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Watson's Boy

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...behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it....
— *Revelations* 3:8

[ONE]

His Keys.

HE CARRIES two hundred and thirty-five rings of keys. His father has constructed harnesses for him to loop over his arms, chest, and waist, upon which the keys hang. The harnesses consist of heavy canvas straps, oversewn and strung with hooks.

When he walks, the keys rattle upon his flesh, making his skin tingle. He tries the keys in the locks. The keys do not seem to fit the locks. He continues on, to other doors.

It once gave Brey particular satisfaction to run through dark hallways, the keys sounding against his body. Now he does not run, but lumbers. The increasing weight of keys stunts his movement, cripples his growth. He does not resent this — he does not realize it. According to his father's calculations, when Brey gathers five hundred keys the load will become too heavy. His spine will snap. His father suggests that he should stop at four hundred, and for that reason has equipped the harness with only four hundred hooks. Brey, however, has realized that each hook can be bent to hold two rings of keys. If he continues to collect keys, Brey will someday find himself lying on the ground with a broken back, calling for his father quietly, as if embarrassed.

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fect grids. Each hall between the intersections has ten doors upon each side. Each door is distanced from the next by two spans of Brey's arms — one and one half spans of his father's arms. The halls are lit by light bulbs hanging single and naked over the intersections. The bulbs are of various wattage, and expire periodically. In certain intersections, the halls are nearly dark, lit only by light bulbs four intersections distant. In other intersections, the halls are brightly lit, the polished floors glistening as if wet. There, the light bulbs are globes, larger than he imagines his brain to be.

The terminal wall is different. On the terminal wall, there are only doors on the inner side of the hall. On the outer side, in the place of doors, windows have been cut into the stone. The windows are filled with glass. The glass is black, opaque, but shiny enough that in it Brey sees his own ghost.

The hall ahead grows dark, the light bulb broken or missing. Brey travels by touch through the dim, unreeling his fishline. He has always been afraid of the dark. He counts ten doors, feels the wall sheer off before him.

He sets the reel of fishline aside. He eases down to his knees, sweeps his hands forward across the floor until they brush something. He fumbles a ring of keys from the floor, ticks off the keys upon it. There are seven keys. This is true of all rings of keys, an essential quality of rings of keys. He can count on it.

He returns, following the fishline back to the tenth door. He wraps the fishline around the handle of the door, sets the reel down on the ground. He follows the fishline backward, stopping before each door to try each of his seven keys in the lock.

The walls are rough. He uses them to scrape the dead skin from his elbows. He has not discovered either graft or joint in the wall. To Brey, the walls seem carved from a single block of stone. Perhaps his father would disagree.

The floors are smooth. Echoes rise from the soles of his boots. The walls and floor might be carved from the same stone, though the one

The keys seem as regular a fixture of the halls as the doors. They are covered with dust where the halls are dusty. They are free from dust where the halls are clean.

He does not know if the halls will continue to exist when all the keys are removed from their intersections. He experiments to discover if, once the keys are gone, the halls will disappear. Perhaps, he believes, they will vanish from around him, allowing him an infinitely open space.

The discovery of a set of keys invokes in him a series of gestures. He picks up the keys. He examines them, assures himself that they resemble the other keys he has found. He hangs the keys from a hook of his harness, then returns to his rooms, trying the new keys in the familiar doors along the way.

If keys exist, doors must exist which they will unlock. Such is the nature of the key. Such is the nature of the door.

He has travelled through two hundred and thirty-six intersections and in the center of each has found keys. He does not know how many intersections exist. He has reached one outer, terminal wall, beyond which he cannot progress. For this reason, he suspects that the halls are not infinite.

His father thinks differently. "Everything is a passage," he says, "though not every passage leads somewhere."

His father has never been wrong. Brey tries to push his way through the terminal wall. The wall seems solid, essential in every regard. His fingers find no passage. He gives up.

His father instills within Brey his respect for keys. His father tells him:

"The keys are in the hallways, at every intersection. I have never collected keys. If you collect them, I shall be pleased. If you choose not to collect them, I shall not question your choice."

His Hallways.

The floors of his halls are polished, black stone. The walls are rough, gray stone, as are the ceilings. His hallways are extensive, forming per-

is polished while the other is not. Why one might be polished and the other not, Brey cannot guess. For him, they may as well be different types of stone.

Brey was born in the halls, as was Brey's father. What occupied the halls before them, Brey cannot say. If Brey's father knows, he keeps it a secret, perhaps for Brey's own good. If his father knew and if it were important, Brey knows his father would tell him. Brey does not need to know.

The Doors in His Halls.

The doors in his halls are all locked. They seem to him identical. He has measured himself against the doors. The doorways are large enough to admit him, but little larger. There is a handbreadth of space to either side of his shoulders, two handbreadths above his head. His father, on the other hand, must stoop to fit within the doorframe.

The doors are made of unvarnished wood. Four of the doors are unlocked. All of the other doors are locked. Excepting the bedroom door, the doors which are unlocked hinge inward. The hinges lie hidden, cradled in stone.

He feels his way along the dark hallway. He stops to lean against the wall. He disentangles the fishline from around the door handle, heaves up the reel.

He carries the reel with both hands, resting it against his thighs. The weight of it digs the keys into his legs. He travels forward, unspooling the fishline.

He drops the reel. He kicks the keys out of the intersection, nearer to the wall. Bracing his body against the wall, he squats down, steadying one hand upon the reel. He takes the keys from the floor. In standing, as his father has taught him, he looks up at the ceiling. The purpose of this, Brey does not know.

Sick, Brey feels the weight of the keys. The hallways are cold. He drags his shoulders and face along the wall, shivering.

He drags his face too heavily. His skin abrades, breaks, bleeds, old scars splitting back.

Brey would be handsome, but his face is scarred. He would be handsome had not his growth been stumped by the keys. Brey would be handsome, if the word had any significance for him.

