

Casey Pycior

Just a Gift Between Friends

Wanting to get out of his grandparents condo on Lake Hamilton, Morgan borrowed his grandfather's late model Cadillac and drove into downtown Hot Springs to try to find a place where he could be comfortable. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy spending the week with his grandparents, he just wasn't sure how to act around his family anymore. Although Hot Springs was an artsy town, it was still in Arkansas, and Morgan worried if he would fit in.

As he drove north up Central Avenue he spotted the Pancake Shop on the west side of the street and swung the big Cadillac into the nearest parking space. It was right on the main street so he was certain it wasn't the kind of place where you needed to be a regular. Looking forward to a relaxing breakfast, he got out of the car and bought a copy of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* from the machine in front of the entrance. When he opened the door to the Pancake Shop, the cowbell hanging from the inside handle clanked, and everyone in the diner turned and stared at him as he entered. It was probably only because of the cowbell, but he couldn't help thinking they were staring for another reason. In his faux vintage T-shirt, cargo shorts, and flip flops, he knew he wasn't dressed differently than any other nineteen-year-old college student, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being judged.

The sign just inside the front door told Morgan to seat himself, so he quickly scanned the room. There was only one man sitting at the counter at the back of the diner, but Morgan didn't like having his back to the rest of the room, nor did he want to sit at a table by the window—that made him feel like he was on display. He hurried, with his eyes on the floor, over to a small table for two along the south wall and sat down facing the counter.

After getting coffee and ordering the special—two eggs, two strips of bacon, and two pancakes—Morgan sat back in his chair and opened his paper. He found the crossword puzzle in the back of the Classifieds section and began working on it just as his breakfast arrived. Between bites, he worked through the puzzle to first find the easy three and four letter clues like "The Greek god of love," and "Once ___ a time." Reluctant to return to his grandparent's condo after he finished his breakfast, he put his feet up in the chair across from him and began working intently on the hard clues he'd

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skipped over. After ten or fifteen minutes, he was nearly finished, but one clue directly in the middle was giving him trouble. It was a nine letter word that began with “P” with the clue “performance.” He repeated the clue over and over, like he did anytime he was stuck.

“Have you tried ‘pantomime’?” said a voice from the counter.

Morgan looked down at his puzzle and saw that “pantomime” fit before looking up to find the source of the voice. The man at the counter turned on his stool to face Morgan and gave a little wave signaling it was he who had given the answer. “How did you know I was stuck on that one?” Morgan asked.

“It had me stumped too.” He turned so Morgan could see that he was working on the crossword puzzle as well. “I heard you mumbling to yourself over there, so I figured you might be stuck on the same clue. I guess I was right.” He took a sip of coffee. “Mind if I join you? Maybe if we work together we can get this puzzle hammered out?”

“Okay,” Morgan said, though he wasn’t sure what everyone would think, two men sitting together working on a crossword puzzle. As the man got up from the counter, he motioned to the waitress that he’d be joining Morgan. As he approached, Morgan moved his legs too quickly from the chair and banged his knees under the table, rattling the silverware and his coffee cup and saucer. Everyone in the Pancake Shop turned to stare again at Morgan. He let out a quick laugh and smiled. “Sorry.”

Morgan hadn’t even really looked at him until he was pulling out the chair and sitting down. Much older, the man was probably nearer his father’s age than his own, if he had to guess. He wore black Adidas wind pants and a tucked in gray polo. The top two buttons of the polo were open, which not only exposed some graying chest hair, but served as a place to hang his Oakleys, and on the left breast there was an insignia Morgan couldn’t make out. He reminded Morgan of a high school gym teacher, minus the whistle. Morgan liked how his thick, sandy blond hair was parted in a way that probably took some time to get right, but looked as if he’d just run his hands through his hair on the way out the door. He had a strong face—cheek bones, jaw line, and chin—but not rough or crude. It was refined, but not at a

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sacrifice to masculinity. The skin on his face was tanned, and the wrinkles in the corners of his eyes were one of the only things that gave away his age.

