

WHY DON'T THEY LEAVE THE HOUSE?

An Entry in the 2014 Windhammer Prize for
Short Gamebook Fiction

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Reader Advisory – This gamebook includes strong horror themes
that may disturb some readers.

Instructions

*A game of clues, and like others
You play you, born of your mother.
Find section one hundred and one—
Not mentioned, but where you must run.
Reach this end, and try not to scream.
Take a pen, and hope that you dream.
Write down clues, the spoils of your hunts.
Just one rule...you only play once.*

Turn to **1**.

1

The bus driver's radio crackles to life. Something gets muttered about road construction. Sounds exciting, compared to the winterful boredom rolling by the windows. Minutes later, the driver lazily grabs the mouthpiece to say, "Copy." You settle in your bus seat again, transfixed by the dancing snowflakes outside.

The convention up North sucked. What a waste of travel money. You try not to think about it by gazing at the bleak landscape of firs and fields touched only by snow.

Behind you, the passengers seem equally dull and serene. Except for the pretty blonde woman at the back, everyone looks terribly aged and weatherworn, almost decrepit. Each glance reveals the young woman fixating on her mobile device and the others gazing back at your face. All gawking, no talking.

Enough of that. The heavy snowfall outside entertains you for a while, until the driver addresses all passengers through the speakers.

"We've taken a side road to get around construction on the main. No one expected weather this bad, so a better-fitted bus coming up behind us will take you the rest of the way. Please get off at the next stop and prepare to get your luggage."

The bus pulls over, and everyone shambles outside into a blizzardy white world. Snowflakes crash into your face and refuse to melt. The passengers huddle at the roadside, waiting for the driver to get off his butt and open the luggage compartments. You see him through the starry snowstorm, a silhouette talking on the radio.

The passengers shuffle and pull up their collars and hoods. How did their sunken and droopy faces collect so much sun damage up here in the North? They look like homeless people in eerily new and crisp winter coats. Travellers from afar, maybe, like you.

"Come onnnn," you hear the blonde woman groan across the group of passengers.

Shivering, others follow her lead and check the driver again. Through the fog of your breath, you can see him twisted in his seat staring directly at *you*.

He turns, locks hands on the wheel, and drives away.

A few awkward moments later, you overhear the young blonde introducing herself as Kristin to another concerned passenger. Shortly after, she runs onto the road and waves both arms at an approaching van.

-You join her in the effort (99).

-You'd rather wait patiently for the bus (76).

2

Morning arrives, and the plow driver stops when he reaches you. Half an hour later, the constable lets him drive on.

Before returning to his cruiser for warmth, the policeman looks at you once more. The grimace of terror, literally frozen on your face, he mistakes for some final shivers and teeth chattering. Death from exposure.

"And not a single house for miles around," the constable says to himself. He gazes over the snowy fields, all empty since he started working in this region 20 years ago. "Not a soul to help."

Turn to the AUTHOR'S NOTE at the back.

3

The knife handle feels slippery in the sweaty bed of your hand. You'll just have to grip harder. "Good luck," Angus says as you put the lamp down. "Life has tortured me well."

You cut a centimeter deep wound from Angus's left nipple to his hip bone. Failed math students would call it vertical. He shrieks but stays silent. No information. Your steely hand makes another friction-filled stroke down his bony chest. Spiders overhead come out to see what shakes their web. What noise rattles those cocooned husks?

You draw parallel trenches in the pasty canvas. With so much blood soaked into Angus's lap, his writhing makes a squishing noise. But after many cuts and cries, he still won't answer your questions.

-You'll have to change your technique a bit (18).

-Enough. You don't want him to die. So you stop now and return upstairs, hoping a judge will go easy on your sentencing given these desperate circumstances (27).

4

The "living" room gets smoky again as Angus lights a second. Kristin paces and tries her phone again in vain. Dominico warms his hands at the fireside where he seems determined to stay.

"I've never had a proper baptism," Rachel says to the window. "If the spirit takes me, I want my body bathed and baptized."

-You spent some time in jail, even if just a night in the drunk tank (86).

-You've never spent a night behind bars (37).

5

The sound of Kristin and Dominico arguing wafts in from the living room, their voices too distant to decipher. Alone in the cold, you step closer to the window for what little moonlight it offers. Your foot kicks something across the floor, causing the object to light up. Someone dropped their smartphone in here.

You pick up the device and quickly learn it belongs to Angus. The prankster took several pictures tonight in this very room, all stored and ready for anyone to look through. He brought the deceased Mrs. Keeble in here, all right. Most of his pictures show the two of them...entwined.

The first picture, a close-up selfie, shows Angus using his teeth to tear a colostomy bag off Mrs. Keeble's naked side. The next picture shows him smiling insanely with his tongue probing near the raw, red stoma, the hole in the old woman's abdomen where only a colostomy bag should go. Question A: does he do anything else down there? His cheek had pressed hard against the mole-speckled senior to make this profile happen, his wide eye looking right at the camera. The other pictures get worse. You should definitely ignore them by skipping to the * * * below.

Really, you should. Even judges refuse to look at disturbing pictures presented as evidence in court. People live with horrible images their whole lives. Then again, everyone here could die in a few hours anyway.

So you press the button. Angus's hand, the one that once held this phone now in your hand, rammed itself through Mrs. Keeble's mouth. Her throat rose here and there, where the exploring teen extended two fingers somewhere in the stretched esophagus. The next picture shows the ancient dried lips splitting as the kid's arm went in elbow deep.

One picture later, Angus had flipped the naked hag on her stomach, exposing a humpback. Prominent vertebrae form a track of smaller hills. He apparently tried to bite some of these protruding knobs off. The next picture shows that Angus had snapped Mrs. Keeble's arms at the elbows, making the forearms bend backwards. This allowed the two to hold hands, like lovers, with the body facedown. A few pictures later, and Angus had the body turned into a sickly human pretzel. He broke the leg bones in enough places for him to form a noose around both their necks, forcing their faces together as they lie on the floor. You understand why Angus forgot his phone, having stuffed Mrs. Keeble in the pantry so hurriedly, sated in these newly made memories.

* * *

Kristin finally rushes in with another lamp. You show her the latest picture. Her face becomes as ugly as it will ever get. She takes the cell and, after finding answers to Questions A through Z, hurls it at the wall.

"Angus has some abhorrent tendencies," Kristin says. She looks away from the broken phone, but lamplight shines inescapably on the damaged pantry door. "We shouldn't go in there now. He stripped her and would have taken any clues and destroyed them. I say we tear apart a room upstairs that no one's contaminated yet. We might find some spy cams."

Kristin's got a point there. Just like fuel, time burns up too. You hand her the axe, for perhaps she could use it upstairs while you go question Dominico. Or would two sets of eyes do better in the search?

-You will help Kristin search upstairs (92).

-You want to question Dominico (71).

6

You lean your head back a bit. Soon, sleep pushes it the rest of the way. The night passes without incident until sunlight stings your eyes. The tapered form of Kristin closes a curtain after peeking outside. She flicks a smile your way.

"They plowed the road," Kristin says softly. "And my phone works now."

She holds it up, almost with a celebratory wave. You leave your chair and follow her to the front door, stepping carefully over the two who slept on the floor. They lie there like empty sleeping bags.

"I called the bus line," Kristin whispers. "They've apologized profusely and dispatched a bus to get us." Confused, you look back at the others. Sleepiness hasn't quite left, and something pops in your neck. "Oh, they decided to sleep in and wait by the fire. But we should go out and wait by the road to flag down the driver."

She opens the door with a quiet hand and gestures "after you" with her other.

Strange how all six of the other passengers *decided* to sleep in. Did everyone wake up, make plans in silence, and resume sleeping in their same spots? You look over them again, sleep now fully receded from your vision. The others seem frozen there on the chairs, divan, and floor where they settled overnight, their coats pulled over their heads.

All of them have coats over their heads. And the "fire" died around 3 AM. Kristin smiles dedicatedly.

You backtrack clumsily, stepping on Angus's fingers by accident, and grasp the coat covering one lady on the divan. Kristin has fled, either outside or upstairs, leaving the door to sway alone in

the cold wind. Your hand slowly pulls the coat off the woman's head.

Then you wake up, for real this time. The living room remains dark, and wind thumps on the window. Your dream only lasted a few minutes. Turn to **64**.

7

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. Family means a great deal to you. You avoided any serious trouble in your youth, though you knew at least one student who died. But not everyone had the nice parents and privileged upbringing that you had. You've done nothing but nitpick and analyze us, like you always do. You've turned us into math, like you do with everything. You always think logic will win out. You've always acted too carefully, planning out steps and procedures before making decisions. You keep putting emotions on the back burner, whether yours or ours. We've become nothing but a dry list of fine details to you because you see everyone as such. You lump us into 'yes' or 'no' groups to gain a simple black and white judgement. You do it based on your observations rather than our whole lifetimes, don't you? You just want the most accurate bottom line answer. You think too much about the future. You worry too much. You act passive and minimalist because it feels easier to lay low. You've never shown enthusiasm for anything, have you? You have few friends, and you hate the outdoors. And you hate asking for help even more. Fine."

She takes the lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to **88**.

8

The panties haven't quite frozen to Marsha's skin yet. Her body feels like a microwaved frozen dinner with some parts ice-cold and others lukewarm. Sleep won't come easy for a while. Worse, nothing turns up after all your awkward prodding. Nothing but new memories, and new stuff under your nails.

Finishing up, you almost fall backwards in shock; Mrs. Keeble stares out the living room window, a perverse grin wrinkling her face. She loses control of her dentures (and who knows what else) in the gleeful peep show. The old woman saw everything.

Her beady head creeps away from the window. Suddenly, the snowflakes swirling all around feel like a crowd. You stoop to clean your shuddering hands with snow off the veranda while thinking of how to explain yourself. What if Mrs. Keeble tells them about your little violations?

But she won't. You know it.

Only from this lowered vantage point do you notice something clenched in Marsha's fist. After some hard grappling with her fingers, a prescription bottle flushes loose. Its seal remains unbroken, the antidepressant Sertraline pills untouched. The label, mostly scratched and picked off, also reads "two each day." Record this clue's message, though it seems trivial by itself. Try to finagle more elsewhere.

You seize the flickering lamp and go indoors. Turn to **22**.

9

You peer around the kitchen, finding only relics of the depressing old days: an empty spice rack, too small for modern variety; a cracked porcelain salad bowl in the cupboards, stressful to lift; a vacant flower pot on the window sill with even its clinging mold cooked dry from decades of UV light. Now, it holds a few cigarette butts. Outside the window, a lawn had aged into more fields

and forest. The fir trees, all caked in falling snow, turned white like old men.

A door in here leads to a hallway which bends around the stairs and rejoins the living room. Another door lies open to the bathroom which has one of those cramped wooden tubs too pitiful to look at. Dominico snaps off boards from the rotted kitchen wall and chucks them noisily on the floor; half-deaf men care nothing for their hearing, let alone others'.

You return to the living room where Angus entertains the elderly Mrs. Keeble with his double-jointedness. Some guys will hit on anything. He bends his thumb forward and back to touch his wrist while the senior gawks and chuckles. Dominico brings a load of wood in and talks to Paul about—what else?—the weather. Rachel prays facing the mold-spotted wall.

You sigh and shiver all at once. The countrified house has absorbed everyone, bringing out the stagnancies of yesteryear. People had little to do then but pray, gawk, and talk about the weather as if enough complaints would bring summer.

Rachel stops praying and, looking at everyone with a recharged smile, says, "Concentrate on the first color that comes to mind."

She fixates on you, making everyone else do likewise.

-You refuse to play along by thinking of no particular color (38).

-You may go ahead pick the first color that springs to mind, then turn to 67.

10

You whip out your mobile device. But out here, light years from a cell tower, no signal comes through. The device works fine but provides no internet connection or phone service.

-You ask to use Kristin's phone (59).

-You look at your surroundings through the blizzard (75).

11

"Un. Believable." Kristin scowls as you take advantage and frisk the dead teen.

You find a stack of charred photos in his coat pocket. It appears Angus, while alone, tried to burn these in the fireplace. But someone returned, forcing him to stuff the smouldering pictures back in his coat.

The only surviving picture shows Marsha's face. The rest had burned beyond recognition, but you suspect they might have captured the unknowing faces of the other passengers. Angus or someone had labelled Marsha's picture as "The opening death" in black marker. Write down this valuable clue.

Kristin's anger diverts when you show her. She looks a little sick in the yellow lamplight.

"Why does he have these?" she asks, grabbing your arm. "How could he have known about all this? Maybe Paul should have died later on, but he...took control of his situation."

Yes, Paul died first, perhaps the unintended opening death.

"Help me carry Angus to the basement," Kristin says. "We must search him without Dominico walking in."

You agree to this, picking up Angus's legs while Kristin takes the shoulders. Beyond the basement door, the steps creak under the combined weight, and rats scurry under the antique furniture stored down here. Your lamp flame wobbles in the struggle to carry so much at once. Kristin sets the body in an old chair, and the strip search begins.

Despite your thoroughness, however, nothing else turns up except cigarettes and a pen. The

smell of burnt kerosine collects in the dank, a reminder of passing time. Still driven, you both return upstairs. According to Angus's pictures, the deaths will occur in a specific order, with Marsha's the "opening" death. *Perhaps you should look at the clues in the order you find them.*

"Let's look in the walls for hidden cameras," Kristin says.

-You agree with her plan (15).

-You should find Mrs. Keeble's body and search her for clues (48).

12

You shake Rachel's hand, but your attention keeps returning to the cry child's pictures. He looks like a southpaw too, for in every photo, the screaming boy clings to his mother's forearm with his left hand.

"I've always had the gift," Rachel says. "People like me can...sense...a spiritual presence. Most don't believe in the spirits who talk with me. The commune we shared in the living room may have looked frightening to the nonbeliever. But the cry child felt so...so loud and desperate. He compelled me to speak with him. He wants revenge on those who neglected to free him from the walls. His own family imprisoned him there to stifle his screams.

"I can also tell that you and Kristin feel uncomfortable with us. Of course, we all feel scared after seeing those precious people taken by our Lord so suddenly. But you feel something...more. A disturbance, caused by the rest of us."

Maybe you and Kristin have terrible poker faces. Or, Rachel could have overheard your theorizing in the hallway. Either way, it won't hurt to tell Rachel the truth while alone in the dining room. She seems to know anyway.

-You normally enjoy the company of large groups, but this particular group seems too creepy and quiet (51).

-You simply need your alone time. Getting forced to hang around any large group of strangers would naturally disturb you after a while (63).