Brey's father never carried keys. His face once was smooth. He was gathered up to a colossal height.

Now he is old. His face is puckered and wrinkled. His back is stooped. But he is still taller than Brey.

Brey turns accidental circles in the dark hallways, reversing his course. He reaches a previous intersection whose keys he has removed. He leans against the wall, catching his breath.

He feels the floor for keys. He finds nothing.

He keeps stooping, keeps searching.

"Father?" he yells. "Father?"

He carries three hundred and fifty-seven pounds of keys upon his body. If he falls to the ground, he will find it difficult to rise. If he is injured in the fall, he will lie upon the ground until he starves or until he thinks to remove the keys so as to stand.

He stumbles across the intersection, strikes the opposite wall. Leaning against the wall, he moves forward. He counts doors as he passes them, continuing toward new intersections.

Of doors, there are two possibilities. Perhaps the doors were made at the same time as the halls. Perhaps the doors were cut later. There is no evidence to allow Brey to favor either one hypothesis or the other. But he prefers the former.

His Room.

The frame of his bed stands beside the door. His body is too heavy for it. Next to it is spread a palette. He sleeps upon the palette in clothes and keys, adjacent to the frame.

His bed frame rises into a rickety canopy. Shredded fabric hangs from it, seemingly held together by cobwebs and dust.

On the opposite side of the room are a broken chair, a desk, and several notebooks. Each notebook begins with a single map of the hallway which he has explored. Following are scores of theoretical maps, numerous postulated sets of hallways.

His walls are bare. In the ceiling is a bank of twelve light bulbs, cradled in a depression of stone, bulbs abutted one to another. Five of the light bulbs have failed, two during Brey's lifetime. Brey will never forget the drama of those moments. The remaining light bulbs stay lit while Brey is awake, switching off when he lays down to sleep. The mechanism that regulates the light remains obscure to him.

Attached to the desk is a strand of fishline which wraps around the leg of the desk four times before being tied off. The line runs out under the door, down the hall, through empty intersections, toward the terminal wall. The line is neither taut nor loose.

He sits cross-legged upon his palette, pouring over his maps. All the maps partake of the same design, making it difficult to distinguish one map from another. If Brey's imagined maps were not clearly marked, he would find it difficult to distinguish them from his real map.

His imaginary maps contain imaginary keys in each intersection. All maps are gridwork. All are recorded on equally sized sheets of squared paper. The only difference between them is where Brey marks the location of the terminal doors.

The terminal doors are recorded on the imagined maps but have not yet been discovered in the hallways. The terminal doors exist on terminal walls, breaking the succession of blacked windows. The terminal doors stretch to the ceiling. They are two large, varnished doors, locked together. No light departs through their bottom crack. Some little light comes through the locks, outlining them, suggesting that something exists beyond. An eye to the keyhole, Brey believes, would reveal only an elaborate gearage.

The terminal doors must lead out of the halls. Otherwise Brey would not call them "terminal."

Perhaps through the terminal doors lies another set of hallways, organized according to principles of which his own halls are merely a shadow. The terminal doors exist: they have been discovered on all maps, excepting the actual map. Thus, they must eventually be discovered on the actual map. Thus, reasons Brey, they must be discovered in the halls themselves.

Before he collects all the keys, he hopes to find the terminal doors. When he finds them, he will attempt to escape through them.

Perhaps the terminal doors are hidden in a dark section of hallway. Perhaps he has walked by them, pressed against the opposite wall, again and again, unaware.

He returns to his room to find the door ajar, his father standing over his desk, thumbing through his map books.

"Brey, will you explain what these are?" says his father.

"Notebooks?" says Brey.

"You know what I mean," says his father.

"Maps?" says Brey.

"Maps?" says his father, crumpling them. "Maps of what, Brey? These are useless."

His Parents.

His parents live in the room adjacent to his own. They are withered of skin, but not of mind. They are the source of all his knowledge. His mother never leaves the room. His father rarely is to be found in the room. He wanders.

Brey has wrapped his mother's body with strips of sheets to protect her from rats. He has done thus at his father's request. Brey has never seen rats. He has read about them at length, and has learned about them from his father. His father wanders the halls looking for evidence of the rats.

"The rats," his father confides, "exist! I have seen them, Brey. Someday they will return to these halls."

Brey has not seen the rats. He has seen drawings of rats in his father's books about rats. He believes in the rats, though he has not seen them. He trusts his father.

"Your mother and I have killed rats," says his father. "Someday they will return for me or for your mother. I am still capable of running from them. Your mother is not. If she is disguised in sheets, however, they might pass her by."

If the rats do discover Brey's mother, they might find it difficult to chew through her wrappings. It might take them long enough to chew through the sheets that they would choose instead to search out other bodies. Brey's body, for example, or that of his father. Brey's father can run from the rats. Brey can lumber from them. If he is not fast enough to escape, his keys might still protect him.

Even if the rats chew through his mother's sheets, they will chew through at only one spot. The rats will stream into his mother through the single hole, eating the body hollow. If Brey surprises the rats, he will be able to sew the hole shut. The rats will be trapped. They will suffocate within his mother.

No one shall wrap Brey in sheets when he grows feeble. There is nobody to do it. He will be easy prey to rats.

When he approaches death, he will hang himself from one of the light fixtures in the hallway, out of reach of the rats. Perhaps he will collect enough keys that his entire body will be covered, armored against rats. A smart rat, however, will snout past the keys.

The wrapped feet of Brey's mother hang over the edge of her bed. His mother says little, almost never speaking directly to Brey. His father claims, however, that she asks about him often. That she is concerned about him.

His father tells him things about keys, about halls, nothing else. His father says this of the keys: "There are two ways to get the keys: you can collect the keys or you can wait for them to collect you. I have done the latter. The keys have not come. I have no regrets—there are things more important than keys."