Morgan wasn't sure what to make of an attractive stranger, who wasn't wearing a wedding band, asking to sit with him. *Was it that obvious? Or was this just friendly, innocent Southern hospitality?* Morgan thought. Unused to dealing even with men his own age, Morgan was completely lost as to how to have an encounter with an older man, if that's what was happening.

"I'm Winston." He offered his hand.

"Morgan. Nice to meet you, Winston." Morgan shook his hand. The firmness of Winston's handshake surprised him; it felt like the beginning of an interview or some sort of business transaction.

"You're not from around here?" Winston asked.

"No, I go to KU up in Lawrence. Is it that easy to tell?"

"No, but I'm in Hot Springs a lot, and the people here just have a certain look about them. In a way it is easy to tell, but," he said and leaned in to whisper, "you should take that as a compliment."

"I will." When Winston relaxed back in his chair, Morgan smelled his aftershave lingering at the table; it was unmistakably Old Spice. Morgan would recognize that smell anywhere. Every man on his father's side of the family used it. His father gave him a bottle just after he began shaving when he was fourteen. Morgan tried it, but it never smelled the way it was supposed to on his body, though he still had the bottle stuffed in the back of his sock drawer.

"So," Winston said and crossed his legs, "what brings you all the way down to Hot Springs?"

"I'm visiting my grandparents for the week. They've got a condo on Lake Hamilton. It's free, so you know." Morgan shrugged his shoulders.

"It's important to spend time with family. But who am I to talk? I don't

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spend much time with mine.” Winston laughed. “I’m only home a couple months a year; the rest of the time I’m on the road. Have been since I was 18. It’s not the best situation for a family. My son, he’s about your age I’d guess, could attest to that, but my wife and I have an understanding. It’s the way it was when we met, and I told her this was how it was going to be.”

Though disappointed, Morgan tried not to let on. It was strange knowing Winston had a son who was the same age as he was, and he wondered what Winston’s son would think of him. Still far from certain, Morgan decided to take a chance, and said, “So, what is it that keeps you on the road and allows you to sit around all morning talking to strangers in, of all places, Hot Springs, Arkansas?”

Winston smiled. “I’m a regional scout for the White Sox.” He pointed to the Sox insignia on his shirt. “I’m down here because I got word that there was a high school shortstop I needed to see out of Little Rock who’s here playing in a tournament. So here I am. On weekdays the games usually don’t start until evening, so I’m free in the mornings to sit and enjoy breakfast and conversation with strangers, to answer your question.”

Morgan smiled, and for a moment gazed into Winston’s eyes, eyes such a light blue they looked like the color of smoke. Morgan looked down at his hands in an attempt to quell his nervousness, and asked, “So, how’d you get into scouting?” As he listened to Winston explain how he was drafted by the Brewers in ’83 and had played in the minor leagues for a couple of years before he tore up his shoulder, Morgan did his best to decipher Winston with the limited skills he’d acquired up until that point. Nothing added up. Winston’s age, his marriage, his son, baseball, the Old Spice, none of it added up to form the sum Morgan suspected and hoped Winston was. *It can’t be this hard to figure out who’s who*, Morgan thought. And he couldn’t help thinking about Winston’s son, wherever he was, and what he would think about his father sitting with him there in Hot Springs. Despite his confusion, and whatever the sum total of Winston’s parts, Morgan couldn’t help being caught up by the man sitting in front of him.

“I have a confession to make,” Winston said, interrupting Morgan’s thoughts, “I didn’t really care about the crossword puzzle. I just wanted to come sit with you.” It was as if Winston had again sensed Morgan was stuck

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on a clue in the puzzle and had tossed him the answer. Morgan held his gaze a moment then looked down into his coffee mug when he could no longer hold back his smile.

“You want to get out of here?” Winston asked, and before Morgan could answer, said, “How ‘bout we take a walk?”

“We can do that,” Morgan said, though it was as if he didn’t really have a choice. He felt he was just along for whatever ride Winston was taking him on. However, he knew his grandparents often took morning walks through downtown before it got too hot, and he wondered what he might say if he met them on the sidewalk. Who would he say Winston was, the father of one of his friends at KU? He wasn’t even certain himself.

At the register, Winston snatched the bill out of Morgan’s hand. “It’s the least I can do. I owe you for helping me finish the puzzle.” He handed the bill to the woman behind the register.