13

Wired from shock, the group huddles around the dying fire. Rachel consoles the other women, squeezing the little golden cross at her neck. Angus looks grown up and sombre. You never felt more alert.

"Much as I hate to," Dominico says, "I better get some more wood." His entire brow wrinkles up in the dull light. "But only one trip. I don't want to disturb poor ol' Paul."

You zone out and experience only sounds. Bare wood snapping in the next room, the grind of prying nails, sparks popping from the fire, Marsha sobbing, a creak in the floor, the clock chugging seconds—the damned clock. Dominico returns with another load of broken boards. He kneels to set the bundle by the fire. After tossing a few boards in, the farmer notices something odd on their surface.

"Wait now," he mutters, "Someone wrote chicken scratch on the inner sides." By the orange firelight, he studies the board in hand, reading aloud the charcoal scribblings.

"I want you all dead. each of you."

Dominico tosses the board aside without reading the remaining essay of garble. He selects another from the tall pile.

"I see you through the walls. die die." He reads a line from another. "i will kill you by the hour.

everyone." Another. "who should i spare? who should i kill?" Another. "all of you must die for your intrusion."

You can't help but read over his shoulder. The crude letters shrink to fit total hate on each board. Marsha breaks into sorrow, standing to give the group a teary gaze.

"I want to die alone," she says.

"Oh, Marsha," Kristin intervenes. "Don't fall for old ghost stories that teenagers cooked up. We'll all stay safe and catch a drive at sunrise."

Dominico holds up a board. "I said this got wrote on the inner sides," he affirms. "See the nails poking through here?"

Kristin rolls her eyes. "Well maybe the owners checked up on the place and reversed the boards to hide this unsightly graffiti."

"They flipped the friggin' wall around but didn't bother cleanin' up the bottles and trash?"

Dominico drops the board defeatedly, despite winning an argument of logic against a premed student. Kristin bends to read the scribbly messages. Her mouth scrunches to one side.

"Well, for one thing," she says, "each line has eight words. I can hardly remember from high school...poems with eight lines, each with eight syllables. I don't know. Something the stoner kids would do."

An epiphany strikes Angus. "Wait, eight of us got off the bus...and entered the house."

His eyes explore the group for approval. Marsha cries and flees up the stairs just outside the living room door.

-You better follow Marsha upstairs before she hurts herself (34).

-You want to study the boards instead (25).

14

Biting down hard on guilt, you pull a sleek cell phone from Marsha's pants pocket. Your fingers do their best under the cruel moonlight mixed with snow. After much fumbling with the buttons, the lit up screen shows a text message:

"Works every time."

Annoyingly, the low battery fails before you can learn more. The screen dies, like the kerosine lamp, like Marsha.

Her pockets hold nothing else. A friend, relative, or employer could have messaged her. But which? Certainly, the phrase Marsha received suggests a trick or method. You pocket the dead cell phone. Write down the clue in its text message.

Taking the dead lamp, you stumble around until your hand finds the banister outside the bedroom. The rail guides back to the stairs for the longest descent of your life. Turn to 22.

15

Kristin's face beautifies when you concede to join forces with her wild idea.

"Come on," she says, grabbing the axe Dominico left by the wall. "We'll start with the frame. They probably built the house for filming and cut corners on the parts we can't see."

She takes a mighty swing at the lower boards that Dominico hadn't removed yet.

"Modern materials on the inside," she says in a huff, bashing out boards with another swing.

"If not,"

Chop.

"we'll know"

Chop.

"that they repurposed this dump and towed it here."

Dominico storms into the kitchen, flabbergasted.

"Now what in Christ's name—"

"Shut the hell up, Dominico!" Kristin shouts, spinning to face him. She hunches over like a raccoon defending its trashcan, clenching the axe like a hockey stick. "Some of us want to live you know!"

Dominico disappears through the door. Kristin, panting, steps through the wall opening. You already see nothing modern or remarkable about the inner studs apart from the death threats in charcoal.

-You should encourage Kristin to move the search elsewhere instead of wasting precious time here. Maybe this part of the house's puzzle already served its purpose (90).

-You want to help her search this spot. The sick minds behind all this may *want* the mystery to go in this direction; they practically drew a map to this wall and might provide a rewardful clue (50).

16

You reach out your right hand, only to retract it because Rachel extended her left. Awkwardly, you shake hands with your left instead. Maybe traditions haven't taken hold here after all.

"I've always had the gift," she says. "People like me can...sense...a spiritual presence. Most don't believe in the spirits who talk with me. The commune we shared in the living room may have looked frightening to the nonbeliever. But the cry child felt so...so loud and desperate. He compelled me to speak to him. He wants revenge on those who neglected to free him from the walls. His own family imprisoned him there to stifle his screams.

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-You normally enjoy the company of large groups, but this particular group seems too creepy and quiet (56).

-You simply need your alone time. Getting forced to hang around any large group of strangers would naturally disturb you after a while (7).

17

Dragging Marsha's cold dishevelled body to the living room grants a moment of reflection. It takes so many hours just to look presentable each day. How many hundreds of times have you washed your hands and face, brushed your teeth, eaten, swept the floor—these tedious tasks that eat up the human experience? And how often do people get to live out their darkest desire, as Dominico intends?

You return to the living room where he still holds Kristin hostage with the pitchfork. She stares hard into your eyes. Everything else here looks far too ugly. But that Marsha...*she's still got hot blood and juice.*

"Good," Dominico says as you plonk the body down. "Now bring in that garden hoe from outside."

You do so.

"Now make one end sharp. Just whack that hook end on the floor until it loses its curve."

You do so.

Whether or not selective amnesia works, you intend to try. Kristin whimpers as Dominico gives precise instructions. Go ahead and block out each step, until only his words of finality buzz into your ears:

"Funny how she fits right in there once curled up." The firelight dances in his mad eyes. The stench of cooked meat fills the house and your memories alike. "Now get some more wood. She needs it."

But you don't have to anymore. Dominico mopes away from Kristin and leaves the house, closing the front door gently behind him. Kristin ebbs to the window and watches the farmer walk through the knee-high snow. He lobs the pitchfork away like a spear. It turns sideways futilely in the wind before disappearing in the blackness out there.

You join Kristin by the window and watch together. Outside, some 20 paces from the veranda, Dominico sits in the snow. He methodically lies on his back and pulls snow over himself, drawing his arms inward like a reverse snow angel. The old man buries himself, and the older clock starts to chime.

-You run outside and save him (26).

-You stay with Kristin and contemplate tonight's phenomena (60).

18

Horizontal cuts. One by one. Slow and messy. The night has slowed into days for at least one of you. After ten minutes of real time, Angus has a weeping checkerboard carved into his torso, all squares red. Salty teardrops plop from his cheeks and sting their way into the cringing gashes.

"Alright. Alright," he manages.

After minutes of gasping, he asks for the pen and pack of smokes from his abandoned shirt. You find them (wondering what other uses those cigarettes could have once lit). And if Angus makes a prank out of this, the hot lamp glass could go a long way.

You jam the pen between his tensed fingers, and the inner white flap of the cigarette pack under his hand. He scrawls something, struggling to use the armrest as a desktop. The taut rope digs into his restrained—and now bloodied—wrist. The disgusting black gums portrayed on the carton's warning label look delightful compared to your work on Angus.

"All...you need...to know," he concludes in a whorl of head reeling.

You take the pen and pack of smokes to read his message:

"DEATH SENTENCE ORDER"

Below that, he wrote a list of names in this sequence:

PAUL

MARSHA

KEEBLE

RACHEL

ME

DOMINICO

_____?

_____?

Write down this clue. The list title probably contains the key information, since you already know the order of the first four deaths. Apparently, Angus considers everyone but you and Kristin sentenced to die by ordinance.

"I go next," he mumbles.

You turn to leave, a messed up grin on your face. Turn to 27.

19

You climb out the window and trudge around looking for Mrs. Keeble's body. The snowstorm feels like an ice cube massage on your face. Nothing turns up on the veranda or under it. Angus must have hid the corpse. Or maybe not; so much snowfall could quickly carpet the petite woman and any footprints leading to and from her. Unless...

The wind buffets you on your way to the outhouse. Your shivering hand grabs the half-rotted door and rips it open. Inside lies...

...nothing. Just an ordinary outhouse. Then, you see the graffiti on the door:

YO, IT STINKS

Jen = supersnatch

da boot boys rule!

big hook

slit

skinned

kennel

feast

Frustratingly, you can't even slam the door because of all the snow packed around it. All your time out here seems wasted. But if Kristin's theory holds true, then the teenagers don't even exist. What if one of her supposed house designers, however desperate for money, became reluctant or guilt-ridden and left hints here for the inevitable victims? But that all sounds nuts. Kristin more likely has The Truman Show Delusion.

-For now, you may return to the living room empty-handed to see if the others have learned anything (36).

-You'd rather abandon them and take your chances by heading for the road (98).

20

No, you *won't* do as told! *All* these people seem crazy, Kristin included.

You pry the axe free and chop at the door harder than that girly-armed college princess ever could. Four swings, and the blade sinks completely through the wood. After some lower blind

swings the boards split and cave in. The axehead jams in the wood a few times, and you yank it loose, feeling a board fall out and brush your knee.

You pound away up high again, a well of adrenaline burning inside. Your arms veer the weapon left, then right, seeking the opening already made. But the axe keeps landing in soft wood as you approximate in the dark.

Family pictures, scores of them like Atari pixels, fall and smash with the thundering blows. Nevertheless, you fail to break the door down in time. Your hands release the lodged axe as Kristin arrives with another lamp.

How it shines.

With adjusting eyes, you see the upper half of the door obliterated. The petite torso of Mrs. Keeble (what remains of her) dangles partly out of the smashed hole. Most of the chopping landed in her head and collar bones. The axe now rests around her sideways nose, the handle coated with an amalgam of cerebral spinal fluid and blood. It all felt like sweat in the dark. Grey matter oozes into the jutting collection plate of her upper dentures. A glob from one eye gleams on the dripping axehead. Both twig-like arms lie somewhere in the closet.

Closet, not pantry. To its credit, the shelves behind Mrs. Keeble bear a lone frying pan. Angus had stuffed the body in the tiny space available and closed the door with the old woman leaning on it.

Kristin has to sit down—on the floor, not in any of the chairs. Speckled with blood anyway, you rummage through the maroon soup coagulating in Mrs. Keeble's pockets. She has nothing. Maybe Angus took her stuff.

The last pocket you turn inside out has an odd sheen and perfectly smooth texture. Your hand had mistakenly slipped into a deep wound and pulled out her liver.

The lock broke at some point, and you easily open the bloodied door. The body topples on your feet. Kristin sobs at her reflection in the lamp. Only the Mi'kmaq sing it better.

You find the arms. They still bear four custom fit golden bracelets inset with jewels. Pure gold.

-You take them off. Kristin probably won't even notice during her mental breakdown (82).

-You better leave those. The officials understand these sorts of gruesome accidents, but they won't forgive grand theft, and they *will* search everyone after these deaths (95).

21

You hurry down to the basement, your lamp flame struggling to stay alive. The big stone walls here look like those of a dungeon. Angus lies in a chair where Kristin left him. His head hangs low like it did in life. But now, he wears a fur coat...that moves.

Rats cover every part of his upper body. They chew away in an orderly fashion, some forming rows as if suckling like pups. Some really do suckle—on blood dribbling from eaten-off nipples. You grind your teeth audibly when seeing how they've stripped the fingers *around* the fingernails, leaving tongue-polished bone displayed on the armrests. Your light scatters the rodents clinging to his face. Many red holes await further mining. A large female pokes her head out of an eye socket, then has room to duck back in and turn about in the den space eaten from Angus's brain.

You best not tell Kristin of this; she looks rattled and guilt-stricken enough from leading everyone here.

You retreat upstairs to meet her, not knowing if rats can open zippers or if Angus just never bothered with such hassles. Turn to 40.

22

You return to the living room, hoping the warmth of fire will nestle into your bones again. But it won't, and the lamp nearly slips from your hand.

Rachel, Mrs. Keeble, Dominico, and Angus sit cross-legged around their own lamp with its blazing wick cranked high. They hold hands in a square circle, all droning a chant in a well put-together seance. Rachel begins howling gibberish, "in tongues" as practitioners call it. Her shrieks sound like no language you've ever heard.

Kristin, the only non-participant, hugs her knees on the middle of the divan. The lamp light, flickering like a torch, plays games on her frightened face.

"What took you so *long*?" she whispers.

You announce that Marsha mysteriously died. The chanting goes on, your own voice like a faint radio that merely announced the weather. Angus cracks his eyes open, however.

Kristin springs off the divan and flees to the hallway by the stairs, pulling you along. In the privacy and dark, she lowers her voice for good measure.

"These people creep me out! We seem like the only normal ones. And how could two of them die here?" She clings to your arm, adrenaline gripping her body even harder.

-You'd like to devise your own postulations on the night's events and tell Kristin (89).

-You want to hear her ideas (83).

-You'd rather bring up the possibility of a supernatural cause based on the evidence (91).

23

You ask Kristin for suggestions, and her face goes blank with contemplation.

"All this cost a ton of money," she whispers, her watery eyes darting about the three doors. "They even made a fake bus line and had our bus depart on a storm day. But I can't figure out how they remunerated this many actors to go along with dying. You and I just boarded the wrong bus at the wrong time. Or maybe not. Maybe they chose us too..."

She sniffs, and you can't help but suspect Kristin has become as delusional as the rest. The richest people become rich by *not* spending recklessly. Would they really buy up all this land in the desolate North, build an old house replica, and hire people to die in it?

"Will anyone miss *you*?" Kristin drones. "I don't know you well, but the designers of all this picked a bunch of nobodies. Hardscrabble losers. I haven't made it to med school yet, and I've got huge student debt and...other problems." She looks down.

You ponder your memorability, what legacy you'll leave. What have you done in life to make your death prominent? How many tombstones in a cemetery do people even glance at?

-You and Kristin should find Mrs. Keeble's body (48).

-You agree to help her ransack the house (15).

24

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. You've treated your own family members with hostility before. You've never gotten along with one of your parents. You often feel anxious, tense, and impulsive. You've even struggled with some depression. You envy others and handle stress poorly. You have so much cynicism that you even hate dressing formally. You've broken people's trust before, haven't you? You've taken too many stupid risks for temporary thrills. You want to imagine the best solution to

this nightmare, yet you keep letting your emotions control you like always. You get feelings and gut reactions from out of nowhere. You can imagine our hardships, but only because you can picture them inflicted on yourself. You have unstarted art projects on your mind, and we simply have gotten in the way of that, haven't we? Yet, you consider yourself affectionate, confident, and approachable. It just means you took on too many extracurricular endeavours in your youth and you have too many hobbies now. You like the outdoors, if just to escape the clutter you made. You don't plan for the future enough, do you? You have many friends, but only because you distract too easily. You use them because you can't focus on yourself enough. You think you can help us like you try to help everybody. But really, you just talk too much. You can't even relax yourself."

