality, I’m not doing a thing, but all the movements and sighs let Ms.Jordess, like so many other small business owners looking for professional advertisements and displays, feel like she’s getting a good deal.

“Ahh, here we go,” I glance at her over the screen, “For only \$1,600, we can get you four six by three signs, in full color, as you requested, as well as our new fold out design for 500 business cards. Don’t forget how nice they’ll look on your storefront.”

She folds her hands on her lap, and gives me a deer in the headlights stare. “I’m not so sure I could do that. I was looking for something in the realm of one grand, no more.”

I pull up closer to her, “But Ms.Jordess, this is the supreme solution to attract more customers. People that live miles from here will notice your ads as they drive by. I can assure you this investment will lead to more people entering those doors. It’ll pay itself off in no time.”

“I guess you’re right,” she says, waiting for more reassurance on my part.

“Your dog groomers will look so nice, I might want to get my own hair cut there.” I reply, followed by a laugh. She goes along, her make up failing to cover up all the creases in her skin.

Once her nervous laughter ceases, she asks, “When will it be done?”

“We can have it brought over to you by next Thursday. The payments up front though. We take credit.” She pulls out her purse, a red bag that looks like it’s made out of seat belts. A white envelope is slid over to my side, followed by a bright yellow credit card. I process the payment quickly, not forgetting to compliment her god-awful earrings. It’s the compliments that keep them coming back, says Rick, my friend, whose office is two doors over. It’s interesting, how neither of us had any desire to stay here in Minnertown, but all the big dreams and planning synthesized nothing in reality. His thing was football in high school, mine was acting. One bad fall left him with a concussion that shut down any dreams of ever playing in the big leagues. My enthusiasm over being someone else for a living didn’t translate to any opportunities. As one thing led to another, we both had a marketing major in the nearby community college.

I slide a business card over to Ms.Jordess, along with her credit card. “I look forward to working for you again. Tell your friends about us. Have a nice day.” My nameplate, which reads

Chris Denners in solid black letters, catches the light as she stands. I hear a thump above me, followed by a hiss. Finally, the heat has been turned on. I swear the landlord keeps the thermostat at fifty degrees. This October has been colder than any other I can remember. My client leaves, surely ecstatic at the thought of all her new signs.

Signs That Sell Inc. was opening in the new building complex four blocks from the university. It was as if God had intended for Rick and me to go here. Now, 3 years later, we work full time on the fourth floor. As much as he hates sitting in a room and acting pleasant all day, I enjoy driving every penny out of each person that walks into my office.

A squeal runs through the building. The siren seems to come from everywhere. Once. Twice. I peek my head out of the room. Rick is already in the hallway.

“What’s going on?” I yell to him.

“A fire alarm went off on the top floor. Someone was probably smoking or something,” he replies. Everyone stands around awkwardly, not wanting to this disturbance to result in any lost customers. Finally, someone up front says we have to leave. The floor manager must think it’s serious.

I catch up to Rick as we head downstairs. Two firemen pass by us.

“Maybe there was a gas leak,” I ponder.

“Doesn’t really matter, as long as we get a longer break.” Rick says, snickering. His broad shoulders look comical in a dress shirt. The buttons always seem to be barely hanging on.

“Jeez, how much gel do you need on your hair? Do you go through a bottle every morning?” He chuckles, as we go through the back exit into the parking lot.

“Shutup. Jennifer likes it this way. She says I look like a professional, which I am,” I grin. We’ve been dissing each other since 9th grade, considering that there is a lot to pick on between the both of us, we still haven’t stopped.

“I don’t know about you though, your shirts always look one size too small,” I retaliate.

He looks down. “This one’s alright.” It’s not. Alex, our manager, calls us over.

“Seems like a flame of sorts developed in one of the empty rooms on the 6th floor. It’s gonna be a while till we’re back inside. Don’t forget to leave the week reports on my desk at the end of the day.” We nod, and he goes over to the others. I haven’t made any friends here, and neither has Rick. We’ve never gotten past the “Good morning,” part of any conversation. Maybe it’s because he and I came in at the same time, I don’t know. I pull out my Marlboro.

“Goddammit Chris, when are you going to quit already? You reek of cigarettes.”