“But you helped me,” Morgan said.

“It’s all the same, the puzzle got solved.”

Morgan let him pay without further argument. He studied the face of the woman behind the register to see if she was going to let on she knew, but he found nothing on her face except wrinkles and fatigue. Morgan, happy to be taken care of, almost as if he and Winston were on a date, took a moment to admire Winston. He was a few inches shorter, which gave Morgan a different perspective than he had at the table. He watched as Winston, after having taken his American Express card out of his wallet, began tapping the card on the counter and slowly turning it in his fingers. It was a business credit card. Morgan wondered if he was simply an expense, but decided it was normal for people to pay for meals with their business account.

Sure that it would be obvious to everyone who looked, Morgan was apprehensive about walking with Winston along Central Avenue, Hot Springs’ main street. He worried that people might look at him and wonder what he was doing with a man old enough to be his father. But after tourists passed them on the sidewalk in front of the Pancake Shop and didn’t seem to

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notice, he realized that people probably thought Winston *was* his father. Though nervous and still unsure of exactly what was happening, Morgan couldn't wait for the older man to show him.

As they began walking down Central, Morgan asked, "When you're scouting, what do you look for in a player?"

"To make it as a professional, he's got to have more than talent. Talent only gets you so far," Winston said, his voice brighter. "He's got to know himself—what kind of player he is—before he can ever become the kind of player he wants to be. There's so much more about it than just the game."

"I always figured it was just if someone was a good enough player." Morgan was fascinated by how passionate Winston became when he talked about scouting.

"It's my job to 'read' the player, to see all the things about him that his coaches can't. It's not just if he's good—I wouldn't have been told about him if he wasn't—it's about his body type, if he'll fill-out, how he moves, if he'll be injury prone, and how he carries himself, both on and off the field. At this level, it's almost as if the baseball skills take a back seat to all the intangibles. My reputation as a scout is on the line every time I recommend a player, so I've got to be sure." Winston looked at Morgan walking next to him. "But enough about all that. How do you like Lawrence? I was just there this spring looking at a big left-hander from Lawrence High."

"I've only been there for about a year. I grew up in a small town up north of Kansas City, so it's been a change. I feel like I belong in Lawrence. I've never really felt that way with my family. I don't think I was ever the kind of son my dad wanted me to be. In a small town, if you don't play sports, you're nobody—no offense. I was content to be outside of all that, and my family didn't know what to think. But in the last year I've sort of recognized who I am, and now I fit in with them even less."

"That's what college is about, finding yourself and your place in the world. I think if a person worries too much about fitting in, they miss out on life."

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They stopped in front of *Romancing the Stone* and looked through the glass at the displays of all the jewelry, candles, wind chimes, and other goods from around the world, and Winston asked, "What are you studying?" Morgan looked at Winston's reflection in the glass next to his own. He wanted to reach out for Winston's hand, not only to feel it, but to see what that would look like to hold hands with a man.

"I haven't declared a major. I like the idea of getting a good job out of college, but I really just want to be inspired. Like when you talk about scouting. It's inspiring to hear someone so passionate about their job. That's what I want."

Morgan couldn't believe how easy it was to open up to Winston. If someone had happened by and overheard a piece of their conversation, they wouldn't have thought twice about it. It was so ordinary, but there was something about the way they talked. It was as if they were talking about much more than they were, and that made opening up effortless. Morgan never talked to anyone about his family, or about being inspired, but with Winston, it came easy. In their short conversation it seemed he had told Winston virtually everything, except what he had hoped was obvious. As they stepped away from their reflections their hands accidentally touched, and a shiver ran through Morgan's body.

They crossed Central in front of Bathhouse Row. Of the eight bathhouses on the east side of Central, only two were still open: the Buckstaff and the Fordyce. The Buckstaff was still a working bathhouse, and the Fordyce had been turned into a museum and visitor's center.

"Have you been in the Fordyce?" Winston asked, gesturing toward the ornate, three-story Spanish Renaissance Revival styled bathhouse. Morgan hadn't, so they walked along the shrub lined sidewalk, climbed the limestone steps, and entered through one of the heavy copper doors.