She takes her lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to **88**.

25

The handwriting looks different on some boards, suggestive of a few drunken partiers scribbling down angst. But why renail the boards back up so no one can see? Perhaps one child wrote these threats over many years from toddler to teen...while imprisoned in the walls.

The other boards show more of the same venting—death to everyone in the house. You notice that, oddly, no forms of *to be* appear anywhere. *Is, was, are, were, am, be, been, and being* don't exist in the writing. What kind of nutcase writes like that?

Marsha storms back downstairs during your preoccupation with the scrawls. Turn to **54**.

26

You hurtle yourself outside on a quest for some damn answers. The icy wind feels like nothing now; even the snow getting in your socks won't cool this rage. Kristin stumbles into the doorway, her form blocking what little light comes out. But she goes no further.

"Leave him!" she cries into the night. "Leeeeeeeeeeeeave hiiiiiiiiim!"

But instead you leave her, stomping through the snow to the lumpy spot where Dominico laid down. Your fists plunge into the snow, clenching and hauling up the man underneath. Lightly packed snow falls off his face.

You shake him until his shirt tears, yelling to no effect. He died, somehow, under three centimeters of snow.

As the clock's laughter subsides, its fifth chime echoing outside, you let the body slump back down and commence searching it. Dominico has a folded paper in his back pocket, worn and wrinkled. He studied this often. This recipe, printed off some sick-minded website, lists all the instructions the man recently uttered...

...the instructions you obediently carried out. The recipe even has diagrams. And up top it reads "Woman on Spit". Record this clue. The suppressed memories all pour in now.

Close to a nervous breakdown, you return to the house and eventually find yourself halfway up the staircase, huddled with Kristin. She has no expression, nor a sentence made of words. Who knows what to do about all this? So unheard of. So galling.

Suddenly, the house rumbles. The grandfather clock topples sideways with a crash. Kristin runs downstairs and opens the front door to escape, but you see the veranda surrounded by a rising earth wall. The house has started to sink.

You both run to a window instead. Turn to **94**.

27

As you climb the stairs, Angus hollers.

"Hey tardsauce! Why don't you talk to Mrs. Keeble? I had plenty of fun with her in the pantry."

His insane laughter bounces off the stone walls. You remember him dragging Mrs. Keeble's body outside—or did he? Out of everyone's view, maybe Angus merely opened and shut the front door, and snuck the body into the dining room...

You recall seeing two closed doors in there, one to the bathroom, the other...a pantry? Could Mrs. Keeble's clothes—hopefully, she still has them—hold the clues of tonight's madness?

You return upstairs and close the basement door. It muffles Angus's reviling screams. Good. Kristin, hearing the door shut, runs into the kitchen.

"Dominico won't tell me anything. 'Herp, derp. I forgot,'" she mocks, keeping her voice low. "He wants to wait by the fire until the 'ghost' decides our fate. But I know we can find poison gas canisters, or cameras, or something spurious if you help me look in the walls. What did Angus say?"

You convey the scant information from Angus, leaving out the nastier details. Kristin motormouths more about her bullheaded theory, her impatience palpable. Then, the screams from the basement stop, and the clock in the living room begins to chime.

Kristin's eyes meet yours. You better start finding the cause of all this.

-You and Kristin should find Mrs. Keeble's body (48).

-You agree to help her ransack the house (15).

28

Night settles over the house. Only you and Kristin thought to bring some food for the long bus ride. No matter how kindly Kristin offers, the others refuse anything from the shopping bag she produces from her coat. Now in a slight survivalist mode, you eat part of what you brought, saving some for tomorrow. It could take a while to flag down a motorist out here.

Kristin tries to keep the group mingling, but their words seem as gaunt as their sunken faces. Marsha looks nearly catatonic, and for some reason, Dominico glares at her. Do they know each other? Mrs. Keeble returns from another roam in the kitchen with three half-filled kerosine lamps clutched to her frail chest.

"I found these beauties in a cupboard," she says, "if anyone needs to sneak outside to the outhouse." Smiling, she places the lamps on a badly etched and stained coffee table.

The fire burns. The humdrum hours pass. Paul and Dominico occasionally enter the kitchen and return with more firewood. Women share the divan, and the men doze off in their chairs. Angus sleeps on the floor, his *Rocky IV* download cranked so everyone can hear a muffled Paulie say, "*hit the one in the middle!*" from those beady earphones. The ruffling of coats over uncomfortable bodies and the hourly clock chimes cause a chain reaction of wakefulness anyway. A bit of sleep now will help tomorrow if you have to walk far. After watching the others doze off, you feel yourself reeling asleep.

-You let yourself sleep (6).

-You struggle to stay awake (53).

29

You reach out your right hand, only to retract it because Rachel extended her left. Awkwardly, you shake hands with your left instead. Maybe traditions haven't taken hold here after all.

"I've always had the gift," Rachel says. "People like me can...sense...a spiritual presence. Most don't believe in the spirits who talk with me. The commune we shared in the living room may have looked frightening to the nonbeliever. But the cry child felt so...so intense and desperate. He compelled me to speak with him. He wants revenge on those who neglected to free him from the walls. His own family imprisoned him to stifle his screams.

"I can also tell that you and Kristin feel uncomfortable with us. Of course, we all feel scared after seeing those precious people taken by our Lord so suddenly. But you feel something...more. A disturbance, caused by the rest of us."

Maybe you and Kristin have terrible poker faces. Or, Rachel could have overheard your theorizing in the hallway. Whatever the case, it won't hurt to tell Rachel the truth while alone in the dining room. She seems to know anyway.

-You normally enjoy the company of large groups, but this particular group seems too creepy and quiet (41).

-You simply need your alone time. Getting forced to hang around any large group of strangers would naturally disturb you after a while (78).

30

You rise from your chair, creep over to the kitchen door, and open it. The loud creak awakens some of the others. They gasp and shout for everyone else to wake up. But that may as well happen in another universe.

In the kitchen, a mix light from the fire and moon fall upon Paul, the antiques dealer. He lies sprawled on the tabletop, hands still gripping its edges. Kristin's discarded shopping bag covers the man's head, the plastic stretched tightly over his face. He had fastened his belt around his neck to make the hood airtight.

Suicide. The muffled moans and thrashing came from his suffocation and death throes. Suddenly, a horrendous noise throttles your nerves—the grandfather clock. Twelve chimes ring into the house, denoting midnight. Amongst the sighs and bodies stirring awake, you hear Angus cursing Paul under his breath.

Kristin stumbles into the kitchen half asleep and nearly yelps. As you explain what you heard, she checks Paul's pulse with one hand and lays her other over the body's chest. Her eyes confirm the obvious: no heartbeat.

Your own heart slams around in your chest as though compensating for Paul's missing beats forevermore. You and Kristin return to the living room to meet the silence and stares of the others.

"Leave that door closed," Dominico mutters. "Let Paul rest in peace."

-You would like to venture in again to search for a suicide note (74).

-You prefer to stay and console the group (13).

31

Now seems like a better time than any to light up. If you don't carry your own smokes, Angus gives you one. What does it matter now? Everyone here will die by morning at this rate.

After a deep inhale, you feel that tingly sharpness throughout your brain and lungs. The rough

punch to your throat feels like soothing sandpaper. Wonderful nicotine stamps down your arousal levels, a much needed calming effect.

The “living” room gets smoky as Angus lights a second. Kristin paces and tries her phone again in vain. Dominico warms his hands by the fireplace where he seems determined to stay. His hearing aid makes high pitched squeals.

“I’ve never had a proper baptism,” Rachel says to the window. “If the spirit takes me, I want my body bathed and baptized.”

-You spent some time in jail, even if just a night in the drunk tank (86).

-You've never spent a night behind bars (66).

32

With a shrug, you tell the young man that maybe the driver wanted the luggage. After all, some of these passengers look well-to-do with their brand new winter wear. An experienced bus driver could predict the rough value of baggage contents. Or, maybe he has a medical problem like someone said.

“Yeah,” the teenager says with a grin, “screwed in the head.”

His lingering sneer disturbs you some. Turn to 72.

33

Relieved, Kristin writes the procedure on the back of a letter and hands it over. While she sterilizes some straightened coat hangers in the fire, you flip over the paper and see her transcripts for the fall term. Under the straight A's in every course listed, a family member wrote, “March onward, dear!”

Record this written clue. Kristin seems quite smart. Maybe she devised the right theory on what happened here. At least, you hope so.

Kristin hands over the twisted wire tools with their noose and hooked ends. She lies down by her neatly folded pants. You do the deed.

When the bleeding stops, Kristin redresses. She can still manage a walk, but with difficulty. You toss the tiny fetus, umbilical cord, and placenta parts into the fire at her request.

“Now we have won,” she says solemnly. “They will kill you at six o'clock anyway, but you'll die a hero for wrecking their scheme.”

You both sit on the divan in perfect silence. The hour eats itself away. When the clock chimes at six o'clock, though, no one dies. She aborted the child for nothing.

Suddenly, the house rumbles. The grandfather clock topples sideways with a crash. Kristin staggers over and opens the front door to escape, but you see the veranda surrounded by a rising earth wall. The house has started to sink.

You both rush to a window instead. Turn to 94.

34

You grab a lamp, and Kristin gives a thankful smile. Her voice, coddling the frightened group, fades on your way up the creaky stairs.

You follow the banister around to a wide open door. It leads to a beautifully furnished bedroom. Marsha lies on the Victorian colonial bed, as if waiting for company. Her curves call out to the room, more prominent with her coat and sweater discarded on the floor. She seems the most well preserved of the older women here, still attractive with her streams of black hair.

"Stay and hold me," she pleads. "I lied about dying alone."

- You concede to sit on the bed and comfort her for a while (46).
- You prefer to stay off the bed and coach her back downstairs (65).

35

You unstop the bottle and gently pour its diamond-like water on Rachel's head. The long flow bathes her hair, runs down her calm face, and tinkles into the tub water ever so tranquilly. It lingers on her wrinkles, now peaceful and smoothed out despite the subtle smile. Her once stressed face looks marvellously younger, muscles relaxed now as the water plays over her eyelids, eating them until both eyes sit exposed, and the corneas strip away too. The vitreous humor expands, and jelly towers rise from their orbit homes. Having no where else to grow, the gooey eyes droop onto her boiling face and dribble like a month's worth of mucous.

The hair sizzles louder than a hissing cat. It shrivels and dissolves to the scalp which peels away of its own volition. The face expands into a bubbling pink broth, then flops apart into ribbons. Globes of quivering meat and muscle find comfort only after plopping into the water just under a blistering chin.

Soon, only a veiny red skull with earlobes remains, and a swelling tongue breaks through its teeth. You can almost see squabbling puppeteers yanking strings to rip the nose cartilage off and force open the disintegrating jaw.

You back away from the fumes. In some other dimension, the emptied vessel and stopper have smashed on the floor. Why did Angus bring a *strong acid* with him? Did he know this situation would come about? The bastard just pulled one of the sickest pranks of all time.

You certainly can't plunge your hands into the reddening acid bath to pull Rachel out. Hopefully, no one will enter and see this catastrophe. Turning away, you walk into the tin buckets left here. Their crashing over doesn't even cause Kristin to flinch. She has stood at the open door for a while now, staring at the black window as if it sends her memory into a cherished void. She clears her throat, but the drone in her voice may last forever.

"Angus lured me into the basement, promising to explain everything that happened tonight. Maybe he knows something. Maybe not. He made sexual advances, and I had to beat the crap out him to keep him off me. I tied him up to keep the rest of us safe. We better damn well start searching this house, starting with inside the walls."

She cradles a swollen knuckle and checks her watch. Three thirty. You follow her into the kitchen.

- You should march downstairs and question Angus about the sexual assault, the horrible acid prank, plus find out what he knows (if anything) about all these deaths (70).

- Angus will lie anyway, so you formulate a plan with Kristin to search the place without wasting any time (23).

36

You stumble your way back to the house and return through the front door as quietly as possible. Back in the living room, Rachel, Angus, and Dominico lie *asleep* in the diminishing firelight. Only Kristin stands awake. She watches over them from the corner, wide-eyed and hugging herself.

"They casually went back to sleep," Kristin whispers. "Total equanimity! Why did you leave me here,

you JERK!?"

Your arrival and Kristin's hissing abraids the two men awake. Dominico reluctantly tosses some more planks in the fire. Angus groggily sits up and rubs his eyes. Rachel...

She just sits there asleep on the divan, smiling like a Buddha. Kristin, having endured enough stress for three lifetimes, marches over and hollers in Rachel's ear while shaking her. The peaceful woman tips over.

Dead.

Not even the grandfather clock can wake her. Three o'clock. Rachael meets the holy trinity, if only in chimes.

"By the powers of Jesus," Dominico gasps. "Well..." A moment of silence passes. Not to mourn, though—to ruminate. "She wanted a baptism. We owe her that much."

Angus, now reverent, nods respectfully. The two men relight the lamps and leave, discussing what they'll need to ready the bathtub. Kristin looks at you, or maybe the entire room, with her jaw dropping evermore. Her condition looks permanent.

"I told you," she whispers. *"I said these people looked crazy! Why didn't you listen, you idiot?"*

Her face looks ready to explode. Her eyes could water plants. Arguing ensues, no matter what your responses. Kristin calls your "hysteria theory" stupid, moot, invalid, unsubstantiated, and unfounded. In your defensiveness, you demand to know why she can't use her university courses, psychology and such, to construct a believable hypothesis that explains all this.

"Psychology?!" She rubs her thin eyebrows hard and freezes, preparing to say (or confess) something difficult. "You have to major in that. Look, the first two years teach *nothing* practical or helpful in real life, alright? They force us to take all these dumb prerequisites and electives. The whole system funnels money to your grandparents' generation—the slave masters. Why do you think tuition keeps skyrocketing?"

Hands clenched at nothing, she flees to the hallway where you first debated in the dark. May as well follow.

-You've attended college or university (81).

-You did not go to either (100).

37

Rachel approaches, squeezing her little golden cross like a stress ball for thumbs only.

"Kristin won't believe me," she says. "But I know you will. Please, let me show you proof of the cry child. He will spare us if we simply *believe*."

The way people have dropped here, anyone could go next, including yourself. One death every hour doesn't just happen by chance. You will at least hear Rachel's explanation for the phenomenon killing these feckless people tonight.