His Knowledge.

His mother tells him little about herself. He knows that she has always been in these halls, little more. His father is modest, speaking seldom of

his own accomplishments. He knows of his father no more than he can gather from his father's commentary on rats, halls, keys. There are only stories of rats, elaborate rat traps, his father's refusal to collect keys: "If I had it to do again, I would change nothing. I do not believe in regret. Nevertheless, I wonder if you should reconsider your own course."

His knowledge of his father lies in his father's drawings and poems. His father has mentioned thousands of drawings, of rats. Brey has found only a single sheet of paper with two ink drawings upon it, plastered underneath the sink. The lines are faint, but the shapes of rats are still trapped there.

Often, Brey himself traces rats on the table with his fingers. In this, he considers himself his father's child.

He has torn pages from his notebook and drawn pictures of rats upon them, leaving them scattered through the intersections for his father to find. The drawings have disappeared, but his father has never said anything about them. Perhaps the drawings are good enough that Brey's father thinks they are his own. Perhaps the rats find them first, destroying them.

His father's poems are in a slim volume labelled *Homage to Brey: (He Has Chosen to Collect Keys)*. His father said nothing to Brey of the book's existence. Brey discovered it in his parents' room while his father was wandering, his mother asleep. The book was wedged between the headboard and the wall. He slid the book from its hiding place, apparently without his mother and father's knowledge, and conveyed it into his room to hide under his palette. At times, as he sleeps, he thinks he feels the shape of it beneath him. His father has never mentioned its absence.

There are forty-six poems in the book. Brey knows they are poems because below each title is written the words "A Poem." Since he has stolen the book, Brey does not dare discuss the poems with his father. The poems are about rats. None of the poems scan. None rhyme. Nonetheless, Brey is moved. He is secretly proud of his father.

The halls contain myriad sounds. He has the sounds of his boots in the halls, the echo of his fists upon the windows, the jangle of his keys, the

drip of his water, the hum of his light bulbs, the sound of his father's footsteps, fading. When a light bulb expires, the light sputters and offers an ecstatic sound, much rarer. Then a hall falls dark, silent.

At times there is the sound of his father's voice in the halls. In the past, his mother's voice as well. Now his mother's voice does not leave its room.

His father never says: "I have written poems, and this is what they mean."

His father says, "Brey, I am not here for your benefit. I am your father, but I am other things besides a father. I will help you as I can, but I will not sacrifice myself to you."

His father says, "Let's speak frankly. Do you think collecting keys is the best choice for you, Brey?"

His Kitchen.

His kitchen is a room panelled in white plastic, panels stretching from ceiling to floor. Where two panels meet, a metal strip covers the crack. The walls, when soiled, can be wiped clean with damp cloth.

Each sheet of the wall hides a pantry. To reveal the pantry, one must grasp the metal strip at a designated point, pulling outward. The pantries are expansive. There has always been enough food for Brey and for his parents.

His father says of the stove in one of his poems, "Once it was a great truth." What this means, Brey does not pretend to know. He is not privy to the truths of a stove.

The faucet handles of the sink have sheared off, but the gaskets remain relatively intact. Water drips slowly from the cracked spigot. Beneath the spigot, Brey has placed a pewter cup. When it fills with water, he pours it into a canteen.

It takes several hours for the cup to fill. As his journeys through the halls become lengthier, the cup sometimes overflows and water is lost. He collects a cup of water when he leaves to walk the halls, a cup when he returns to sleep. He does not know if his father and mother drink from his cup while he is gone. Brey is not dying of thirst by any means, yet he is often thirsty.

There is a table in the kitchen. Under the table is a paper sack. When the sack is full of garbage, Brey surreptitiously dumps it into one of the hallways.

On the table are stacked four books: *The Rat*, *Rats: All About Them*, *Our Friend the Rat*, and *How to Build a Better Mousetrap*. His father's name has been written inside each front cover, though Brey has had the books as long as he can remember.

Brey has read these books, studying the pictures carefully. He knows the rat. He is prepared.

His Tiles.

The floor of the bathroom is covered with thousands of identical square tiles. Brey has transformed this floor into a map, placing scraps of cardboard at the intersections of the tiles. He has found one hundred and twelve sets of keys traveling to the terminal wall, one hundred and twenty-nine more traveling along the terminal wall. Assuming that the halls form a quadrangle, there are a minimum of fourteen thousand four hundred and forty-eight sets of keys in the halls. Of these he can expect to collect five hundred – approximately three and one-half percent.

He wets his finger in the bowl of the toilet, rubs it against his skin. Dirt and dead skin flake away. His father continues to warn him against using the toilet in this fashion. "Sanitation, son, is not a game." Brey sees no alternative.

His Windows and Walls.

His windows line the terminal walls. They are textureless, black, opaque. He has tried to scrape their darkness away with his keys. The keys slip from the glass without leaving a scratch.

He pounds on the glass with both fists. When he strikes the glass, it vibrates. The vibration is not unlike the sound of his boots striking the floor.

He stops pounding, presses his ear against the glass. He hears nothing.

Brey has seen pictures of windows in his rat books. He has seen windows with rats nestling upon their sills. He knows the purpose of win-

dows. They are for rats to look through, a sort of transparent wall. When rats tire, they draw drapes.

He raises his hands to pound on the windows. He feels a hand on his shoulder. He lets his hands fall.

"Brey?" says his father. "Do you think that is wise?"

"Wise?" says Brey.

"Do you wish to attract rats?"

"Rats?" says Brey.

"Are you ready for them?" says his father. "Are you prepared? Brey?" he says. "Brey?"

His Fishline.

The fishline was the gift of his father. It is wound around a wheel-rimmed spool as thick as Brey's torso. The words "20# TEST PREMIUM FISHLINE: 21,120 FEET (APPROX. FOUR MILES)" are stenciled on both wheels of the spool.