I don't reply. There is no answer that will ever satisfy Rick. He's the most prying and curious person you'd ever meet. I light up the cigarette, and blow a puff right at his face. He gives me a shove. We stand and wait by the hood of his green Civic, observing the commotion. Everyone that works in the building stands around, drinking coffee, talking away. The firefighters haven't come down yet. I watch as two black vans round the corner onto Murphy Ave., pulling up to the front entrance. The evergreen shrubs surrounding the parking area block my view, but I hear the doors open. A minute later all the firefighters are out. Alex goes to talk to them. He comes back, his attire in disarray from all the running around.

"May I have your attention please. The fire squad has told me that another division has come to clean up, and that it may take as long as half an hour till we are allowed back inside," there is a satisfied gasp among the assembled coworkers, "Please wait patiently."

"What caused the fire?" Todd yells out. I know his name only because he has a 'Welcome to Todd's Office' sign plastered onto his door. Only a jackass would make his working space look like a child's bedroom.

Alex murmurs, then speaks up. "I'm not really sure, to be honest. The fire crew was discreet for no apparent reason. They told me something sparked up a flame on the roof and top floor, and that men from a 'separate division' were going to clean it up."

Rick nudges me, "Let's walk around. I'm not going to stand here for another hour. I don't want to catch a cold."

"The woods are more quiet than the sidewalk," I reply. He follows me behind his car, and over the railing into the wooded area. The building we work at is situated on the top of a hill. Murphy Ave. is noisy in the daytime with cars and people, but behind the complex are some tall poplars. I don't know how deep they go, since my usual lunch break doesn't last this long.

We walk at a slow pace, talking about the customers that we've had today. The wind whistles in between the trees, and our feet cause the leaves to crackle continuously underneath us. The forest looks dense at a distance as clouds pass over our heads, darkening the midday sun. Something farther down is bright however. I stare ahead, but only a glow is visible.

"Rick, I think we've almost reached a road already. There's a light up ahead.," I say.

"That can't be. Murphy Ave. goes straight for at least half a mile, and there aren't any side roads. Hey, I see it too. What is it?"

"Beats me. We still have another twenty minutes. Your adventurous side has reawakened." I say sarcastically. He immediately runs off, not saying a word. I see his burly

figure get smaller and smaller until it stops. He stares for a minute, then motions for me to hurry up. I don't bother to quicken pace, it's probably just a kite reflecting the sun's rays or something. The wind blows harder. I long for the warm summer days. If only I'd moved down south, if only...

"You've got to see this!" Rick screams, jolting me out of my daydream. I rush up to him, frightened by his tone. It takes me a moment to focus my eyes off of the glaring light. I squint. Now I see what he's been staring at. The nearby vicinity is covered with ashes. The ground we stand on is warm. All the trees that are still standing seem to lean away from the center, where the light has been emanating continually. At the center of the destruction lie four pieces of...I don't know what to call it. Metal? They are silver and elongated at one point, yet red and shriveled up the next. Every few seconds this strange process repeats itself. The things have little inscriptions, which change over and over, coinciding with the morphing. It is suddenly hot. A bead of sweat rolls down my forehead.

"What do you think it is?" Rick asks.

"Probably some shrapnel that fell out of a plane or something. Look at what it did to this place."

"But it's changing. I don't think any metal on this Earth can do that." He bends over to pick it up.

"Whatever floats your boat. I wouldn't touch it if I were you. We should be heading back anyways, the building's probably all cleared by now." He ignores me, and puts his hands on one side of the object. Carefully, he lifts it up to his chest and cradles it.

"What do all these symbols mean?" He says, eyeing the dashes and lines. It curls up again, more suddenly than before. Rick drops it out of surprise. He picks it up again, taking that as a challenge.

"It's pretty cold actually. Here, feel it." Rick holds it out to me. I will never understand his interest in the weird crap of the world. Always the believer of conspiracy theories and ghosts, Rick has been feeding my mind garbage since the day I met him. Now that he's found some freak material, I bet he'll never shut up about it.

"No. I have no idea what it is, which is a good enough reason not to touch it." I say pithily.

"Come on. Just feel it so you know what I'm talking about and then we'll go back." It stretches out again, but Rick has a firm grip on it.

“Whatever.” I reach out. Before I can come in contact with the object, the jingle of my ringtone pierces the midday air. I take out my phone. Jennifer, my wife, is calling. I pick up. The thing retracts again, and Rick starts looking at the other, smaller pieces laying on the floor.

“There was a small fire on the top floor, and we had to go outside,” I say. “Other than that, nothing eventful. Oh yeah, I got a woman to buy triple the amount of what she originally wanted.”