Wanting to see this "proof", you follow Rachel through a door to the dining room left of the stairs. Her lamp bathes the walls, black windows, and table with a yellow glow like aged paper. Dozens of black and white pictures hang in here almost reluctantly, tilted downward from their place on nails. Each fancily framed photo shows a posing family. And in each, among the fluff of ballroom dresses and old-timey suits, a boy stands screaming with tears soaked through his dress shirt.

Every picture, all around the room, has the wailing boy. His mouth gapes like a bottomless well, and the tears flow hard in every shot. The parents, aunts, uncles, and probably dozens of strangers, all smile properly in perfect huddles behind the cry child.

The partying teenagers stayed the hell out of this room. Only the spiders left anything here.

"I felt his presence," Rachel says. "I know we disturbed the cry child spirit even before coming in here."

-If you have at least one son or daughter, you feel compelled to study the old family photos more carefully (87).

-Having no children of your own, you may choose to examine the photos anyway (87) or seek more practical knowledge of the house surroundings by looking out the dining room windows (93).

38

No one breathes for a moment. Rachel leans back in the ornate chair, exhales, and opens her eyes.

"Not black, but...blackness. No, not even that. Nothingness. You won't pick any color."

No matter what your reply, Rachel, and even the others, look almost betrayed. Kristin, however, gives you a reassuring smirk and eye roll.

Turn to 28.

39

You will assist Kristin with CPR by following her instructions. She kneels by Angus's still head and checks for breathing and a pulse.

"Nothing," she says. "I'll do mouth-to-mouth, and you do chest compressions. Put your hands over his sternum two finger widths above the xiphoid, and lock your arms straight. Just keep pressing rapidly."

You do so. Kristin lies flat on her belly to reach Angus's head in the floor space. She pinches the nostrils closed and clasps her pretty mouth over his ugly one. She breaths for him. The chest rises, and your palms push it down. The final few clock chimes keep a haunting rhythm.

After about two minutes, Kristin knocks your hands away in frustration.

"He died on these crossbeams in the floor," she says, straining to see. "This won't work unless his back lies flat. We have four and a half minutes until his brain dies. Help me roll him out."

She grasps Angus's shoulders while you pull at one hip. Even with your combined strength, the lanky teen feels twice as heavy, as if the house wants to keep the body. The floor holds him down.

Finally, you roll him...and see why. Angus has three rows of holes punched deep in his back. Each puncture wound blossoms with blood, staining his coat. He had lain on rows of protruding nails from the basement ceiling, and each chest compression pushed him down on that bed of nails. One last prank, perhaps, or just bad luck.

Kristin backs off, smearing Angus's blood on the wall to clean her hands. You search the facedown body and fish some half-charred photographs from the teen's pocket. Your eyes strain to study them in the awful yellow light. But the burned pictures have soaked through with blood.

The kitchen looks war-torn with its two bodies and broken up walls and floor. Grabbing the lamp, you wonder how many of tonight's horrors happened through your own actions.

"Help me carry Angus to the basement," Kristin whispers. "We must search him thoroughly without Dominico walking in."

You agree to this, picking up Angus's legs while Kristin takes the torso end. Beyond the basement door, the steps creak under the combined weight, and rats scurry under the antique

furniture stored down here. Your lamp flame wobbles in the struggle to carry so much at once. Kristin sets the body in an old chair, and the strip search begins.

Despite your thoroughness, however, nothing else turns up except cigarettes and a pen. The smell of burnt kerosene collects in the dank, a reminder of passing time. Still driven, you both return upstairs.

"We should look in the walls for hidden cameras," Kristin says.

-You agree with her plan (15).

-You'd rather find Mrs. Keeble's body and search her for clues (48).

40

You and Kristin meet up again in the kitchen. Her eyes carry the hopelessness of everyone alive and dead. She failed to find anything upstairs.

"They made one bedroom fully decorated and picturesque," she says, "with lace curtains everywhere, like wedding dresses...for when Marsha tried to take the story upstairs."

Once again, Paul's pale body dominates your attention. Kristin stares at him uncomfortably...and at length.

"I know this will sound insane," she says, opening a drawer and selecting a rust-spotted knife, "but we *must* find out what keeps killing these people. I thought about performing a crude autopsy on Paul." She closes her eyes at the thought. "I think they each swallowed a suicide pill, with each capsule timed to dissolve on a different hour. How else would they die so orderly? Paul's body probably hasn't absorbed the pill yet because he died earlier than scheduled. He chickened out and wanted to go by his own means. We have to at least take this chance and find out. But I can't bring myself to do it, not here with bad lighting, no tools, and shaky hands."

She takes your hand and puts the knife in it. "Will *you* find that pill?"

For all you know, Kristin could work for the billionaires, tricking you into these grizzly tasks for their entertainment. Or, maybe she's gone delusional under tonight's stress. People see the world through the filter of their occupational knowledge, in her case, one of pharmacology.

Everyone has values, limits, and standards. Whether you believe in the cry child ghost, Kristin's convoluted theory, or mass hysteria, the choice comes down to this:

-You will eviscerate Paul, turning his stomach inside out to find this pill, if it exists (84).

-You won't do it (69).

41

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. You've treated your own family members with hostility before. You've never gotten along with one of your parents. You often feel anxious, tense, and impulsive. You've even struggled with some depression. You envy others and handle stress poorly. You have so much cynicism that you even hate dressing formally. You've broken people's trust before, haven't you? You've taken too many stupid risks for temporary thrills. You've done nothing but nitpick and analyze us, like you always do. You've turned us into math, like you do with everything. You always think logic will win out. You've always acted too carefully, planning out steps and procedures before making decisions. You keep putting emotions on the back burner, whether yours or ours. We've become nothing but a dry list of fine details to you because you see everyone as such. You lump us into 'yes' or 'no' groups to gain a simple black and white judgement. You do

it based on your observations rather than our whole lifetimes, don't you? You just want the most accurate bottom line answer. Yet, you consider yourself affectionate, confident, and approachable. It just means you took on too many extracurricular endeavours in your youth and you have too many hobbies now. You like the outdoors, if just to escape the clutter you made. You don't plan for the future enough, do you? You have many friends, but only because you distract too easily. You use them because you can't focus on yourself enough. You think you can help us like you try to help everybody. But really, you just talk too much. You can't even relax yourself."

She takes her lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to 88.

42

Returning to the living room, Kristin turns the blazing lamp wick down to a tiny flicker. You both go around shaking the others out of their trances. Rachel stands up explosively, her face wild and wrinkled with rage.

"You've cost us our souls!" she yells at you, teeth bared with spittle shooting through. She steps to the pitch black window like a sleepwalker. "The spirit will take us all."

"We tried," says Angus.

He and Dominico go over to console her in a bony huddle of solidarity. Mrs. Keeble remains on her knees before the fireplace. She mimes prayers vigorously, her knobby hands clasped like magnets. In the firelight, her veins rise like worms trying to get out.

Kristin gives up trying to pry the elderly woman from a rigor mortis like pose. She confronts the trio by the window.

"You've got this poor old woman in a frenzy," she says to a now stoic Rachel. "Manipulating and terrorizing these people won't help our situation."

"I did what the cry spirit needs for our salvation," Rachel counters. "I showed him love, which he never had. And you'll regret interfering."

You can't tell if Rachel went to the window to cool herself or compose a lie; the black panes reflect a pale statue, not a woman.

"We did more helping than *you* did," Angus cuts in, poking his face close to Kristin's.

A series of pops and crackles interrupts the arguing. You all turn to witness Mrs. Keeble lying on the floor facedown with her head in the fireplace. The flames digest her hair and turn the peeling, sizzling head into a fireball. The oozing flesh looks like a roasted marshmallow gone wrong.

You and Kristin rush over and haul the petite body out by the legs. Fire and smoke flow out with it, and Kristin smothers the flames with her coat. Rolling the body over exposes a tilled swamp of a face—black broth embedded with red coals. Most of the meat has burned off. The cooked brain expanded, cracking open a black skull. Doctors don't know this about osteoporosis yet. How would they?

The grandfather clock chimes happily as a child playing on a busy road. The others just look on like someone changed the channel.

"You guys!" Kristin yells, coughing on smoke. "Did she collapse or pitch herself in on purpose?"

"You tell us, 'doctor'," Angus says. "I guess you'd call that a center of mass problem."

"I warned you," mutters Rachel. "Now, you can only repent, child."

Actions take over for a while. Smoke has that affinity for people. It seeks them. Tonight, it carries the stench of roasted hair and flesh. The passengers wave it away. Angus volunteers to take the smouldering body outside, slamming both doors behind him. He returns some time later smoking a cigarette.

"Why don't we leave this place?" Kristin protests. "Let's just button up and take our chances on

the road."

"The spirit of the cry child will follow us," Rachel says, tonelessly. "He may still show mercy if we convince him of our good, blessed nature. Those kids who came in here before us showed...disgusting contempt and disrespect." Her eyes dart around to the empty booze bottles in the corner. "The child's poor ghost could only scribble and scream silently in the walls. But now, we released him."

Dominico the farmer nods. "I believe it. And I want justice. Maybe we all deserve this, for things we did in life. The spirit will show mercy, but only if we deserve it."

"What about you, Angus?" Kristin asks. "I can't just leave everyone here."

Angus shrugs. "I don't care. I really don't care anymore." He takes a drag and exhales a blue cloud at the ceiling in a prolonged sigh.

-You smoke, or used to smoke (31).

-You never had the habit (4).

43

You close your eyes almost completely and wait. With heightened alertness, it becomes apparent: Mrs. Keeble, awake on the divan, leers at the kitchen door too. She smiles perversely. The old woman half-closes her eyes and waits—copying *your* tactic. Nobody comes out of that quiet kitchen.

You better investigate. But despite the adrenaline kick from the voyeur hag, feigning sleep works too well sometimes.

-You drink caffeinated tea or coffee daily (30).

-You honestly don't (6).

44

The group wanders into the living room just right of the front door. Kristin opens the curtains to let in the remaining light of dusk while the young man you spoke with earlier crashes on the clawfoot divan. The bald man who "broke in" begins working on a grandfather clock, fascinated by the tall relic. You notice a depression within that circular scar on his head.

A retired-looking farmer looks up the chimney of a brick fireplace, his knobby hand clinging to the large mantle as he stoops.

"I noticed some water damage in the kitchen walls and floor," he says, gawking through an open door. "We may as well use it for firewood so we don't freeze. Those boards need to come off anyway if they plan on refurbishin' this place."

By the time the farmer noisily returns from the kitchen with an armload of boards, Kristin has the 1900s chair set arranged in a circle.

"Why don't we all have a seat and introduce ourselves?" Kristin says, setting an example with a lovely sitting pose. Then you snap alert, realizing she wants to start with yourself. After you state your name and hometown, Kristin turns her white smile to each person sitting around the living room.

Paul, the antiques dealer. That explains how he got the old grandfather clock working and set to his watch.

Marsha, an attractive brunette before life, and possibly drugs, wore her down. Then again, the others all look like heavy smokers except Kristin.

Mrs. Keeble, a tiny beetle of an elderly woman who peers at the teenaged male. This much staring would make most people uncomfortable.

Rachel, middle-aged, who introduces Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, more than herself.

Dominico, a farmer as you thought. He turns to introduce himself from his spot knelt at the fireplace, where he's gotten a fire started with a torn up beer case.

Kristin doesn't skip Angus, the teenager, who merely states his name unenthusiastically.

And Kristin completes the circle, telling a bit about her busy academic life as a second year premed student. Afterwards, Mrs. Keeble and Rachel go snooping in the kitchen, following Dominico who wants to collect more firewood.

-You would also like to look around (9).

-You should conserve your energy because help won't arrive until tomorrow at best (28).

45

You shake Rachel's hand, but your attention keeps returning to the cry child's pictures. He looks like a southpaw too, for in every photo, the screaming boy clings to his mother's forearm with his left hand.

Your mind wants out of here, and thoughts now sweep back to Paul's body...You can almost picture him splayed on the dining room table, just like in the kitchen...

"I've always had the gift," Rachel says. "People like me can...sense...a spiritual presence. Most don't believe in the spirits who talk with me. The commune we shared in the living room may have looked frightening to the nonbeliever. But the cry child felt so...so intense and desperate. He compelled me to speak with him. He wants revenge on those who neglected to free him from the walls. His own family imprisoned him there to stifle his screams.

"I can also tell that you and Kristin feel quite uncomfortable with us. Of course, we all feel scared after seeing those precious, kind people taken by our Lord so suddenly. But you feel something...more. A disturbance, caused by the rest of us."

Maybe you and Kristin have terrible poker faces. Or, Rachel could have overheard your theorizing in the hallway. Either way, it won't hurt to tell Rachel the truth while alone in the dining room. She seems to know anyway.

-You normally enjoy the company of large groups, but this particular group seems too creepy and quiet (24).

-You simply need your alone time. Getting forced to hang around any large group of strangers would naturally disturb you after a while (68).

46

You set the lamp on a nightstand and yourself on the bed. Marsha pulls your shoulders down and cuddles aggressively. The lace curtains swish around, even the ones on the window. For some, only human armor will do.

"Why did we end up together in this cold house?" she groans. "The one house with all those death threats? We won't survive this destiny, but at least we have right now."

With that, she runs her fingers over your scalp sensually. Her limbs lock around yours, waiting, craving.

-You offer comfort by holding her in the glow of lamplight (73).

-You gently push her away, mumbling some excuse (65).

47

Kristin strides through the door, leaving her lamp on the table for you to collect. No need for it because a fire illuminates the living room where she will find a scared old farmer. How efficient of her. How fatally mistaken.

You follow her through the door a moment too late and see Dominico has her pinned to the wall with the pitchfork from outside. To your relief, he hasn't stabbed her yet. The rusty prongs dig into Kristin's sweater, almost impaling her abdomen. Her axe lies on the floor.

Dominico's eyes blaze threateningly. Kristin stands on her toes, with only her eyes daring to jiggle from inside a stiffened body. Nothing either of you do, not even hurling the lamp, would let her slip aside in time. The crazed farmer stares at you accusingly. His hearing aid makes high-pitched whines.

"Do as I say, now," Dominico says. Kristin sneaks a frantic nod at you. "Or try somethin' stupid. Either way sounds fun. I *heard* you two talkin' about playin' doctor with Paul. You want to know why no one left this nice warm house? Well some of us have fantasies to live out before we go."

Perhaps so. A basement full of antiques for Paul, the one fancy bedroom for Marsha, a trip to the past for Mrs. Keeble, a haunted room for Rachel to expose and exorcise, frightened travellers for Angus to toy with, and bodies for Kristin to investigate—all indicative of a last wish design. But not quite. What do *you* get out of this house, a fun adventure?