Brey does not know what "miles" are. He has never heard not seen the word "feet" used in this sense before.

His father, explaining, says, "It is called fishline because it is fishline."

His father volunteers nothing more about fishline, only informing Brey that it is fishline. Brey masters this information, makes it his own.

He takes a ring of keys off his belt. Opening the ring's gate, he slips the fishline inside the ring. He hooks the ring back onto his waist.

The fishline whirs past him as he walks, slipping through the eye of the ring, a hiss beneath the clank of keys.

He walks down the halls toward the next set of keys. He picks away a half-scabbed cut on one hand, lengthening it, deepening it. He stops to rinse his hand with water from the canteen. The water drips onto the polished floor, separating into beads. Holding aside the keys that cover his shirt, he presses his hand against the fabric. He wipes the hand dry.

He passes empty intersections, enters dark halls. Light returns, then fades. He trusts to the fishline.

He reaches the last explored intersection. He finds his father there. "Hello, Brey," his father says.

He and Brey shake hands.

"Are you sure that collecting keys is the right choice?" says his father. "Are you prepared for every contingency?"

Brey nods, passes through the intersection. Beyond, the halls grow brighter still. He approaches the next intersection.

He hesitates, halts. Allows his eyes to adjust.

The intersection is heaped ankle-deep with dust. No keys are visible.

Brey hesitates. He turns away. The intersection behind him is empty, his father gone.

[TWO]

His Dust.

The dust meshes and thickens as it approaches the intersection, coming together in a solid sheet at the near edge, thickening as it moves in. He turns away, follows the fishline back the way he came.

His father absent, he consults his mother.

"Where the halls are dusty, the halls are full of dust," says his mother. This can hardly be disputed.

He waits for her to say more. He stands motionless at her bedside, watching her lips purse and relax as she breathes.

His keys rattle as he walks toward the door. He hears his mother behind, calling for his father. He opens the door and goes out, pretending not to hear.

In his room, pinned to the mattress, a note from his father:

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Father.

What ashes are Brey does not know. Dust he knows. Father he knows.

He tears a square of paper from a page of *Our Friend the Rat*. He drops it onto the tiles to mark the intersection.

On his written maps, he marks dust-filled intersections with the letter “d.” He marks dust on the original map of his halls. He does not mark dust on the other maps. He will wait and see.

His Father.

His father squats in an empty intersection, pushing Brey’s fishline about with his fingers. Hearing Brey’s approach, his father rises to greet him.

“How do you explain this, Brey?” says his father, holding the fishline pinched between two fingers.

“Fishline?” says Brey.

“Unspooled through the halls?” says his father.

“Collecting keys,” says Brey.

“Is that what fishline is for?” says his father.

His father stands twirling the fishline, awaiting a response. Brey takes his father’s arm, tugs him down the hall.

They stand next to each other, staring at the dust. His father moves to move his arm around Brey. Brey squirms away.

“This is dust, Brey,” says his father. “Similar to ash,” his father says.

He is on his knees in his parents’ room, crawling. He unwinds a strip of sheet from his mother’s leg, spreading it flat on the floor. He scrapes together the dust under her bed. He sprinkles it over the strip. Lifting the two ends of the strip off the floor, he shakes the dust down into the middle curve. He twists the strip into a purse, knots it closed, hangs it from a keyhook.

He starts to unravel his mother’s other leg. Beneath the strips her skin is mottled and cracked, weeping. She calls out weakly, as if injured. He unravels three broad strips from her legs and crawls away, her cries in his ear.

He soaks the strips in the toilet. He wraps three wet strips of sheet over his face, knotting them together behind his ears. The wet rags adhere to his skin. He gashes holes for his eyes. The top of one strip and the bottom of another strip join at his mouth. When he opens his mouth,

the strips part. When he closes his mouth, the strips join. Water gathers beneath his chin, dripping down onto his keys. Perhaps the water will rust the keys.

The dust thickens beyond the intersection, fingering the walls. The dust gathers thickly near the walls further down, bowing the floor.

From the edge of the intersection, a series of identical marks leads into the dust. The marks are staggered – right, left, right. They lie separated at an equal distance.

Each mark consists of two portions. The first is an elongated ovoid peaked at the front, flat at the back. The second, behind the first and separated from it by a narrow strip of raised dust, is a half circle.

He looks over his shoulder for his father. His father is not behind him. He squats down. With his hand, he wipes out all the marks he can reach.

He takes the bundled cloth from off its hook, unwraps it. Inside is gray dust, finer than the dust of the intersection. He pinches some yellow dust from the floor, sprinkling the dust onto the dust in the bundle.

Behind him, the sound of his father’s boots. He knots the bundle shut, stands.

“What happened to your face?” his father says.

Brey feels the wet cloth over his face.

“What do you have in your hand, son?”

Uncurling his fingers, Brey holds up the knotted rag.

“Are these your mother’s wrappings, Brey?” says his father, his voice rising.

“This?” says Brey. “She gave it to me?”

Brey unties the bundle with his teeth. Turning his father’s palm upward, he fills it with dust.

His father frowns. He opens his fingers, lets the dust trickle out. He brushes his palm against his leg. He takes Brey by the shoulders, turning Brey toward him.

Says his father, “Where did I go wrong?”

His Mask.

He steps deep into the intersection. Easing to his knees, he closes his eyes. He slides from one knee to the other, feeling the dust push up before him. He slides his hands in. He fans them over the floor.

His fingers cross something hard. He brings his hands together, feeling the dust billow. He picks up a ring of keys. He straightens his back and stands, moving sideways until he touches a wall. He opens his eyes.

The air of the intersection is dark with dust. His body and boots are coated and dull. The wet rags covering his face have thickened, the dust and dampness forming a paste.