“Wow I’m so impressed,” she replies. “Oh I’ve got another caller, see you at home.”

“Alright, bye.” I hang up. “Yo Rick! It’s time to go!” He trots up to me.

“I want to come back after work to put these things in my car. I’ll get a bag from the cafeteria.” He whispers excitedly.

“Why do you need them? Some weird junk isn’t going to get you anywhere in life,” I say.

“Maybe these inscriptions mean something. Plus, I could sell them on ebay.” He places one on the ground, covers it with leaves, and begins to walk alongside me.

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I open the door to my car, Rick, with his back to me, is hunched over by the steps. He coughs profusely as I approach him. I nudge him, and the moment that he turns around will forever be in my memory.

“My god! What happened to you?” I exclaim. His skin is blotched with red and white patches. The shirt that seemed so tight on him in the morning now droops off his shoulders, drenched in sweat. He shivers in waves.

“I don’t know. I-” A fit of coughing ensues, lasting what seems like an eternity. “I was fine this morning,” He manages to blurt out. “Well get home right now. You need to rest. I bet it’s the flu or something. Do you need a ride?”

He shakes his head, then half walks, half drags himself to his automobile. He pulls out of the parking lot before I snap out of my trance. How did he get so sick in only a few hours? I hope it’s not contagious.

The next morning, Rick doesn’t show up for work. I concede to visit him on my way home.

I ring the bell to his small suburban townhouse.

“Just a minute!” His wife, Rebecca, calls. The door is opened.

“Hey Rick. How are you?” She asks placidly. Her pale face tells me something is wrong. For a woman that cares so much about how she looks, she wears no make up today.

“Is everything okay with Rick?” I ask. “He didn’t show up for work today.”

She stares blankly. “I don’t know. Come in.” The way she responds scares me. She’s usually very outgoing, but this time something is wrong. I follow her into the living room, where I see Rick. He lays on the couch, as still as a log. His eyes are closed, but he breathes heavily and wrings his hands over and over. The couch is wet from his perspiration. I approach him.

“Rick?” I inquire.

“Rebecca?” He whispers. My god. He can’t tell the difference between me and his wife.

“No...uh it’s Chris.” His eyes flicker as he tries to open them. Whatever sickness affects him, it has sapped his energy within a day. So as to not make his condition any worse, I quickly tell him I’ve got to get going, and that I’ll stop by soon. Rebecca waits in the kitchen. She stares out the window as I approach.

“What’s happened to him?” I ask frantically.

“He came home last night coughing and with a fever. I gave him some cold medicine, thinking it was just the flu. He’s been like this since last night. I called the doctor for an emergency house visit since he can’t even get up. It’s scaring me Rick.” I want to tell her to call the ambulance, but the thought of him being rushed to the hospital after he was fine yesterday seems unreasonable. Yeah. He’s fine. Just a bad cold. Everyone has those.

“I...I’m sure it’s nothing to be worried about. He could’ve just caught a chill.”

I pull out of the driveway, my mind somewhere else. It rains heavily, the rhythm of the rain unnoticable to me. How was it that he was good as normal one minute, and so sickly the next? I think back to yesterday. His deterioration started when we were walking in the woods. He touched those things.

Those things.

Did it have something to do with them? No. That’s not even feasible. Some broken contraptions don’t just cause people to fall ill. Or do they? No. When the doctor comes, he’ll prescribe some antibiotics, and Rick will get better just as fast as he got worse. Yes, that is exactly what will happen.

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“Rebecca? I stopped by a few minutes ago. No one answered the door.”

“He’s in the hospital Chris. The doctor said that his fever was too high to keep him at home. He hasn’t been diagnosed yet.”

I forget myself for a moment, “This is really bad. I’m coming to see him.”

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He lays on the hospital bed, a dim light illuminating from his bed stand. His chest moves, ever so slowly, the white sheets crinkling. I get closer. No. No. No. That can't be him. He is white like a ceramic tile, his shirt drenched with sweat. The medical apparatus glows, bars and numbers changing continually. I don't need to understand the machines, his state can clearly be seen, without technology. A whistling comes from within him. I call out. No reply. One more time. He lays still. I go out in the hallway, away from all the beeps and ringing, all the tubes running through him.

A man approaches me. "Are you visiting Mr. Richard Parker?" He asks. I manage to nod.

"I'm his physician, Dr. Milburn. I'm assuming you'd like to know the cause for his present condition." He inquires. Again, I can only nod.