"Now you go and drag that ditch pig Marsha back in here," Dominico says, trampling your thoughts. "Not enough punches in the world for that woman's face. Get goin'."

Perhaps he and Marsha shared the same psych ward. But that puzzle must wait; Dominico tightens both hands around the pitchfork. You mutter your compliance and set off, glimpsing at the grandfather clock on the way out. Ten minutes to five.

-For Kristin's safety, you should fetch Marsha's body quickly, or Dominico might think you've run off searching for a weapon (17).

-You will risk wasting time, dragging the body slowly and clumsily, hoping Dominico will die next at five o'clock (52).

48

"All right," Kristin sighs. "But I expect you to help *me* after this."

She grabs the axe Dominico left by the wall, and you both take the hallway to the dining room. Angus probably stowed Mrs. Keeble in the pantry here where no one looked yet. Kristin tries the pantry door handle, but finds it locked.

"Give me some light," she says, hoisting the axe high. "And space."

She starts chopping at the door like a lumberjack on bath salts. You try shining the lamp on her target without getting too close...but the flame dies.

With no kerosine and a massive cloud crawling past the moon, you step backwards into the darkness. Kristin stops swinging the axe.

"Dammit," she says. "Guard this spot while I get another lamp. I don't want Dominico coming in to finish the job and steal evidence. *They* put him here to lie and mess with our heads, just like the others."

She goes. At least, you think she left. Your prowling fingers touch the axe that Kristin left stuck in the door.

-You feel like chopping through the door in a race to find what, if anything, Mrs. Keeble has in

her pockets (20).

-You'd rather wait as requested. Otherwise, Kristin might decry *you* as the mole who wants to hide all evidence of the perceived scheme (5).

49

You reject Kristin's proposal. But no amount of persuasion will change her mind. She goes into the living room and proceeds with the operation alone.

Then come the screams. More and more of them become howls and pitches you've never heard before. Only ten more minutes have passed. At least you know Kristin doesn't work for them, if "they" even exist.

-Enough! You will help her get this over with since she will do it anyway (33).

-No. No. No. You avowed to stay right here and do nothing. Hysteria, billionaires, ghosts, paranoid schizophrenic med students, or whatever else won't have their way with you (58).

-You hang yourself over the stairs by tying one coat sleeve to the banister above and forming a noose with the other. (This will almost guarantee victory by having someone else solve the mystery for you. Turn to the AUTHOR'S NOTE at the back and choose option 2.)

50

You follow her in with the lamp. After a few paces, a jutting corner narrows the gap. Kristin squeezes her way through, disturbing the tall slabs of mouldering newspaper shreds—what they used for insulation long ago. The cellulose, loosely jammed inside the wall, topples on her.

"Got to fight through all this crap," she says, coughing on dust.

The bursting dust cloud smothers your gentle flame, burying you in darkness.

"AHHH!" Kristin cries in a choking fit. "My sweater got snagged on nails! Pull me out of here NOW!"

In the blind struggle, Kristin thrusts back and slumps into your arms. Her thrashing stops as if she went paralysed.

"Why won't you help me!?" she yells. "Pull me out of here, will you!?"

You grab her *hard* and back yourself out to the opening in the boards.

"Where the hell have you gone?!" she hollers, despite laying on your chest as you do all the work.

Your eyes adjust to the moonlight from the kitchen window, but dust billows out the broken wall, obscuring everything. You want to throw Kristin's stenchy body on the floor. She smeared rat droppings all over your clothes and down your shirt. Some of her dried hair broke off in your mouth. The clinging won't stop because your fingers have punched through the space between her ribs. Blackened skin rips off and sticks to your cheek when the body—not Kristin—finally slides to the floor.

While dislodging the old insulation, Kristin blindly threw a mummified corpse in your arms—the cry child, grown up and deceased. The walls delayed a great deal of decay.

Kristin finally staggers out. Her foot stomps through the sunken black abdomen. In a fluster she drags the naked creature around like a snowshoe until her foot pulls free.

In a swirl of screams and confusion, Kristin yells something about grave robbing. "They" did it to stage all this. You both brush off and flounder to the hall. Rationality returns, though never to your dreams after this. She relights the lamp with her black hand and a lighter stolen from Dominico.

Now, she wants your help in doing the same thing to the walls upstairs.

-You will go along with this and listen to her plan (95).

-If Dominico knows anything about all this, maybe you can cajole him into talking (71).

51

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. Family means a great deal to you. You avoided any serious trouble in your youth, though you knew at least one student who died. But not everyone had the nice parents and privileged upbringing that you had. You want to imagine the best solution to this nightmare, yet you keep letting your emotions control you like always. You get feelings and gut reactions from out of nowhere. You can imagine our hardships, but only because you can picture them inflicted on yourself. You have unstarted art projects on your mind, and we simply have gotten in the way of that, haven't we? Yet, you consider yourself affectionate, confident, and approachable. It just means you took on too many extracurricular endeavours in your youth and you have too many hobbies now. You like the outdoors, if just to escape the clutter you made. You don't plan for the future enough, do you? You have many friends, but only because you distract too easily. You use them because you can't focus on yourself enough. You think you can help us like you try to help everybody. But really, you just talk too much. You can't even relax yourself."

She takes her lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to 88.

52

You drag Marsha's bare body across the splintery floor. Bits of her skin stay there. Upon your arrival in the living room, Dominico stares grimly at the grandfather clock.

"Not enough time for the meal," he says.

Kristin breathes deeply for the first time ever as Dominico goes to the fire. He tosses a folded paper from his pants pocket into the flames. The grandfather clock pounds its anvil with that old second hand. All the way to 12 it swings. Then, the farmer lays his pitchfork on the mantle. He curls up and dies to the sound of the chimes. Now you know why priests read verses at funerals: some folk don't deserve a real epitaph.

Kristin curls up too, but in the corner. You search Dominico but find nothing. More importantly, though, your actions prevented some vile mutilation against Marsha or Kristin. The absolute worst has surely passed. Turn to 60.

53

Some time past 11, your attention drifts around the dark room where the others have finally found sleep. While you gaze at snow gathering on the window, *someone* skulks through the kitchen door and closes it.

You strain to both see and hear. Then come the noises. From inside the kitchen someone's belt buckle clangs about loosely. The table in there creaks and wobbles under the strain of one or more bodies. Then, the repressed muffling...

Rhythmic moaning ensues. And panting too, all constrained, all in vain to your ready ears. You hear plastic rustling and chaffing. Plastic and a faint sloshing, like a juicy garbage bag getting handled too much.

It sounds like people having sex in there. Your imagination starts up, picturing some uses for the plastic. Then, the noise stops with telling abruptness, and the house settles into silence once again.

Minutes pass.

Your eyes dart around the living room trying to identify the crumpled figures remaining. In the dying firelight, only patches of them glow orange and yellow enough for you to see. A petite elderly lady and a middle-aged woman curl against the armrests of the divan. Kristin sleeps between them, her head bent down as if she will soon fall into her own lap. One man sleeps in a chair, another on the floor. Someone whose gender you can't identify sleeps in another chair in a back corner.

But do you remember these people (all drab, except Kristin) or how many make up the group? Pushing that door open would let firelight flood in with your intrusion. Someone's chair blocks the hallway door, so you can't sneak around to the other kitchen entrances.

-You decide to barge into the kitchen to investigate (30).

-You pretend to sleep and wait to see who emerges from the kitchen (43).

54

"Marsha went outside to cool off," Rachel informs you. Her peaceful grin holds strong. The others seem unperturbed by the news, except Kristin. She leans close and touches your arm imploringly.

"Please go talk to her," she says. "Marsha won't listen to me, and the freezing weather hasn't let up."

Kristin has a way with people. Maybe a likeness for this caring university student has welled in your heart, or just old fashioned heroism. Whatever the cause, you want to help both distressed women. Perhaps the farmhouse itself has made its occupants more traditionalist.

You open the front door and meet a flurry of snow in the night. On the veranda, Marsha rocks in the splintery rocking chair, her black hair flailing wild in the storm. Shockingly, she sits in her underwear, having biffed her clothes out to the whiteness where they met a swift winter burial.

The words spill from your mouth. She ignores them. Every approach you try fails to even turn her face to yours. Nothing can break her gaze into the black sky and white field.

You move closer with your flickering lamp. Only when face to face does the reality hit. Marsha's eyes have grown to the size of baseballs. No—she just wears eye patches of snow. More fills her gaping mouth. Only the *wind* rocks her chair, for she died out here, alone, like she said. But no one can die that soon from the cold, not even when naked. She left the house just minutes ago. Now, the wind flaps her like a flag of surrender.

The knell of the grandfather clock startles you. Its muffled chime fights its way outside. One o'clock.

You back away, letting the cold body rock indifferently. Rationality resettles. Perhaps Marsha overdosed on drugs? Her naked back and shoulders bear gang-inscribed tattoos, and old track marks riddle her forearms. Could her hushed behaviour from earlier imply that she came from a halfway house on prison leave? Could she have hidden hard drugs in...herself, forgetting to remove them in all of tonight's stresses? Or did the terrified woman swallow her drugs fearing a worse fate?

-Considering the two deaths and growing panic indoors, you feel justified in searching Marsha's underwear, perhaps even doing a quick cavity search. The discovery of drugs could explain this death and prevent an escalation of hysteria (8).

-No way. You return indoors to report the bad news and your suspicions (22).

55

You try to get inside the bus driver's head. The cold and stranded feeling here calls to mind certain workplace attitudes. Thoughts turn to those former coworkers, stuck in unwanted jobs. Snowflakes bombard your vision, bringing to memory a million gruelling tasks.

The wind envelops your face, making simple chat difficult. But you tell the young man that no one grows up wanting to drive strangers around as a dream job. Sometimes, people snap. Their job-related stress builds up, and they can't always cope rationally. Maybe these passengers just got stuck with a disgruntled worker. A large sum of money akin to a lottery winning or a surprise inheritance could have forced the driver's hand, knowing how much people can hate their work. Or, maybe he has problems at home...

You don't need to find every clue to solve a mystery. A good thinker can fill in the gaps using inference and the scant clues available, as done here.

You could go on speculating, but the young man looks uninterested. Turn to 72.

56

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. Family means a great deal to you. You avoided any serious trouble in your youth, though you knew at least one student who died. But not everyone had the nice parents and privileged upbringing that you had. You've done nothing but nitpick and analyze us, like you always do. You've turned us into math, like you do with everything. You always think logic will win out. You've always acted too carefully, planning out steps and procedures before making decisions. You keep putting emotions on the back burner, whether yours or ours. We've become nothing but a dry list of fine details to you because you see everyone as such. You lump us into 'yes' or 'no' groups to gain a simple black and white judgement. You do it based on your observations rather than our whole lifetimes, don't you? You just want the most accurate bottom line answer. Yet, you consider yourself affectionate, confident, and approachable. It just means you took on too many extracurricular endeavours in your youth and you have too many hobbies now. You like the outdoors, if just to escape the clutter you made. You don't plan for the future enough, do you? You have many friends, but only because you distract too easily. You use them because you can't focus on yourself enough. You think you can help us like you try to help everybody. But really, you just talk too much. You can't even relax yourself."

She takes her lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to 88.

57

Driven mad with fear, you cannot trust or follow anyone.

Kristin shakes her head and runs upstairs. You hear a window smash. Hopefully, she landed Ok. The house sinks deeper, now with just yourself alive inside. The wait begins to see who shall prove the other wrong.

Smoke rises from the floor cracks, and the dark hallway gets excruciatingly hot. In the agony that leads to collapse, you don't know whether to believe Kristin's paranoid theory or if the house sank to Hell.

Read the AUTHOR'S NOTE at the back.

58

The screams end, and the grandfather clock gives another eulogy. You peek around the corner and see Kristin becoming just another cold thing on the floor. Her lake of blood coagulates here

and there. In time, it will freeze. Everything goes to zero out here.

At some point, you leave the house and trudge back to the road. It looks recently plowed, and a car pulls over in response to your desperate waving. A long look back reveals the strangest thing thus far: the house has simply vanished. Your fresh footprints in the snow lead way back to a blurry spot in the field. But beyond that...

Your eyes become teary. Even the young motorist squints after whatever elusive thing has escaped out there in the bland white fields. Snowblind, you climb into buddy's warm car—some guy on his commute to work.

You can't explain this, so you don't. You invent stories about hunting out here and getting lost. The stories continue at the garage where he drops you off. More stories for the taxi driver. Eventually, you board another bus with an ordinary mix of people and even some children on board. But the stories continue in your mind, maybe for the rest of your life.

Yes, you make it home. Normalcy returns, sort of. A call to the police, therapy, moving on with your life—these things never happen. Who would believe any of it without the bodies, without other witnesses, without *the house*?

Your timid phone calls and internet searches yield nothing about those other passengers. They may as well have never existed. But Kristin *does* exist. Her university and Facebook page exist, and her family and friends long to know what happened to this missing student. One day, when suitably recovered, you make the trip.

Now, you sit by the roadside dreading entry into another house, the home of Kristin's parents. They deserve to know. But how could anyone explain what happened with so little evidence? A sane person would walk away now; the travel expenses mean nothing. Today, you must make the hardest decision of all.

Your story may begin here, but this one just ended. Read the AUTHOR'S NOTE at the back.

59

Kristin gives a one-second smile at your approach. Worry then resumes command over her face. Through the whirling snow, you ask if she's had any luck.

"I can't get a signal." She turns her little screen forward as if for proof. "I doubt anyone else will either," she says glumly to her hand.

You watch her try again and again until it feels rude. Turn to 75.

60

Ten minutes have passed five o'clock. Kristin sits on the stairs in the hall, where no one died, massaging her scalp. She keeps tossing little looks at you.

In the deep quiet, you reflect on how your debacles tonight support the mass hysteria idea. All actions made things worse. Even Kristin became part of the madness. Of course, this many abrupt deaths would derail even the most rational minds.

Vacantly, Kristin says, "I got pregnant two months ago from a one-night stand. It all makes sense now. The billionaires will keep me alive. They want to expose my fetus to inhumane concentrations of stress hormones. All these deaths...for me. Don't you see?"

You do see. You see her swimming in derangement. But maybe she got it right...

"They want to create a perfect monster. They'll track my child for life, inflicting tortures from afar. The super rich will sculpt him as they please. Who knows why? Maybe for amusement. Maybe they want more serial killers born." Her stone face melts, and she looks to you. "We can't

beat them. I can only hope to destroy what the designers want most. They'll get a prenatally stressed newborn from somewhere, but not from me. We must spare the child from such a life.

"I'll need your help with the abortion. I brought some wire coat hangers from the basement."