He scrapes the paste from his mouth, folds the cloth back from his lips. He scoops up handfuls of dust, packs them against the damp rags.

He passes water near the wall, mixing a mud of urine and dust with his fingers. He packs his face thick with mud, smoothing it with his palms.

Around him, the dust now lies heaped and swirled. The marks are gone.

Dust to dust, perhaps, Father?

His face grows hard.

He opens the door to his room. His father sits on the palette, his knees gathered in his arms.

"About this mask, Brey," says his father. "Does it have any purpose?"

"Purpose?" says Brey.

"I thought not," says his father, rising.

He opens the door, but turns back.

"By the way, what did you mix with the dust?" his father says.

"Water?" says Brey.

"Water?" says his father. "Not water taken from the sink, Brey."

"Not the sink," Brey admits.

"Where else is there water? The toilet?" says his father. "Good Lord, son, take the mask off."

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She is asleep. He unwraps her feet, removes her slippers. She mumbles, curls her toes. He places the slippers over his hands, leaves the room.

He attaches himself to the fishline. Before reaching the spool, he leaves the fishline to turn down an unexplored hall. He does not walk far, only far enough to see that there is dust and to retreat.

He returns to the fishline, following it to the first dust-filled intersection. He crosses to the hall beyond. He bends forward, blows breath out of his plaster mouth. The dust before him displaces, leaving a cone-shaped depression. Perhaps, he thinks, air currents and breezes created the marks in the dust.

He kneels. He walks his mother's slippers into the dust. The slippers leave a single-part mark nothing like what he recalls of the two-part original marks.

The marks of his father's boots might be similar to the original. Or a rat could have made the marks, leaping zigzag down the hall. Two rats escaped his father: the marks which were to one side could have been made by one rat, the marks to the other by the other.

Brey does not know if leaping through dust is typical behavior for rats. He consults his rat books, but learns nothing. Brey does not know if leaping through dust is typical behavior for his father. He consults his mother. She does not respond.

"Collecting keys will not always be easy," his father has told him.

Yet his father claims never to have collected keys. How would his father know what is easy, what is hard? Does not Brey know more about keys than his father will ever know?

He struggles up from the palette and into the hall. Slowly, he opens his parents' door.

He bends down, lifts an old pillow from the floor. Holding the pillow in both hands, he approaches the second bed.

He brings the pillow down against his father's face. He pushes the pillow down. He holds the pillow down with both elbows locked. He waits.

Nothing happens. His father does not react.

He lifts the pillow away to regard the face. The face is blinking and serious, very much alive.

"I am concerned about you, Brey," says his father. "Perhaps justifiably."

Brey flees.

The Sounds of His Halls.

Lifting up the spool, he crosses the intersection. Dust adheres to the surface of his mask, streaks his hands and arms.

He drops the spool, stuffs a square of cloth into the mouth of the mask to filter the dust. He continues on. The cloth loses color as he breathes. The cloth becomes a protruding bloodless tongue.

The dust upon the walls dislodges, drifting in a fine mist. He drops the spool. He kneels. He moves forward, eyes closed, hands groping through the dust.

Faint sounds. He ignores them. He finishes with one door, moves to the next. The sounds continue.

The halls might be amplifying a lesser noise: a light bulb sputtering out, a drop of water striking the floor. If not, the sound might be the sound of rats.

His father claims the rats will return. There is no reason to disbelieve his father. He must take precautions.

He returns to his hall. He opens his parents' door. His mother lies in her bed. His father's bed is empty. As his mother turns her head toward him, he draws the door closed.

He breaks apart the frame of his palette. He forces splinters of wood into the crack of his parents' door until the door is wedged shut. He explains to his mother, yelling through the door, that he is doing this *for her own protection*. His father, he cries, *would do the same*.

He opens *How to Build a Better Mousetrap*. He consults a series of schematic drawings in Appendix B.

He unscrews the legs of the kitchen table. He makes of the tabletop a deadfall trap, propping up one end with a table leg. He compares

the drawings to the table, the table to the drawings.

He sets the trap before his door, baiting it with peach preserves. As an added precaution, he mixes shards of glass into the peaches.

He carries a table leg wrapped in cloth stolen from his mother's body. The leg is thick and heavy. The leg fits his hand awkwardly.

He stores several days' worth of food in his bedroom. His canteen is full of water as is his pewter cup. He soaks chips of wood in the toilet, forces them into the cracks of the kitchen door. He leaves his own door and the bathroom door unblocked. He will live in the first room, use the latter's toilet to dispose of dead rats.

Comes a knock at the bedroom door. He rolls off the palette, club in hand. The knock comes again, high on the door. He stands on tiptoe, presses his ear to the door. The knock comes again, slightly above his head.

"Father?" he calls.

There is no answer.

His father would respond to his call. His mother is shut in her room, her door wedged closed. That leaves only the rats. The rats have returned. They are leaping high, throwing their bodies against his door. He knows better than to answer.

The deadfall collapses. He hears muffled sounds, fading. He swings open the door, brandishing the table leg, baring his teeth.

Peach preserves have spurted over the floor. He lifts the tabletop off the ground. He peers under it. Nothing but squashed peaches. The rats have escaped.

He travels through the dust, unspooling the fishline. Dust billows up. He stops, listens for rats. He hears nothing. He continues on.

He squints his eyes, breathing through the cloth over his mouth. He drops to his knees, pushing his hands into the dust. He takes up the keys, stands. He gropes his way to the wall.

He returns. His mother's door is ajar, splinters of wood scattering the floor.

He raises the table leg. He kicks the door open.

His mother lies where he left her, unharmed. Beside her, leaning against the edge of her bed, is his father.

"Come here, Brey," his father says.

Brey hesitates in the doorway, club half-raised.

"This is not a game, dear Brey," says his father. "Am I understood?"