There wasn't anyone in the lobby, but Morgan could hear a few people talking; however, the way sound reverberated off the mosaic tiled floor and veined white marble walls and through the labyrinth of interconnected rooms, he couldn't tell how many or from where it was coming. There were old photographs of famous people—Franklin Roosevelt and Babe Ruth,

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among others—who had come to Hot Springs looking to vacation and cure what ailed them. It was a self-guided tour and a sign with an arrow pointed them where to begin.

“Shall we?” Winston motioned to the doorway that led into the men’s dressing room where the tour began. It was long and narrow, and the dressing stall doors were stained a dark brown. Morgan followed Winston through the dressing room and into the large, open, high-ceilinged men’s bath hall.

“Look at this,” Winston said, standing in front of the placard above one of the thermal baths. “It says here it was recommended that a person drink a glass of the 140 degree spring water to properly warm their insides before they get into the bath. I guess it was all about getting the body ready for the full immersion.”

“Wow,” Morgan said, though he wasn’t really paying attention. He walked across the room, past the Hernando Desoto fountain directly under the round, multi-colored stain-glassed ceiling. Normally he would have been fascinated by the opulence of the bathhouse and all the interesting facts, but it was hard for him to think about anything other than Winston.

“Can you imagine coming in here and seeing ‘the Great Bambino,’ a cigar in his mouth, his ass sitting in a Sitz bath?” Winston asked, his voice echoing.

“The Babe naked? I’m not really sure I’d want to see that. He wasn’t the most athletic of men, was he?” Morgan asked.

“No, but still, we’re talking about Babe Ruth here, ‘The Sultan of Swat.’ What a powerful man.”

From across the room, Morgan could see the childlike awe in Winston’s face from just being in a room that Babe Ruth once occupied. It was endearing and he couldn’t help admiring Winston. He blinked hard as if to take a mental snapshot of Winston standing alone on the other side of the open room. Then, Morgan strode toward him, his flip-flops slapping the tile floor, and with no words between them, kissed Winston full on the mouth. He had kissed a couple girls before, back in high school, and he expected a

man's lips to feel different, but they didn't. Winston's lips were just as soft as the girls' he'd kissed, softer even. He pulled away. He couldn't believe he'd finally kissed a man, in an old bathhouse no less. Winston cleared his throat. "Well," he said, his voice echoing in the room. He pulled Morgan to him and kissed him back.

As they stepped out of the Fordyce into the bright sunshine, Morgan noticed a slight stiffening in Winston's posture. He pulled his mirrored sunglasses from where they were hanging on his shirt and, as he stepped down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk, put them on his face. Morgan wanted to run away, but at the same time he wanted to fall into Winston's arms; though from the way Winston looked, he knew that wasn't an option. Morgan stood exposed, more so than ever before, and he wanted reassurance from Winston that he was safe. In the last year there were men he'd wanted to kiss, but they had been patient with him, and when the time finally came, he hadn't the courage to go through with it. This time, though, he'd finally done it, and he never would've guessed he'd feel the way he did. The simple act of kissing Winston had changed who he was as a person. The feeling was bittersweet; for better or worse he'd grown, and there was no turning back. He wanted to be held, to be told that everything was going to be okay and that he'd done the right thing. "Winston, I--"

"Look, this sort of thing happens all the time. Here's my card," Winston said, taking a card and pen out of his pocket. He cupped his hand under the card and wrote something on the back Morgan couldn't see. Morgan looked at himself in Winston's sunglasses, small and distorted, and wondered what he meant. "I'll be in the lobby until 9:00. After that, I'll be in my room. The number's on the card. See ya," he said, handing it to Morgan before walking back up Central toward the Arlington. Morgan watched Winston disappear in the shadows cast by the trees that lined the sidewalk, and he looked up and saw the Arlington looming over the end of the street.

Clutching Winston's card between his fingers, Morgan crossed Central and walked to where he'd parked his grandfather's Cadillac. He hurriedly got in, and, once the Cadillac's heavy door was closed, he looked at the front of Winston's card. It had a raised Chicago White Sox logo in the upper left hand corner and under it read: *Associate Director of Regional Scouting*, followed

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by Winston's contact information. Morgan turned the card over and saw that Winston had written neatly in all capital letters: "RM # 650—HOPE TO SEE YOU TONIGHT—\$1000. W."