-Nope. You decide to just sit on the stairs and do *nothing* for the next hour. You may lose your life, but not your morals (49).

-You can only win at this game by ruining their prize. So you will help Kristin perform a crude and hasty abortion (33).

61

While they bicker, you hurry to the living room and go through every pocket of Dominico's new coat. He had removed it after becoming sweaty by the fire. Now, his face has that old man grease they wear forever in nursing homes. His coat, however, contains nothing. Not even lint. *Nothing*.

You sneak out to the hall and overhear Kristin reasoning with Dominico. Maybe she guessed your plan and helped stall him? They return to the living room via the kitchen door seconds later. Back in the bathroom, a teary-eyed Angus had performed the baptism as best he could. Rachel's brow glistens in peace, her hair wetted down.

Angus pats your shoulder once on his way out. "Please close her eyes. I feel kind of nauseous right now."

You gently close Rachel's eyes. Withdrawing your hand, your two fingers somehow poke her eyeballs. Bad nerves tonight...

Your arm draws back, having done enough damage, and...it happens again. You poke her eyes. Pulling back harder causes Rachel's head to tilt forward, her eyelids not letting go of your fingertips. Angus coated the eyelids with superglue. Their elasticity keeps yanking on your fingers.

A chill far worse than any winter runs through your shoulders. You turn and see the pale face of Angus laughing in complete silence from the kitchen. Keeled over, he can barely contain his squeals.

What would stop Angus from darting over and braining you with a chair? And why wouldn't he, a kid capable of *this*? Having little choice, you must tear off Rachel's eyelids to free your hand. It takes some chewing, but only a little.

Only a little, you'll tell the doctors one day.

Maybe enough to forget—though you'll never forget leaning so close that your breath bounces off Rachel's cold accusing eyeballs. The tub water ripples; she resists. For the rest of tonight, her jiggly eyelids will remain stuck to your fingers. Every brush of an object will dirty and shrivel them.

The clock starts chiming after you've nibbled to freedom. Angus, quite literally rolling around in conniption, dies laughing. He rolls into the space under the floorboards, the hole made by Dominico's removal of planks. There, the kid lies still for all time. Tears of laughter have zigzagged over his face, landing in a frozen smile. His teeth gleam in your quivering lamplight.

Kristin rushes from the living room to check if someone died. Seeing that someone did, her eyes lock on yours.

"Help me do CPR!" she demands. "We can save him and find answers to all this! Only *he* knows what the designers intend to do with us."

Luckily for Kristin, she can't see the blood-rimmed naked eyes of Rachel in the dark bathroom. You explain the prank, even showing her the eyelids on your fingertips. But it doesn't detract her.

- You have taken CPR training and want to use it here (77).
- You never took a First Aid and CPR course, but you'll follow Kristin's instructions to resuscitate Angus (39).
- Kristin can do what she wants, but *you* intend to frisk Angus and turn out his pockets (11).

62

You fixate on some empty cans, bottles, dime bags, condom wrappers, and hash pipes scattered on the wood floor.

Pipes? Strange how they discarded those. Potheads get attached to their pipes, mainly because of the smokable THC-laden resin which accumulates inside. No one throws away their sentimental homemade pipes. Even more oddly, some kids scrawled their full names onto these pipes...so the cops would know who to arrest? Fools.

Focus not on the physical clues you find, but on their attached messages.

Rich kids, you suppose. After all, they would have to drive out here in many cars, given the amount of junk left behind.

Wouldn't they?

The young man finally takes his earphones off when entering the house. Through them, you faintly hear Bon Jovi singing, "*Don't bend, don't break, baby, don't back down.*"

Turn to 44.

63

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. Family means a great deal to you. You avoided any serious trouble in your youth, though you knew at least one student who died. But not everyone had the nice parents and privileged upbringing that you had. You want to imagine the best solution to this nightmare, yet you keep letting your emotions control you like always. You get feelings and gut reactions from out of nowhere. You can imagine our hardships, but only because you can picture them inflicted on yourself. You have unstarted art projects on your mind, and we simply have gotten in the way of that, haven't we? You think too much about the future. You worry too much. You act passive and minimalist because it feels easier to lay low. You've never shown enthusiasm for anything, have you? You have few friends, and you hate the outdoors. And you hate asking for help even more. Fine."

She takes the lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to 88.

64

Suddenly, a horrendous noise throttles your nerves—the grandfather clock. Twelve chimes ring into the house, denoting midnight. Amongst the sighs and bodies stirring awake, you hear Angus cursing Paul under his breath.

Then, a scream shatters the night. You hurry toward the kitchen where the noise came from and crash into Kristin bolting through the door. Startled, she shoves her kerosine lamp into your hands.

You step through, allowing the golden light to spill onto the kitchen table. There, Paul lies sprawled with his coat sleeves rolled up to his wiry shoulders. One arm dangles off the tabletop, a laceration from elbow to wrist displaying his red anatomy to the world. The last of his blood patters onto a cooling lake on the floor. A rusty kitchen knife remains locked in his other hand. His face, pale as the snow on the window, stares lifelessly at the ceiling.

The blood and body bask in an acrid stench. His blanched face looks peaceful, controlled, relieved. On the table lies Kristin's discarded plastic shopping bag and Paul's belt. He had considered some other method of suicide before ultimately choosing the knife. Gasps and shrieks emerge from the awoken group. They stare in until you mercifully back out and close the door.

"I woke up and heard a dripping sound," Kristin trembles. "If only we heard something sooner."

Indeed, you can still hear a faint drumbeat of blood drops from under the door. The group waits in silence, Marsha whimpering with each dull thud until the drip finally stops.

"He moved in with God," Rachel says. Uncannily, everyone nods except Kristin who shares an uneasy look with you.

"In Heaven," Dominico says, "he'll get to look down at Hell and watch bad folks burnin' alive. Burnin' real slow." That elicits more nods and sudden closure.

"Um," Kristin says. For a while, she can muster no more. They all stand like trees, until she finally finishes. "I think we should all stay together...to help mourn."

-You would like to search Paul for a suicide note (74).

-You prefer to stay as a group like Kristin suggested (13).

65

"Get out then!" Marsha screams obscenities and throws her shoes like boomerangs. You barely get a word in, ducking out of the bedroom to dodge footwear.

On your trot back to the stairs, the lamp spills some light through one ajar door. A peek in reveals an ordinary bedroom with just the bed remaining. The partying teenagers had some fun in here. You enter, finding only stained blankets, and soon hear Marsha stomping downstairs.

But something seems off here. The room appears ordinary and antiquated, but with something missing. Yet, what would one expect in an abandoned house? Have you ever worked in the field of carpentry, house cleaning, interior decorating, real estate, or renovating?

-Yes (80).

-If not, then you return downstairs to the living room (54).

66

Rachel approaches, squeezing her little golden cross like a stress ball for thumbs only.

"Kristin won't believe me," she says. "But I know you will. Please, let me show you proof of the cry child. He will spare some of us if we simply *believe*."

The way people have dropped here, anyone could go next, including yourself. One death every hour doesn't just happen by chance. You will at least hear Rachel's explanation for the phenomenon killing these innocent people tonight.

Itching to see this "proof", you follow Rachel through a door to the dining room left of the stairs. Her lamp, a palpitating blob of fire, bathes the table, black windows, and walls in yellow. Dozens of black and white pictures hang here almost reluctantly, tilted downward from their place on nails. Each fancily framed photo shows a posing family. And in each, among the fluff of ballroom dresses and old-timey suits, a boy stands screaming. Tears soak his dress shirt.

Every picture, all around the room, has the wailing boy. His mouth gapes like a bottomless well, and the tears flow hard in every shot. The parents, aunts, uncles, and dozens of strangers all smile properly in perfect huddles behind the cry child.

The partying teenagers stayed the hell out of this room. Only the spiders left anything here.

"I felt his presence," Rachel says. "I know we disturbed the cry child spirit even before coming in here."

She draws near, and you feel the warmth of her person and her clenched lamp.

"I never told you much about myself yet," she says. "Or even my full name—Rachel Rose Rogers."

Rachel sets the lamp on the dusty table and extends her hand for a quick shake.

-You consider yourself left-handed (45).

-You consider yourself right-handed (29).

67

Rachel leans back in the ornate chair, exhales, and opens her eyes.

"Green," she says, looking drained again.

"Green!" Dominico gasps. "I picked green. But how did she know?"

The others exchange looks, eyebrows all raised. But Kristin frowns incredulously. After all, at least one person seemed likely to pick green.

Right?

Turn to 28.

68

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. You've treated your own family members with hostility before. You've never gotten along with one of your parents. You often feel anxious, tense, and impulsive. You've even struggled with some depression. You envy others and handle stress poorly. You have so much cynicism that you even hate dressing formally. You've broken people's trust before, haven't you? You've taken too many stupid risks for temporary thrills. You want to imagine the best solution to this nightmare, yet you keep letting your emotions control you like always. You get feelings and gut reactions from out of nowhere. You can imagine our hardships, but only because you can picture them inflicted on yourself. You have unstarted art projects on your mind, and we simply have gotten in the way of that, haven't we? You think too much about the future. You worry too much. You act passive and minimalist because it feels easier to lay low. You've never shown enthusiasm for anything, have you? You have few friends, and you hate the outdoors. And you hate asking for help even more. Fine."

She takes the lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to 88.

69

You set the knife on the table. No more atrocities tonight.

"I understand," Kristin says. "And sorry for even asking. Normally, the police would order real autopsies. But that won't happen. The designers of all this will cover it up somehow. They choose this remote area, after all. They set up the bus, the fake passengers, the house, then waited for a big blizzard to hit. Then, they nabbed us."

She looks at you blankly.

"When you left the living room to check on Marsha, Rachel told me something. She said the ghost corporeally warped the boards. But I think the designers wanted Dominico to remove those

exact boards, so he could find those exact words on them.”

She raises the axe and stares past you. “I’ll have to force Dominico to use self-induced vomiting. It will bring up the pill and save his life.”

-To prevent this confrontation, you reconsider and perform the autopsy (84).

-It all sounds manipulative. You instead follow Kristin to the living room to see how this goes (47).

70

You open the cellar door by the kitchen’s wood stove. Rickety brown stairs look up.

“Wait,” Kristin says. She opens a drawer and takes an old kitchen knife. “Take this just in case. I’ll question Dominico in the living room.”

She hands over the knife and her lamp, and you descend the groaning stairs. Underground, an infestation of rats scurry under the throes of lamplight. They huddle beneath the jutting stone blocks of this mismatched foundation. Most of the house’s antique furniture got jumbled down here too. Paul will miss out on these treasures, like so many days of life.

Angus sits in the one cleared spot, shirtless and tied to a stout chair with skipping rope. He grins, despite a puffy split lip where Kristin socked him a few times. You can see how she overpowered him so easily; the boy looks rake thin.

He can only laugh as you question him about the acid baptism. On the topic of throwing himself on Kristin, he replies, “I wanted to get laid before I die. Big deal.”

Ah. So he sees himself as part of tonight’s pattern. Whether you pester him for answers, beg, threaten or barter, nothing works. Angus just gives himself rope burns from laughter. He knows things, and has nothing left to play with but your psyche. The lamp yellows his smile and puts a settlement of shadows under his eyes.

Atop the stairs, you can just see Kristin’s silhouette closing the basement door.

-To save the lives of Kristin, Dominico, and yourself, you have no choice but to torture Angus for information (3).

-You could never stoop to that unthinkable act, nor gain anything here. Time ticks. Better head upstairs and help Kristin search (27).

71

You leave Kristin to her explorations and find Dominico at the living room fireplace. He has burned most of the boards, using one to stir the coals into a vigorous red.

“We’ll get life in this house yet,” he says.

You question him thoroughly, but how would a retired farmer know anything about mass psychogenic illness? He believes utterly in the ghost—the vengeful child who kills by the hour, as promised. Dominico glumly hands over the lonely board he spared from the fire. The black scrawl reads: *i will take this house down to hell.*

Another board on the floor, broken in half at mid-sentence, reads: *rib section roast.* What could all this mean? Due to their bulk, you may swipe only *one* as a clue while Dominico turns to the fire.

“When my missus died,” he says, “I curled up at the bottom of a rum bottle and stayed there for years. Rachel put her hand on my forehead and knew all about my abusive drinkin’ days. She could also read this place, tune in to the spiritual side. She said the ghost will forgive some of us ‘cus of the Almighty Lord’s mercy. He’ll spare you or me for sure. Now, I figure I can face him to

give you the proper chance at life you deserve. I wasted mine gettin' wasted.

"And someone's got to play the fire keeper 'round here." His pensive eyes roll up to the ceiling. Feeble thumping reverberates from upstairs as Kristin chops away on the walls. "Look at ya's both. So much for tryin' to act all rational." He stares ruefully into the fire again. "In tryin' times, folk like you keep askin' 'why oh why don't they behave all logical and rational-like? Why don't they use their brains instead of their feelins'? Why don't they just leave and get help?"

"Well, you don't live on planet Vulcan full of Mr. Spocks. Real folk don't act all perfect, all levelheaded and cool. We survive by jumpin' scared and flailin' just like her."

Funny how the horror movies got it right, and the nitpickers, the backseat drivers, swear they'd act wiser in the victims' places. But Dominico's story about the grip of alcoholism sparks a more important thought: Could *addiction* tie all these passengers together? It would explain Angus's smoking and Marsha's erratic behaviour earlier. And maybe Kristin's.

-You rush to the basement to check if Angus has any needle marks (21).

-You hurry to meet Kristin to see what she's discovered (40).

72

You repeat the "who knows" bit heard back at the roadside, wanting only to conclude your talk with this unpleasant guy.

Silence resumes over the journey to the farmhouse. Its dark shape grows like an inoperable cancer; without this shelter you'd die from exposure. The forlorn building looks barely livable. Maybe a road or trail led here in the old days. Not anymore.

People stop to remove snow from their shoes or dig out tissues to consult runny noses. Each time, Kristin turns to stop the whole group, her yellow hair whipping her mouth in the snowstorm. She has assumed a leadership role and checks that everyone stays together. Here, as the wind wraps their clothes tight, you see how skeletal most of the passengers' legs have gotten with age.

The group reaches the house at last. Dusty windows, moldy curtains, and darkness within forbid any peeking inside. Someone should have bulldozed this place back when they invented bulldozers. Steps lead up to the dilapidated veranda. There, a pitchfork and garden hoe lean by the door next to a rocking chair.

"No one will mind us breaking in," says a bald man with a circular scar on his pate. "They can blame the damn bus driver."

He tries the handle, which makes an echoing clunk sound.