Brey nods. His father rises, takes the table leg from Brey's hand, throws it out into the hall. He raps his knuckles hard against Brey's plaster forehead.

"Brey?" he says. "Brey?"

He turns the tabletop upside down. He sops up the peaches, flushing them down the toilet. He unravels a strip of cloth from his mother while she sleeps. Dipping the cloth into the toilet, he uses it to swab the floor.

Perhaps he can strike a bargain with the rats. Perhaps a truce might not be impossible.

He screws the legs back into the table, but leaves the tabletop upside down on the floor. He ties the strip of cloth to a table leg as a white flag. He leaves three jars of peaches next to the flag, proof of his goodwill.

He is willing to offer the rats something in exchange for a little peace. He is willing to exchange something valuable for the right to collect keys. Even something of great value.

His father, for instance.

Limit.

Days pass. The jars of peaches remain. The rats do not come.

He tips the tabletop onto its side. He drags it over to block the bathroom door. The flag drags across the floor, turning gray. He unties the flag from the table leg, carries it to his mother, draping it across her calves.

There are keys to be collected. He has been told that he should collect keys. He will collect keys.

He is at the outer edge of the intersection, near the spool, holding a ring of keys. He follows the fishline back, trying the keys at each door, without avail.

*

He listens to his own footsteps. He stops abruptly. Behind him footsteps continue an instant, stop. Whirling around, he sees nothing.

He continues forward. Behind him, a light sputters out. He turns his head, peering backward into the fresh darkness. He feels the fishline vibrate. He starts to run.

He lumbers forward, crossing dusty intersections. He reaches the spool of fishline, stops long enough to heave it up and struggle on. The fishline plays out through his legs, shutting to and fro across the spool. On one side of the spool appears a strip of exposed wood, growing wider as the fishline plays out. He crosses three dust-filled intersections and enters clean halls. He stoops to pick up a set of keys, hurries to the next intersection. He plucks up another set of keys and lumbers forward, the keys hooked awkwardly over two fingers. He stumbles, breathing hard, shifting the spool's weight to one side, to the hand without keys in time to scoop up a final set of keys.

The fishline pulls stiff between his legs, spool growing solid before his thigh, drawing him up short. The line breaks, he is thrown forward. Keys jingling, he tumbles down.

Brey has run out of fishline.

[THREE]

Brey, at Rest.

He lies splayed near the spool. He rolls his body over, stares up at the ceiling. He lifts a hand to his face, tracing a crack running from the upper edge of the mask down to his eye. He draws a deep breath.

Perhaps it would be best to pretend to be dead. Perhaps it would be best to deceive the rats. Perhaps it would be best to wait until the rats approach his body, thinking it a corpse, and then kill them.

He has memorized the rat books. He has begun to think like a rat.

He hears the sound of footsteps at some distance. He lifts his head, straining to see through a mask gone skew.

"You are lying in the middle of the hall, Brey."

Craning his neck, he glimpses the upper half of his father.

"Me?" says Brey.

"Is there anyone else?" says his father.

"You?" says Brey.

"Lying down, for God's sake," says his father. "Is there?"

Brey looks across the level of the floor. He turns his head to the other side, looks. He turns back to his father, shakes his head.

"Get up," says his father.

Brey does not move.

"Don't be difficult, Brey."

His father straddles him, reaching down to slide his palms under his back. Straining, he drags Brey to his feet.

Brey lets his knees turn to water, refusing to support his own weight.

Grunting and staggering, his father hugs him to his side with one arm. He strikes Brey in the throat with his other fist. He bares his teeth, bites Brey on the ear.

He lets go. He moves back his bloody mouth. Shaken, the boy stands.

The moment his father is out of sight, Brey lies down. He is not afraid of rats. He is protected by his boots, his keys, his mask.

The only thing he fears for are his eyes. The eyeholes of the mask are large enough to allow snouts. As he kills rats, he must remember to shield his eyes with one hand.

He lies in the hall, alone. The rats are clever. They have not come. They plan to starve him.

He turns his face to the floor. He pulls himself to the wall. Bracing his hands against the wall, he rises to his knees, sways to his feet.

His bones are sore. His tongue cleaves as if his mouth were packed with dust. The keys hang heavy upon him. He can feel his father's teeth still clinging to his ear.

He gathers the scattered keys, hanging them upon his hooks. Leaving the spool on the floor, he follows the fishline back.

*

If the rats are waiting in the darker hallways, he can do little to avoid them. It would be safer to take another route back, but he will not leave the fishline. Despite his father's misgivings, he must keep to the fishline.

The path turns away from the terminal wall. He follows the fishline as it runs straight, turns, turns, continues straight, turns again. The path is not as he remembers it. Yet there are no keys in the intersections of his path. He is following the right path.

He continues. He stops when he reaches a dust-filled intersection. The dust was not here before. Perhaps the dust has been moved here. By the rats, to torment him.

He moves through three intersections filled with dust. He travels through each, stepping lightly.

He looks to one side. He sees that the intersections to either side of his path are free of dust. A second glance, and he sees that there are no keys in those intersections.

Logic: If he has not explored the intersections, there would be keys. If he has, there would be fishline. If not one, the other. Yet there are neither.

"Father?" Brey cries, turning circles. "Father?"

On Blame.

He waits in the middle of the hall for his father to come. His father does not come.

His father has lied. His father chose to collect keys. Otherwise, there would be keys in all of the intersections which Brey has not explored. His father has betrayed him.

Yet, suppose it were not his father but the rats?

Rats are collectors, according to Our Friend the Rat. If they discover a glittering object, they will bring it back to their nest.

Keys do not glitter, but they catch light. The rats might take keys for two reasons: a) the keys catch light or b) to persecute Brey. Nothing must be blamed on his father. Everything can be blamed on the rats.

But should it? Perhaps his father and the rats are working together against him, his father's hatred of rats a cover-up for his father's hatred of his son.