It took Morgan a moment to understand Winston's message, but when he did, his stomach dropped. He put the key in the ignition so he could open the power window and get some fresh air. The thought of taking money appalled him, though he was unsure of the protocol for a situation like this. *Is this what he meant by, "it happens all the time?"* Of course, he'd heard stories about highway rest areas and city parks or airport bathrooms and how there was some sort of signal, but he wasn't that kind person, and he'd never heard of money being involved. *Certainly Winston didn't mean it that way.* It all seemed so easy to Winston. *Winston wouldn't have actually written it down on his business card if it wasn't the way it happened, would he?* Morgan began to think maybe it *was* the way it happened.

No one would have to know I'm doing it for money, Morgan thought as he stood alone at the crosswalk in front of the Arlington. *In fact, I'm not. I'm doing it because I want to. It just happens Winston wants to pay me. I didn't ask to be paid.* He looked up at the Arlington rising majestically above him. The lights from the street glowed a misty yellow against the buff brick façade that faced Central Avenue. *But a thousand dollars is a lot of money. It'd take me almost two months to make that much working in the library.* He looked across at the hotel guests enjoying their cocktails at the tables on the large veranda and waited for the signal to turn. Morgan couldn't completely shake his uneasiness about accepting the money, and he knew he could turn around and walk back to the car and he would never see Winston again, and no one would ever know what almost happened. Part of him wanted to run and hide and never have to deal with it, but part of him just wanted to get it over with, to finally know, to finally be sure. Then he thought again of the kiss. He didn't want it to be just a kiss with a stranger; he wanted more. If he was ever going to do it, this was the time. The lighted silhouette flashed telling him it was time to cross. *I want to do it. I'd do it even if he hadn't offered the money, so why shouldn't I take it? He's giving me a gift. "Can't it be just a gift between friends?"* he said aloud as he crossed the street.

He climbed the green and white steps and passed under the red, green,

and blue mosaic-trimmed loggia, doing his best to look casual. As he approached the doors, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass and wondered if he was dressed appropriately. All evening he had agonized over what to wear for an encounter such as the one he was about to have. He wore the nicest clothes he brought with him, khaki pants and an olive green polo—the ones he would probably have to wear again when his grandparents took him out to dinner on the last night of his visit—but he decided finally that what he wore didn't matter; it wasn't as if he and Winston were going to be going out on the town.

Spinning through the revolving door, Morgan was met with the mingling sounds of soft jazz—a song he'd heard, but couldn't name—and the voices of all the people in the lobby. The lights were dimmed, but the deep golden yellow paint on the walls reflected the lights and made the lobby glow. A raised seating area enclosed by a black railing took up most of the center of the open lobby, and to the right stretched a long bar. Behind it, recessed into the wall, a large floor to ceiling mural depicted, rather unrealistically, a jungle bursting with bright pink, orange, blue, and green flora, and a waterfall pouring over a cliff directly in the center of the painting. On the left side of the lobby, in an alcove directly across from the bar, stood the small bandstand. The jazz trio—guitar, upright bass, and drums—played, backed by a continuation of the jungle scene behind the bar. In this mural, however, half a dozen round faced monkeys peeked through the plants and trees of the multicolored jungle.

It wasn't crowded, but there were people sitting in the elevated center section, as well as at the tables surrounding it. Above, the second floor looked out over the lobby, and several people were sitting at the tables that lined the railing. Though it was unwarranted, Morgan again felt all the eyes of the lobby on him. It was like he had a sign around his neck that told everyone what he was about to do. Even the way the monkeys in the mural looked at him told him they knew his secret. Morgan wasn't sure if it was the heat from the hot springs across the street, the jungle theme, or his nerves, but he began to sweat. He started to walk quickly across the lobby to the elevators, but stopped, almost stumbled, hesitated a moment, then turned and walked to the bar. When the bartender asked what he was drinking, he said "Just a tonic," but as he did, the band finished the song and all the people in the lobby applauded. While the bartender left to make his drink,

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Morgan turned to watch the trio's interpretation of "Take Five." The bartender came back and Morgan pulled a ten dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it to him. He turned to the cash register, rang up the drink, and came back with three-fifty. Morgan hadn't thought his tonic would cost that much, but it was a fancy hotel, so he didn't think anymore about it.