"Not even locked." He looks in and remarks on all the empty beer cans and drug paraphernalia on the floor. "I guess kids come in here to party."

Luckily, those partiers never found creative uses for the decorative garden tools outside, like poking out windows. The passengers scurry inside to a dark hallway. No wallpaper. A stairway welcomes any takers to blackness upstairs.

-You have used illegal drugs or done some underaged drinking, doing either activity at least five times in your life (62).

-You haven't participated much in either act (44).

73

You embrace Marsha, tackling her mouth with yours. Hard kisses explode into a duet of moans. Your hands knead into her waist while she captures you with just her thighs. Far away, the grandfather clock chimes once. *One* means unity. A celebration. Cobras fight like this. The room gets stinky. But only the bed exists. **What if the guts could love the busy road?**

And somewhere else, a child twists different colored play doughs together. Marsha's hands try shuffling your back like a giant deck of cards. No, this doesn't feel right at all. What if two barnacles encrusted each other? What if a boy glued together two snail shell openings with the snails still inside? But you must try to indulge.

She relaxes entirely after the bout of fitful lust. Her eyes fuse to the ceiling in her usual catatonic reverie. Her sole duty: to double down on the offer, 20 hangnails and all. She surrenders her entire self, never resisting or questioning. You indulge.

Half an hour later, the lamp dies and coldness pelts on the black window, wanting in. You lie on Marsha, pressed hard to her cheek. Hopefully, the morning sun will catch you both like this, her hot breath on your ear, her heartbeat thudding through to yours.

Except...

You feel no breath, not even for three minutes of denial. How...how long ago had she...?

You spring off the body and pace like a prisoner. Your hands won't leave your mouth. They've become rooted there. Squatters. Clothes find their way back on, but it doesn't kill the goosebumps. Those feel permanent, like the track marks so recently caressed.

Think. Rationalize. Over an hour passed since Paul's suicide. Could the curse on the boards have something to do with this? Will someone else go next? Marsha looks (looked) like a hard drug user—the crack cocaine type—but to die from overdose in *this* house seems too coincidental. You certainly never smelled anything on her breath.

Thoughts pour out of you like sweat. Maybe this old farmhouse has put everyone in a traditional mindset, and spooky tales have taken hold—a self-fulfilling prophecy. Surely.

Suddenly, Kristin yells from downstairs, "*Oh my god! Stop it! STOP!!!*"

-You feel like going through Marsha's clothes (again), this time to find what may have killed her (14).

-You better hurry downstairs (22).

74

You volunteer to take a quick look for a suicide note. Kristin protests with her eyes. Maybe she fears for your mental health in there...or hers in here.

You light the lamps for them—Dominico left his lighter on the mantle—and take one into the kitchen. Careful not to move the body, you set the lamp on the table and worm your hands into Paul's coat pockets. They contain only a two month old receipt for coffee. Strangely, Paul carried no wallet, even for this long and ill-fated bus trip.

The receipt shows he purchased the large double double at a store in "Broken Reed Clinic". Maybe he sought help for his psychological problems there. You pocket the slip, and for now, respectfully keep the man's personal issues private. Write down the receipt message as a clue.

Returning to the living room, you announce that Paul left no suicide note. Turn to 13.

75

You look all around and see...

nothing. A forest presses up to the ditch across this not-even-rural road. Enough snow has fallen to make driving unsafe for anyone without a plow. Behind you, beyond a trackless field, sits an abandoned farmhouse. Others have noticed too, and talk spreads of heading there to escape the cold.

Thoughts of the bus driver charge through your mind as you brush more snow off your coat. The vocal passengers can't fathom why he would sacrifice his job and endanger lives over some luggage probably worth less than a few hundred dollars.

"Maybe he forgot to take his meds or something," one passenger says. "Who knows?"

"He'll do some jail time for sure," states another.

"Well, we can't stay here," Kristin finally says, addressing everyone. "We'll have to take shelter in that house because no one knows our location. The sun goes down soon. They might not even plow the road until morning."

Groaning ensues, but the weight of the cold brings everyone to agreement. The group, eight in total, begins trekking through the snowy hills to the house. It looks more like a dark marble lost in the field. Kristin leads the way, shielding her eyes in the flurry. Bored, the young man with the earphones walks alongside you.

"That bus driver just wants to mess with us," he says confidently. "He took it too far though. Probably ended up in the ditch a ways ahead. What do you think?"

It sounds stupid. Older workers don't pull these pranks. Now remember: you play you, born of your mother.

-You've worked at least one job in the food, bar, or restaurant business or as a bus or taxi driver (55).

-You agree with the other passengers' musings (32).

-You assert to have no idea (72).

76

Kristin shakes her fists at the driver who, ignoring her completely, speeds past. You feel certain the motorist had slowed down to study all the stranded passengers, then sped up to avoid them. Vultures or not, no other vehicles come. The road, though freshly plowed, starts filling up with a thick carpet of snow.

Concern leads to panic. The strangers vent as if it will bring the bus back:

"He forgot our luggage."

"Will he come back?"

"I don't see the other bus."

"Did he say how long we have to wait?"

"He can't just take off like that!"

"Well, he did."

That snarky tone comes from a young man, late teens, you didn't notice on the bus. He must have slumped in his seat, zoning out with his earphones and smartphone.

You see the blonde woman, Kristin, glued to her mobile device. She springs up and down on her toes trying to keep warm. Strangely, the others haven't fished any cell phones from their pockets, even as 20 minutes pass. Passengers now wear snow on their shoulders like camouflage in the hail of flakes. Everyone anxiously checks the buried road for signs of a motorist. No one comes. The

group waits by the ditch, surrounded by hills and evergreens.

Things will make the most sense if you answer all questions honestly, especially as they get personal, starting with this one: do you, the flesh and blood real-life you, carry a mobile phone while travelling?

- You do carry a mobile phone (10).
- You don't, so you'd naturally ask to use Kristin's (59).
- You don't, and you wouldn't ask to borrow someone else's (75).

77

You remind Kristin that the casualty should lie flat for effective chest compressions; Angus lies irregularly across beams running beneath the floorboards. She helps roll him out of the coffin-like space. Moving him won't hurt because he didn't injure his head or neck on the way down.

Kristin commences CPR while you pat down the body and periodically check your hands for blood—standard first aid procedure. In doing so, the corner of something in Angus's pocket pokes your palm. Checking the pocket reveals a stack of charred photographs. It appears the astute teen, while alone, tried to burn these in the fireplace. But someone returned, forcing him to stuff the smouldering pictures back in his coat.

The only surviving picture shows Marsha's face. The rest had burned beyond recognition, but you suspect they might have captured the unknowing faces of the other passengers. Angus or someone had labelled Marsha's picture as "The opening death" in black marker. Write down this valuable clue.

Kristin ceases mouth-to-mouth when you show her. She looks a little sick in the yellow lamplight.

"Why does he have these?" she asks, grabbing your arm. "How could he have known about all this?"

You both remain low over Angus's cooling body, Kristin still on her knees from attempting to resuscitate the little monster.

"Maybe Paul should have died later on," she ponders, "but he...took control of his situation." Yes, Paul died first, perhaps the unintended opening death. "Help me carry Angus to the basement. We must search him without Dominico walking in."

You agree to this, picking up Angus's legs while Kristin takes the torso end. Beyond the basement door, the steps creak under your combined weight. Rats scurry under the antique furniture stored down here. Kristin sets the body in an old chair, and the strip search begins.

Despite your thoroughness, however, nothing else turns up except cigarettes and a pen. The smell of burnt kerosine collects in the dank, a reminder of passing time. Still driven, you both return upstairs. According to Angus's pictures, the deaths will occur in a specific order, with Marsha's the "opening" death. *Perhaps you should look at the clues in the order you find them.*

"We should check the walls for hidden cameras," Kristin says.

- You agree with her plan (15).
- You'd rather find Mrs. Keeble's body and search her for clues (48).

78

"Wait." Rachel interrupts your explanation. She touches her palm...where you shook hands with her. "I know you. You've treated your own family members with hostility before. You've never gotten along with one of your parents. You often feel anxious, tense, and impulsive. You've even struggled with some depression. You envy others and handle stress poorly. You have so much cynicism that you even hate dressing formally. You've broken people's trust before, haven't you? You've taken too many stupid risks for temporary thrills. You've done nothing but nitpick and analyze us, like you always do. You've turned us into math, like you do with everything. You always think logic will win out. You've always acted too carefully, planning out steps and procedures before making decisions. You keep putting emotions on the back burner, whether yours or ours. We've become nothing but a dry list of fine details to you because you see everyone as such. You lump us into 'yes' or 'no' groups to gain a simple black and white judgement. You do it based on your observations rather than our whole lifetimes, don't you? You just want the most accurate bottom line answer. You think too much about the future. You worry too much. You act passive and minimalist because it feels easier to lay low. You've never shown enthusiasm for anything, have you? You have few friends, and you hate the outdoors. And you hate asking for help even more. Fine."

She takes the lamp and leaves you in the dark. Turn to 88.

79

You roll up your coat sleeves and dunk your arms into the steamy tub. Water splashes on the floor.

Just repositioning the body, you'll tell them if anyone enters.

Survival instincts cranked high, you turn every pocket inside out. Only one item turns up—a pocket bible. How many women take long bus trips without a bank card or any cash? No receipts or ID, no Kleenex, nothing.

Under the window's moonlight, you open the soggy little bible to a bookmarked page. Someone has circled the words "the first-born". Record this clue.

If you don't already know the reference, the bible story lies right there for your skimming. Basically, God kills all the first-born sons in Egypt households. But he spares the children of followers who marked their door posts with lamb's blood. Did Rachel consider the passengers condemned with survivors already chosen? Without a pen on her person, she must have circled this part before even stepping on the bus.

You slip the bible into your pocket and grab the vinegar bottle. The others might enter to say their goodbyes; they'll expect to see an empty bottle and Rachel's hair all wet from a baptism. Time to do the deed. Turn to 35.

80

You have solved the mystery. The brick chimney reaches up from floor to ceiling like a square pillar. Naturally, your eyes follow the wall around, identifying the place just over the damaged kitchen wall. Water should have leaked from above and seeped into the walls below. But not even a patch of rain got in here. The old house lacks indoor plumbing, so what rotted the walls downstairs? Whatever the cause, remember to *avoid holes in the walls* in case they contain asbestos.

Something seems odd here, alright. With four bedrooms upstairs, the house has eight rooms total. Eight rooms. Eight words on each death threat. Eight people in the house tonight. *Perhaps you will need eight clues, ideally, to learn how those threats really got there.* You go downstairs and

return to the morose group in the living room. Turn to 54.

81

Kristin spoke the truth all along. You've experienced similar ordeals in your postsecondary education: endless hidden costs, courses of little interest or relevance, weeks of the more required learning stretched into years, laughably pointless student unions and their fees, cushy tenures that probably shouldn't exist, and untaught practical materials found easily with the internet or libraries.

Thus, *you should trust Kristin's medical knowledge, but only when she has time to think.*

Funny how your time in college only taught you how little such experiences can help now, when it matters most. Kristin's self-defeating rant bashes her own argument; if she hasn't learned anything practical in premed, how can anyone believe her theory? Nobody won here yet. Turn to 100.

82

An obscenely wealthy person paid for all this. You remove the bracelets and wipe off the blood. The most bejewelled one has a fancy engraving on the underside.

TO: FROM: *BradPitt*

BradPitt—all one word and in lovey-dovey font. Either this old woman became a cat burglar within the past 20 years, or someone insanely rich gave Mrs. Keeble the gift of her fantasies. And no name to the recipient looks rather strange. Record this clue, and turn to 95.

83

Sometimes evil people inherit billions, and buying the best seats at the Superbowl won't fulfill their lust for cruel entertainment. Kristin tells you that someone must have designed this whole setup including the complicit bus driver, the solitary house, and these "passengers"—all actors. They look highly disturbed or worn down from cancer or the like; maybe someone paid them and their families to have them die here in front of hidden cameras.

This expounding sounds farfetched to say the least. Actually, it sounds like the most tinfoily conspiracy theory to date. If some sadist billionaire *does* watch from afar, it wouldn't surprise you if he hired Kristin as one of his "actors". Why else would she antagonize the others this much?

She seemed levelheaded until now, though. Maybe fear and paranoia have gotten to her in this admittedly spooky old house. You try comforting her with a more rational explanation for the two deaths. Turn to 89.

84

Could each person have swallowed a capsule of incremental thickness so the poison gets absorbed at specific times? You intend to find out. May sanity return one day.

"I'll watch the door and stall Dominico if he tries to enter," Kristin says. "He won't think too highly of our plan if he walks in."

She vanishes. So does Paul's body. You simply remove a shirt someone left on the table and begin making a sandwich.

Ah, the bread. So pasty and stale. You cut it and find someone already smeared jam on the other

side.

Now, the two-dollar steak. So tough and undercooked. Oh well. You soon give up with the dull knife and tear it with your hands. Kristin wants her sandwich before Christmas.

So many layers.

Then, the sandwich meats—salami, pepperoni, ham, moist and fresh. Kristin ought to cut down on those; they contain preservatives that cause cancer...of the stomach.

The stomach sliding around in there, slippery in your hand, kicks over these mental barricades. The organ hits your retinas, breaking into your mind at light speed. You feel your own guts sloshing around as your protesting fingers pull out Paul's innards. It all wants to stay in there so badly.

Your trusty-rusty knife rips open the stomach wall revealing brownish chime in a house of mucous. These colors you have never quite seen before. The gastric juices tickle your eyes and force a sneezing fit.

Nostril hairs fidgeting, you perform a gastric bypass for the record books. The grandfather clock won't wait for gentleness. After yanking out the slimy sack and cutting it into a purse, you smear it all over the table. From the thinned-out contents, a treasure twinkles in the stinky wetness: one large capsule. The horrible lamplight reveals some corroded print on one side:

"RIV 80 mg"

Eighty milligrams of...something. A lethal drug, a vitamin supplement, an antidepressant, a pain med, who knows? Record this clue anyway. You show Kristin, who promptly dry heaves at the sight of your maroon hands.

She has no clue either. RIV? Really In Vain. Some premed student.

Loud footsteps approach from the living room. You throw Paul's shirt over his disemboweled body. Turn to 47.

85

Yes! By tricking everyone to leave the bathroom, you can search Rachel for clues. The tub water might ruin evidence over time, so it must get done now.

You cut in, stating that your childhood memories of watching many family baptisms should suffice. Your mumbled story—a complete lie—could save lives tonight if a clue turns up on Rachel's body. An outright suggestion of rooting through the dead woman's clothes would only cause protest from Dominico.