Brey will return to his rooms. He will return to confront his father, to force him to reveal the truth. This time Brey will not be easily satisfied.

His Desk.

Turning a corner, he comes to the end of the fishline.

In the middle of an otherwise empty intersection stands his desk, all the drawers missing but one. One of the legs has been gnawed off, the stump of it lying near Brey, the fishline wound around it.

He winds the fishline around his hand, reeling the leg to him.

It must have taken a vast number of rats to carry his desk through the halls. The two rats that have escaped his father have multiplied.

He opens the remaining drawer. Within, a canteen and three jars of peach preserves. His papers are missing, perhaps destroyed. He closes the drawer.

Leaving the desk, he follows the fishline out. Ten intersections later, he reaches the new end of his fishline.

He lifts it, examines it. The end of the fishline is neither stretched nor curled nor deformed. It has been cleanly cut. He has lost his rooms.

His Wandering.

He attaches one end of the shortened fishline to the desk. To the other, he attaches the broken desk leg. He holds onto the leg as he explores the halls, reeling and unreeling the fishline as if the leg were a spool.

The fishline reaches to a distance of ten intersections. He maps a roughly diamond-shaped area, ten intersections in each cardinal direction, less for those intersections which he cannot approach directly. He does not find keys.

Using a key, he scratches a map onto the surface of the desk. He codes "O" for intersections without keys, "-" and "I" for hallways. If he finds intersections with keys, he will record them with an "X."

He explores in every direction. He reaches the limit of his fishline. Within his range are no keys to collect, no new hallways, no terminal walls, no windows. He sits on the floor near the desk, eating the last of his peaches. His fingers are stained yellow, his mask glazed below the mouth. The crack in the forehead of the mask has spread wider, exposing the cloth beneath.

He licks his fingers. He stands and sets out, exploring again the same halls.

He chooses a direction, follows the fishline to its end. His father stands one intersection farther, well out of his reach.

His father cups his hands around his mouth. "Brey!" his father calls.

Brey lifts the desk leg up, shows his father the fishline attached to it. His father, squinting, moves a few steps closer.

"Where is the spool?" says his father.

"Cut," Brey says. "Rats."

"Are you sure it was rats, Brey?"

"Not rats?" says Brey.

"Whoever cut it did you a favor. You must leave the fishline."

Brey shakes his head.

"Come here, Brey," says his father.

Brey does not move.

"Who gave you life, Brey?" says his father. "Is that where I went wrong?"

Brey takes a step backward. He turns, flees. His father remains motionless, watching him run.

He takes hold of the desk and pulls. The desk groans toward him, listing toward the corner missing the leg. Walking backward, he drags the desk after him.

He pulls the desk into the next intersection. Unreeling his fishline, he explores the additional hallways he can reach from there.

There are no keys in the new intersections. He returns to the desk, scratching his findings onto the surface. He pulls the desk forward an intersection, sets out.

*

The desktop is covered with scratches. He humps the desk forward. He travels to a new intersection, this one filled with dust.

He closes his eyes. He drops to his knees, poking his fingers forward. He finds no keys.

He drags the desk forward one intersection, sets out. Beyond the first dust-filled intersection is a second. He drops to his knees, wades in. He stands, coughing, his hands empty. He returns to the desk, carves his findings into it.

A third dust-filled intersection and the dust ends. The next intersection is as empty of keys as all the others. As is the next, the next, the next.

He searches for his rooms. The halls are not infinite — he once reached a terminal wall. Eventually he must find his rooms.

He has nothing to eat. He has not slept. He pulls the desk forward.

Some of the halls are dark, others lit. None have keys. He travels with great speed when there are no keys to collect. The desk is covered over with interlapped marks which tell him nothing. He does not know where to scratch his next mark. He finds the space with the least number of other marks and scratches his mark there.

He has explored an unknown number of intersections in an unknown amount of time. Had there been keys in these intersections, his back would now be broken. But there have been no keys.

He unties the fishline from the broken desk leg. He opens the desk drawer. Empty peach jars are stuck to the floor of the drawer by their syrup. He breaks the jars free, their bases shearing off, leaving jagged circles of glass.

He puts the broken desk leg into the desk. He ties the fishline around his waist, decreasing its range by a meter. To compensate, he moves the desk a meter closer to the edge of the intersection.

The intersections are similar. None have keys. None have dust. None lead to his hall. He moves the desk forward. He keeps on.

*

His Keys.

He stands in an intersection, leaning slightly forward. The fishline is taut behind him. He takes a set of keys from his arm. He drops it onto the floor. The keys clink when they hit. *Clink*.

Leaving the keys in the intersection, he walks backward toward the desk.

Once there, he turns around again, returns to the intersection.

On the floor he sees a set of keys, the first in a long while.

The keys have returned.

His father sits cross-legged in an intersection. Brey touches his ear, hugs the wall, nods in passing.

“Still collecting, Brey?” says his father, reaching out to touch Brey’s arm.

“Collecting keys,” Brey says. He removes a ring of keys from his hooks, shows it to his father.

“Shall we be friends again?” his father says.

Brey hesitates, nods.

His father stands, opens his arms, moves forward. Trapped against the wall, Brey must meet the embrace.

He travels the halls, dropping keys in intersections. There are keys to collect now in every intersection. His load gets no heavier.

He collects the keys one set at a time. He returns, trying each key in each door.

Advantages: Brey is satisfied. The weight on his back will never increase. His back will never break. He will collect keys until he starves.

Disadvantages: He has not slept. He has no food, he has no water. He will never find his rooms unless he stops re-collecting the keys. He is as good as dead.

He collects keys, checks the doors, marks the map. The surface of the desk is mutilated. He runs his hand over the desktop. His palm comes away shot through with splinters.