He found a table nearest to the corner to hide from all the eyes he felt on him, and sat down. He took a gulp of his drink and nearly choked as the earthy taste of gin drowned his taste buds. The bartender must have misheard him; he'd been given a gin and tonic, which explained the price. Although it was mixed strong and tasted awful, it was crisp and seemed to calm his nerves the more he drank. In minutes, he had finished it. A cocktail waitress came by his table and asked if he wanted another, and he said yes. She was back with a fresh drink in no time. Morgan paid and told her to keep the change.

Sitting at the table, he watched as a ring of moisture formed on the table as his glass sweated. He hadn't wanted to stop once he got into the hotel lobby; he'd wanted to walk straight through to the elevators and up to the sixth floor to Winston's room. He didn't want to give himself the opportunity to have second thoughts, but there he was on his second drink. He thought again about the money, like he had on the drive downtown, and about how he could really use it for next semester. But thinking about the money soiled the whole situation for him. *Wasn't a person's first time supposed to be special?* He spun his half empty glass in the puddle of condensation that had formed on the table and watched as the lime wedge corkscrewed in the glass. As the glass slowly spun to a stop, he thought: *That's it. Money or no money, I'm doing this.*

Morgan finished his drink in a final gulp, the ice falling against his upper lip and nose so that he had to wipe his face after he set the glass back on the table, and stood up. He felt light-headed, but he wasn't sure if he had stood up too quickly, or if the gin had gone straight to his head. He walked with increasing steadiness toward the elevator. He pressed the button on the wall, and the two men behind the check-in desk looked at him as he waited. "I'm visiting a friend," Morgan said before he could stop himself. It seemed the gin had loosened his tongue. The elevator dinged, saving Morgan from saying too much, and the doors opened in front of him.

He stepped inside the elevator and quickly pushed the “6” so the doors would close and he wouldn’t have to ride with anyone. He prayed the elevator not stop on any other floors except the sixth; he didn’t want to give anyone a chance to get on, or himself the chance to get off. The elevator groaned as it began its ascent, as if it too knew what was in store for him on the sixth floor and disapproved. Morgan watched as the illuminated numbers above the doors slowly dinged by—2, 3, 4, 5—and as the elevator stopped on the six floor with a final *ding*, he nearly threw up. The doors opened, but Morgan didn’t move. He stood in the center of the elevator, looked out into the sixth floor hallway, and waited. The doors began to close. Morgan took a deep breath and stuck his foot out to stop the doors from closing. “I’m going to do this,” he said, and stepped out of the elevator.

The hallway stretched out before him on both sides. Morgan started to take Winston’s card out of his back pocket, but so intently had he studied the card, he had not only memorized the room number and what the card said, but he could recall where Winston had pressed harder on the card for certain letters and where, as he moved the pen over the card, a little bit of ink had trailed between the words. He turned to his right, and looking at the numbers on the doors, began slowly walking down the hall. So long was the hallway ahead of him, it seemed to extend and retract until he was able to focus his eyes, and the deep red plush carpet, while dampening his footsteps, had a repeating pattern that, mixed with the two gin and tonics he’d quickly drank, made Morgan dizzy. To stave off the dizziness, he focused again at the numbers on the doors. As they increased and the hallway got shorter, his vertigo subsided and in its place his stomach began to flutter and he felt physically light, like his feet were only barely touching the carpet. Finally, Morgan found himself at the end of the line, the very last door in the hallway, room 650.

He stood before the door and took a deep breath. He raised his arm to knock, and he knew that as soon as he passed over the threshold everything was going to fall away and nothing would remain as it was before. He let his knuckles fall against the heavy wooden door and waited.

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Born and raised in Kansas City, Casey Pycior earned his MA in Literature from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2007. Currently, he lives with his wife, Janell, in Wichita, KS, where he's an MFA student at Wichita State University.

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