You make up some malarkey about having to perform the baptism alone, since only "close relatives" ought to stand by as witnesses, and Rachel would want things done properly. Your spin works, and the three others agree to leave. Kristin, though, looks more frustrated than ever.

If only you could wink to her.

Angus steps forward. He produces an antique vinegar bottle adorned with a nativity scene risen from the glass. Fancy crosses decorate the stopper.

"I found this in the basement and filled it with melted snow," he says. "It'll have to do."

You accept the bottle of makeshift holy water and watch them leave the bathroom. Now, the guilt from your string of lies melts off your shoulders, for the clock ticks like thunder two rooms away.

-You get down to business, plunge your hands in, and dig through Rachel's pockets (79).

-You say a few respectful prayers and pour some water over her first (35).

86

These folk seem resigned to die. The room and its drab faces dish out bad memories. The others look broken down. They exude despair, like you've all landed in jail.

Anyone could die in the next hour. But not you. Someone must discover what keeps killing people off and how to stop it.

You must do *whatever it takes* to solve this, no matter what. Don't hesitate or flee, don't bend, don't back away from your one shot at survival. And screw niceties.

Turn to 66.

87

Someone carefully choose these people and paid them well to go along with it. Why else would everyone pose so casually with a tortured child? They look remarkably unconcerned, like the ever-crying boy doesn't exist. Perhaps Rachel thinks the child has appeared in the photos to haunt them. The posers certainly give that impression. Then again, people worshipped etiquette in those days.

Obviously, the boy had a rare condition. Some people live with the plague of constant tics, chronic depression, mood disorders, or uncontrollable behaviours. You can't imagine the stress this family endured, living with a child who can't stop his ear-splitting cries.

Or maybe the family caused this? And the pictures here...a facade for visitors?

The bus passengers stranded here probably had terrible childhoods too which made them such wrecks. Only you and Kristin have any sense of adult responsibility. Therefore, don't feel bad about viewing the others as troubled kids who never grew out of their problems. They have secrets to hide. *Find opportunities to search their bodies if they die.*

Rachel draws near, and you feel the warmth of her person, or maybe just her clenched lamp. "I never told you much about myself yet," she says. "Or even my full name—Rachel Rose Rogers."

Rachel sets the lamp on the dusty table and extends her hand for a quick shake.

-You consider yourself left-handed (12).

-You consider yourself right-handed (16).

88

They must come from a psych ward for the suicidal! Why won't anyone leave this creepy house? Sure, Kristin wants to (if only for the heroism of saving others), and they stated their tepid reasons for staying. But they can't all want to stay, can they? Kristin probably feels guilty for leading everyone here. Angus seems too depressed and unmotivated. Rachel has too much faith, and Dominico seeks personal redemption. Mrs. Keeble looked too frail and dependant to handle the storm outside. Maybe Marsha the druggie couldn't think straight, even though she suspected more deaths to come. But what about you? The window beckons...

-You want to leave the house *now* by sneaking out the window and running back to the road by yourself (97).

-You'd rather slip outside briefly and search Mrs. Keeble's body for clues to explain these deaths (19).

89

They chose to die here, and everyone but you and Kristin completely went along with the ghost story. Dominico inadvertently started a hysteria effect when he read the hateful graffiti. Paul's

suicide stemmed from pathology, evinced by the big scar on his head. But it sparked a panic. People seek patterns using confirmation bias and believe crazy things in stressful situations. Marsha probably overdosed, fearing her death would happen anyway. You posit this to Kristin who still looks sceptical.

"Well I think someone surveils us," she says, "like a show for sadistic elitists. Now come help me break up that stupid seance."

-You agree to help interrupt the seance and calm the others (42).

-You'd rather continue going over the theories (96).

90

Kristin believes some sadistic tycoon has incredibly small cameras installed to watch from afar and get off on your terror. You explain how they certainly wouldn't place any cameras here because the "cry child" writings would draw attention. Logically, the "designers" would make this part of the house as authentic as possible.

"Ah, good thinking," she says, a trace of her normal self returning. "Then let's tear apart a room upstairs. Most rooms should have cameras."

-You wish to help her find some of these cameras, if they exist (92).

-You'd rather question Dominico while Kristin searches upstairs (71).

91

The evidence exists, no matter how ridiculous the claim. The messages in the walls, a death each hour, one utterly unexplained. The ghost story seems right, at least to these superstitious folk. How can one blame them for feeling scared and finding solace? You explain this to Kristin, who looks askance.

"Come on," she says. "Think. Anything would make more sense than an angry 'ghost'. Suppose all this strange behaviour has a rational explanation; how would you explain it to the police?"

You do some on-the-spot theorizing. Kristin waits patiently for your thoughts. Turn to 89.

92

You and Kristin run upstairs. She singles out a bedroom "likely to have night vision cameras." After taking turns chopping, each wall and even parts of the ceiling lie torn open with piles of boards and insulation scattered about.

Exhausted and sweaty, Kristin sits on the bed she flipped over. You found no wires, cameras, or microphones.

In the pitiful lamp glow, you spot a dislodged nail with a square screw head. Why would they even make those? One side of the nail has "bedroom section, West" stamped in the old iron. Write this clue down.

Kristin obstinately presses the old-fashioned nail to the lamp glass, trying to find a lens down the tiny square hole. She tilts and rotates it endlessly, failing to see anything but depth.

"Maybe they designed this with a wireless camera deep inside," Kristin says. "They can make pretty small cams now. The whole house could have these...nail cams." She sighs and hands the mysterious nail back to you. "Oh, I don't know anymore."

Kristin buries her face in her hands. Then, she starts crawling around in the wreckage using moonlight by the window to see. You return downstairs with the lamp and thoroughly search

Paul's body, but find nothing.

-You'll sleuth for cameras in the basement (21).

-You want to discuss a new strategy altogether with Kristin (40).

93

You approach a large window, open it, and gaze into the cold sky. But nothing lies behind the house except more snowy fields. Wind charges into the already frigid dining room, flowing around your body easily as deer weaving through trees.

Rachel shivers, but says nothing. She cups her free hand over the lamp's glass chimney to protect the flame as it panics and jitters. Shadows dance over the pictures.

You close the window and gaze out the other. Black night, white lands. Nothingness.

"We can't escape him," Rachel drones, "not even by leaving the house. His spirit lives eternal through the mercy of God. But God too will find us and protect the faithful from the spirit's wrath."

Rachel draws near, and you feel the warmth of her person, or maybe just her clenched lamp.

"I never told you much about myself yet," she says. "Or even my full name—Rachel Rose Rogers."

Rachel sets the lamp on the dusty table and extends her hand for a quick shake.

-You consider yourself left-handed (12).

-You consider yourself right-handed (16).

94

You both lean on the window sill and leer out. But again, a muddy wall blocks the regular view of the fields. The upper floor hasn't sunk yet, and sunlight streams down. The whole house wobbles and groans.

Flummoxed and aghast, you go blank, your hypothesis crushed under the grumbling noise. For no amount of hysteria, fear, mass suicide, or strange behaviour can account for a house slowly sinking into the frozen earth.

Rationality melts away. Your mind drops on the floor and breaks like all the dining room pictures heard in some distant plane. Only a supernatural force could cause this—the hourly deaths, the doom in their faces, the futility of all you've done, the spectre pulling this house down to Hell itself. The cry child lives.

Yet the spirit showed mercy on you and Kristin. Your fight for the truth may have appeased him. Maybe forgiveness awaits the faithful.

Kristin rattles your shoulders and thrusts you against a wall.

"Come on!" she yells. "They want to incinerate everything underground." Then, she looks right into your eyes. "Look at all the clues you've collected. Look at them *right now*. Don't you see the pattern? What do they tell you?"

Only faith like steel can save anyone now. Maybe the bus crashed, and all this happens in some afterlife test of morality. Unless you can think of anything better to do, turn to 57.

95

Kristin takes your hand. Her tiny smile says she has forgiven what you've done in these awful circumstances. But then, she lets go and stares out the window.

"Does all this frighten you?" she asks monotonically. You don't have time to answer. "What

about the huge wealth people inherit today? Billions in any currency, total impunity, and no checks or boundaries on what they can do with it all. A complete sadist of a son or daughter gets the family fortune passed down without question. No one cares, and no one stops the money from falling into evil hands.

"This whole house...the land...crews of experts paid off to set it up and keep quiet...millions of dollars...all pocket change to someone. All worth it for whatever sick show they desire. *That* frightens me." She turns from the window, her face bleaker than anything outside. "Humanity hasn't explored everything scary yet. How much schadenfreude can a multibillionaire buy?"

-You mollify Kristin by helping her look for spy cams (92).

-You want to question Dominico (71).

96

You both jump. The clock chimes again, breaking off the debate. Kristin checks her little watch: two o'clock. The seance and your secret discussions went on longer than expected. After further discourse, though, she will only accept her own theory—that a billionaire paid some "designers" to set up tonight's predicament.

Upon returning to the living room, you and Kristin see the chanters conclude their seance. They smile and release hands. Rachel reaches into their circle to turn the lamp flame low. But Mrs. Keeble still grips the men's fingers hard like a gargoyle. Angus and Dominico finally pry their hands free, tilting the petite old woman until she falls over...

dead.

Rachel just smiles on, complacent as before. Kristin uses the inside of her elbow to suppress a scream. Angus gives Mrs. Keeble a shake, but she may have died anytime during the long-winded seance. You will henceforth act quickly and get more done before the next hour.

"We can't leave the body here," Angus says. "Guess I'll do the dirty work."

He drags the body out, and you hear the front door open and close. At least Mrs. Keeble won't stink up the room. Kristin yells questions but only gets shrugs or silence. Angus returns after several minutes, rubbing his palms on his jeans.

"Why don't we leave this place?" Kristin protests. "Let's all button up and take our chances on the road."

"The spirit will follow us," Rachel says, staring at the wall. "He may still show mercy if we convince him of our blessed nature. Those kids who partied here showed...disgusting contempt and disrespect." Her eyes dart around to the empty booze bottles in the corner. "The child's poor ghost could only scribble and scream silently in the walls. But now, we released him."

Dominico nods. "I believe it. And I want justice. Maybe we all deserve this, for things we did in life. I think the spirit will show us mercy, but only if we deserve it."

"What about you, Angus?" Kristin asks. "I can't just leave everyone here."

Angus shrugs. "I don't care. I really don't care anymore." He lights a cigarette and exhales a blue cloud at the ceiling in a prolonged sigh.

-You smoke or used to smoke (31).

-You never had the habit (4).

97

After your leap out the window, the snow that started this ordeal cushions your fall. You rise

and brush off your coat. But brushing off the guilt will take something more. *What about Kristin?*

Well, you did leave the window open. She'll figure it out. Kristin looks smart enough to follow your lead...if she has the time. But...to just abandon her...with those people...

Halfway to the road, your conscience balks the journey. If you currently have a romantic partner or spouse, then pick either option below. Singles *must* pick the first option.

-You have to go back and help save the others (36).

-Screw 'em. They can join you outside or die in the house (98).

98

You run far away from the house, trampling through the snow and gelid wind toward the road. Later, the tiny square of yellow light from the farmhouse window goes black.

The headwind soaks through like wetness; it reddens your face. The winter wear you brought to the trip up North won't do in this blizzard.

You reach the roadside where life has not appeared since the passengers left. The road remains buried in two feet of snow. Many hours will pass before daybreak. After that, the plow may or may not come. Staying out here, even in the trees across the road, could cause frostbite and hypothermia.

Pacing to keep warm doesn't work in this wind. The coldness eats you one layer at a time.

-You'll have to turn back and take your chances in the house (36).

-You will *not* go back there. Instead, you watch the house as morning breaks in case Kristin or someone else emerges (2).

99

You and Kristin stand on the recently plowed road, flagging down the first vehicle to come along. The van speeds past, nearly clipping the young woman at your side. She had ventured into the driver's lane to force the motorist to stop.

But he didn't. In fact, you saw the man purposely turn his head to avoid having his face seen. Kristin scowls and shouts after the driver, her straight hair kicking up in the wind. But the other passengers don't react...at all.

Kristin seems heroic, though *given the choice, you shouldn't follow her wild impulses*. Turn to 76.

100

Kristin will no doubt want to find a culprit behind all this, and you may decide to join her on this new adventure.

However, you still can't find veracity in her Reality Television for Elitists theory nor Rachel's supernatural explanation. Your own Occam's razor based idea seems more plausible—that these people have whipped themselves into a frenzy of fear, albeit a lethargic one. Marsha or even Angus could have supplied Mrs. Keeble and Rachel with enough hard drugs to overdose on. The empty pill bottle could have melted in the fireplace hours ago. All this over fear of possession by an angry ghost and a more gruesome death like Paul's. Mass suicides occurred throughout history over sillier matters.

But at least Kristin sounds compassionate enough to save the remaining passengers, no matter how deranged. And, she wants answers as much as you do.

She curtails the debate when Angus and Dominico go by. They had found some old tin buckets

in the basement, filled them with snow from outside, and placed them on the fire. In the twenty minutes you spent debating Kristin, the two had poured many buckets of melted snow into the little crow's-nest tub in the bathroom. The farmer also brought up a rusty axe and left it by the dismantled wall for more wood collection.

They carry Rachel into the bathroom, Dominico taking her shoulders and Angus the feet. The two gently lower her neck-deep into the outmoded tub. You and Kristin follow to watch.

"Aw, Lord," Dominico says, wiping his lined brow. "Someone has to do all the sprinklin' and say all the words. And I don't know 'em."

He looks to Angus, who shakes his head stiltedly. They both give Kristin an inquisitive stare.

"Guys," she says, "we shouldn't waste time with rituals, especially when we need that time to search for answers to all this. I mean, *what killed her?* I don't want to sound rude, but *come on!*"

-You should whip up a lie about your ability to perform baptisms, then usher everyone out for privacy in the ceremony (85).

-While they argue about conducting a mock baptism, you will slip back to the living room to root through Dominico's coat which he left there (61).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you enjoyed playing **Why Don't They Leave the House?** I really had to restrain myself from making events too disturbing. That said, I believe an artist should make every work a catharsis.

A person only lives and dies once. But seekers will seek, and readers must read. While *"you"* may only play once, the methods below allow for more chances to find the elusive section 101 and solve the mystery.

1-Play again as someone you know well, a family member or close friend. Act as that real-life person would, remembering not to play yourself this time.

2-For hardcore players, encourage someone else to play. Have that person report back to you on how the story goes. The winner may read section 101 aloud to you.

What will you find on section 101? A state of consciousness? A hidden message? Something required in real life? Reading every section from start to finish won't help in finding it, nor will writing down every clue. As in life, persistence and honesty will lead to the one good ending.