"I want to know as much as you do. His symptoms vary throughout the day, and blood tests have shown nothing out of the norm. It's really peculiar, to be honest. His fever has not dropped since he came. A specialist from the neurological division will see him today, it's the only option we haven't tried. At this rate, it's only..." His voice trails off. I stare at him, but he says nothing more. A mumbled response leaves my mouth, and he's gone. I can't think. Nothing makes sense. Wait.

The objects. It all started then.

How could I have been so naive? He held those things, and then all this started. I see the rumpled coat of the doctor at the end of the hallway. A second later I am next to him.

I speak frantically. "Doctor. Rick, uh...the patient in room 233 found these strange collapsible things in the woods the other day. After he held them was when he began to feel ill--"

He cuts me off. "Mr. Denners that's a preposterous idea. I am certain that no foreign object, or allergy resulting from it for that matter, could cause such protracted and relentless syndromes. Please let the doctors do their job. I have a patient to attend to." The man nods and walks away. He's lying to me. I know it. There is no other explanation he has to give, so he denies the only feasible one. I'll show him, and everyone else in this hospital.

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It is twilight. The clouds pass overhead with quickening speed. It drizzles gently as I climb over the railing into the forest. A black bird flies over me, squawking as it passes. I pay no attention. All I know is that I must get those objects to the hospital so the doctors can find out

what's wrong with Rick. The things *have to* be the reason. I start off walking briskly. Then I jog. Then I run.

We walked a straight path, and I follow it as closely as I can. Up ahead, the hill is visible, the light still glowing as it did all those days ago. How much time has passed? Has it been a few days? Or already a week? I don't know. I tread up the hill, the leaves and twigs scratching my legs. The rain becomes heavy and melts into my sweat. I brush my sunken hair to the side as I get to the top.

The objects have made holes.

Through their contractions, they've dug themselves into the ground. Graves. Yet I still hear the continuous movement. I move aside the leaves with my hands until I find a piece. It is relatively small. I remember how Rick changed after only holding it for a few minutes, so I dig my hands in my coat pockets and scoop the piece up, pressing it against my chest. I take a deep breath and begin my trek down the hill. Within seconds, the thing spreads out, doubling in size. It falls out of my hands and I quickly pick it up. A few seconds later, it shrinks down with a pop. Again my hands lose their grip.

I have no time for this. If I run quickly with the object in my hands nothing will happen. I'll get to my car quicker that way. I pick it up and start to run. It is dark, and the rain has turned the ground into mud. I strain my eyes to make out what is in front of me. The thing contracts twice more by the time I get down the hill. I feel a numbing sensation in my arms. *It is only because you are holding the thing tightly*, I think to myself. I gasp for air, gulping it in as I slow down to take a break. An itch begins in my throat, and I let out a loud cough. Then another one. No, keep going, I tell myself.

I start to run again, my arms and legs tense from all the strenuous movement. The object seems to get heavier with every step. I slow down again, coughing and wheezing. It is suddenly so hot, and I fight the urge to sprawl out on the ground and rest. I turn around, and see how little progress I've made; the mild light from the other objects is still visible over the slender timbers. *Keep going*. I cannot run anymore, my body is too weathered, but I must keep going. I walk as quickly as I can, wiping rain water on my face, hoping it will provide some sort of comfort to my sweltering face. It doesn't. The heat increases and I find it harder to hold on to the constantly shifting object in my hands.

My walking gets slower and slower until I can walk no more. I hear my heart pounding in my chest, my lungs heaving powerfully. A coughing fit ensues, tipping me off my feet. I fall

forward into the mud, my hands not protecting my fall. There is no energy left inside of me, the object has taken it all. I try to let go of it, but my hands are trapped under me. I can't move. Several grunts later, it is obvious to me that I can't cry out for help either. The towering trees lean in on me, curving their trunks till they are about to snap. The rain taps my back as I struggle to move, to breath, to see. The world closes in on me. Then it is completely dark.

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Minnertown resident Chris Denner was found dead yesterday in the Clipburn forest by a pair of hikers. His car was found in the parking lot of the building in which he worked. The town coroner was prevented from performing a standard autopsy by several government officials, who did not cite any reasons for this peculiar request. His body, along with his possessions, was taken by the officials. It is unclear what department they were from. The reason he was in the forest is unknown. No one has publicly commented on his death. Truly a strange case in the Minnertown area.