*

As he walks, the fishline becomes entangled about his knees. His steps grow shorter. The fishline slides, slips down, spools loosely about his ankles. He shuffles forward, tottering stiffly from side to side.

Ahead lies a set of keys. He moves forward.

The line tightens. His ankles come together. He tries to continue forward. He sways. He stretches his hands toward the keys and pitches forward.

[FOUR]

His Back

His father never said, "Stay attached to the fishline." His father never said, "Someday you will run out of fishline." His father never said, "You must be careful – the fishline might become entangled around your feet."

There are many things his father never said.

What his father did say was, "Are you certain collecting keys is the right choice?" Brey is not certain.

He shakes his head. The shards of plaster still clinging to the cloth click together. He eases himself over to his back. He tries to move his legs apart, finds them bound together.

He lies on the ground, body still. He stares at the light bulb.

Slivers of plaster scatter the floor. He raises his broken face. His father's face leans into his own, warmly. His father tugs on the rags covering his face, tearing free a shard of plaster. He turns the shard in his hand, flicks it aside.

"What has happened to your face, Brey?" asks his father.

Brey turns his face away. He father reaches out, cups his son's chin in his palm. He forces his son's face to look at him.

"Stand up, Brey," his father says.

Brey does not stand. His father grabs the straps of his harness. His father heaves on the straps, raises him slightly off the floor. Brey stiffens his body. His father lets him fall.

Moving back a step, he kicks Brey in the temple. Brey grits his teeth.

His father stoops, inspects the side of Brey's head, caresses his temple. He rises, takes Brey by the boots, drags him down the hall. Brey bends his knees, kicks them swiftly into his father's stomach.

His father lets go, stumbles bent and staggering. He stands wide-legged above Brey, catching his breath.

"This is for your own good, Brey," says his father.

Grabbing his straps, he drags Brey down the hall. Brey digs his fingers and heels into the floor, shaking his shoulders until his father releases him.

"I have given you slack, Brey," says his father. "But too far is too far."

His father kneels. He removes a set of keys from Brey's hooks, casts it aside. He removes another, casts it aside. Another, another, another.

He continues to remove keys until Brey bites his hand. Cursing, his father rises, departs.

Comes a pressure on one side of his face. He does not move. A shape crosses his eye, rubbing against the eyelid. It moves to cover the other eye. Where it touches his face, it is warm, soft. Covered with hair.

Rat.

He struggles to move his legs. His legs are bound in fishline. They do not move. He tries to lift his head but the rat is too heavy. He twists his neck sideways. The rat claws at cloth and shard, sliding off his face.

The rat squats close to his face, cheeks asquirm. The tail is bare. The feet are grayish pink as are the eyes. The body is covered with matted grey hair. The head tapers to a blunted snout. Below the snout, the tips of two teeth.

The rat clambers up the bridge of Brey's nose, onto his temple. Brey moves his head slightly. The rat slides off in a heap. The rat sniffs his face, clambers atop his head. It sits upon his ear.

He slowly lifts his arm. He moves his hand up his body. He touches the rat's tail. He brushes his palm over the rat's body to touch the head.

He curls his fingers in a basket around the rat's head. He tightens

his fingers until the knuckles whiten. The rat sucks at his hand, breathless, scrabbling and clawing the side of his face. It entangles its claws in cloth and plaster. His fingers tigten.

He opens his hand. The rat slides off his face and onto the floor, quivering, its eyes floating and misdirected. He rolls onto his side, carefully knotting the rat's tail. He ties a double knot, leaving a slight loop. He forces the loop over a hook on his harness, hanging the rat as if a set of keys.

The rat lolls off to one side, its neck twisted, its head lying turned against the floor.

He stares at the light bulb until it is blotted out. His father stands above him, dark-faced, head surrounded by a fiery nimbus of hair. His father holds the rat's tail pinched between thumb and forefinger. He dangles the rat in the air.

"Your idea of a joke, Brey?"

"Joke?" croaks Brey.

"No joke?" says his father.

"Rat?" says Brey.

"Rat?" says his father, hooking the creature back onto Brey's chest. "Where?"

There is his father, lifting him, lifting him.

For His Own Good.

A bank of twelve lights in the ceiling, five of which have expired. He turns his head. He sees that he is lying on a mattress. Four walls, a single door. He has escaped the rats.

No doubt, the rats will find him. Yet, before they arrive, he will devise traps. He will bait the traps with peach preserves, using fishline to set them. He has thought of several good traps. There are more traps than the deadfall — traps that *How to Build a Better Mousetrap* does not cover, traps that the rats will not know to avoid.

The dead rat hangs from a hook on his chest, beneath the sheet that covers him. He will get out of bed. He will draw a picture of the rat. He will flush the rat down the toilet. He will find his fishline and knot the

pieces together, so as to continue to collect keys. He will not collect keys until the rats are dead, but he will collect keys.

The sheets cling tightly to him. They are tucked under his body. He rocks back and forth until the sheets loosen. He frees his hands.

He rolls over onto his side, looks over the edge of the bed to see on the floor below a mound of keys.

He feels his body. Except for the rat, the hooks are empty.

He rolls his legs out of the bed, brings his feet to the floor. He pushes his body upright, steps away from the bed. Without keys, his movements are awkward and extreme, his balance tenuous.

He rests one hand against the headboard for balance. Reaching down, he untangles a ring of keys from the pile and hangs it on his harness. He takes another ring, and another, and another, the heap beside him diminishing, his body growing hard under the weight.

He falls into bed. He pulls the sheet up to his neck. The door opens.

"How are you feeling, Brey?" says his father.

"Feeling?" says Brey.

His father shakes his head. His father comes to the edge of the bed. His father leans over him. He leans down into Brey's body. He presses his mouth to Brey's mouth.

Brey tastes the taste of his father taking away his breath.

His father is all powerful. His father is a myriad-minded man.

Brey will be lucky to survive.

