Session 1

Journal Entry: THE TRACKS

*I killed my brother with a penny. Simple, benign, and perfectly believable.*

*It happened at the tracks. Because, as life would teach me in the years to come, a speeding train was many things. Majestic, when it blurred past too quickly for the eyes to register anything but streaks of color. Powerful, when it rumbled underfoot like an impending earthquake. Deafening, when it roared along the rails like a thunderstorm dropped from the heavens. A speeding train was all these things, and more. A speeding train was deadly.*

*The gravel leading up to the tracks was loosely packed, and our feet slipped as we climbed. It was evening, close to six o’clock, the usual time the train rolled through town. The bottoms of the clouds blushed with a dying crimson as the sun settled under the horizon. Dusk was the best time to visit the tracks. In broad daylight, the conductor might spot us and call the police to report two kids playing dangerously close to the tracks. Of course, I made sure that scenario had already happened. It was essential to my plan. Had I killed my brother the very first time I brought him here, my anonymity in this tragedy would have been paper thin. I needed ammunition for when the police came to question me. I needed to create an irrefutable history about our time at the tracks. We’d been here before. We’d been seen. We’d been caught. Our parents had been informed, and we had been punished. A pattern had been developed. But this time, I would tell them, things had gone wrong. We were kids. We were stupid. The narrative was flawless, and I would later learn that it needed to be. The detective who would look into my brother’s death was an onerous force. Immediately suspicious of my story, he was never truly satisfied with my explanation of events. To this day, I am certain he is not. But my version of that day, and the history I had created, was watertight. Despite his efforts, the detective found no holes.*

*Once we made it to the top of the embankment and stood next to the tracks, I fished two pennies from my pocket and handed one to my brother. They were shiny and unblemished but would soon be thin and smooth after we placed them on the rails for the roaring train to flatten them. Dropping pennies onto the tracks was an exciting event for my brother, who had never heard of such a thing before I introduced him to the concept. Dozens of other flattened pennies filled a bowl in my bedroom. I needed them. When the police came to ask their questions, the collection of pennies would serve as proof that we’d done this before.*

*Far out in the evening, I heard the whistle. The faint sound seemed to catch in the clouds above us, echoing in the bloodshot cotton balls. The evening was darker now as the sun melted away, grainy and opalescent. Just the right mixture of dusk for us to see what we were doing but not enough to betray our presence. I crouched down and placed my penny on the tracks. My brother did the same. We waited. The first few times we’d come here, we placed our pennies on the rails and ran back down the embankment to hide in the shadows. But soon we discovered that in the evening no one noticed us. With each venture back to the tracks, we stopped running when the train approached. In fact, we crept closer. What was it about being so close to danger that filled us with adrenaline? My brother had no idea. I was quite certain. With each successive trip, he became easier to manipulate. For a moment, it felt unfair—as if I had stepped into the role of bully, a role my brother had mastered. But I reminded myself not to confuse efficiency with simplicity. This felt easy only because of my diligence. It felt easy only because I had made it that way.*

*The train’s headlights came into view as it approached—first the top light, and soon after the two ditch lights. I crept closer to the rails. He was next to me, to my right. I had to look past him to see the train’s approach. He was aware of me, I could tell, because when I crept closer to the tracks he matched my movements. He didn’t want to miss out. He didn’t want to allow me more bragging rights or a greater surge of adrenaline. He couldn’t allow me to have anything that he could claim as his own. It was how he was. It was how all bullies were.*

*The train was nearly upon us.*

*“Your penny,” I said.*

*“What?” my brother asked.*

*“Your penny. It’s not in the right spot.”*

*He looked down, leaning slightly over the tracks. The roaring train barreled toward us. I took a step back and pushed him. It was over in an instant. He was there one second and gone the next. The train roared past, filling my ears with thunder and turning my vision into a blur of rusted colors. The train produced a current of air that pulled me a step or two to my left and sucked me forward, willing me to join my brother. I braced my feet in the gravel to resist the tug.*

*When the last car passed, the invisible grip released me. I staggered backward. My vision returned, and quiet filled my ears. When I looked down at the tracks, the only thing left of my brother was his right shoe, strangely standing upright as if he’d slipped it off his foot and laid it on the rails.*

*I was careful to leave the shoe untouched. I picked up my penny, though. It was flat and thin and wide. I dropped it in my pocket and headed home to add it to my collection. And to tell my parents the terrible news.*

I closed the leather-bound journal. A long tassel hung from the bottom, keeping my place for the next time I read from it during a session. The room was dead quiet.

“Are you shocked?” I finally asked.

The woman across from me shook her head. Her demeanor had not changed during my confession. “Not at all.”

“Good. I come here for therapy, not judgment.” I lifted the journal. “I’d like to tell you about the others.”

I waited. The woman stared at me.

“There are more. I didn’t stop after my brother.”

I paused again. The woman continued to stare at me.

“Would you mind if I told you about the others?”

She shook her head again. “Not at all.”

I nodded my head. “Excellent. Then I will.”

Westmont Preparatory High School

Friday, June 21, 2019

11:54 P.M.

A fingernail moon floated in the midnight sky, its tarnished sheen intermittently visible through the foliage. The moon’s erratic presence penetrated the interlocking tree branches with a pale glaze that painted the forest floor in the lacquered finish of a black-and-white film. Visibility came from the candle he carried, the flame of which died every time he picked up his pace and tried to jog through the woods. He tried to slow himself, to be careful and deliberate, but walking was not an option. He needed to hurry. He needed to be the first to arrive. He needed to beat the others.

He cupped his hand in front of the candle to protect the flame, which allowed him a few uninterrupted minutes to scan the forest. He walked for a few yards until he came to a row of suspicious-looking trees. As he stood perfectly still and scanned the tree trunks, looking for the key he so desperately needed, the candle’s flame expired. There was no wind. The flame simply died, leaving a plume of smoke that filled his nostrils with the scent of burnt wax. The sudden and unexplained eclipse of the candle meant the Man in the Mirror was close. By rule—rules no one ever broke—he had ten seconds to relight the candle.

Fumbling with the matches—the rules allowed only matches, no lighters—he struck a matchstick across the phosphorus strip on the side of the box. Nothing. His hands shook as he swiped again. The match broke in half and fell to the dark forest floor. He reached into the matchbox, spilling several others in the process.

“Dammit,” he whispered.

He couldn’t afford to waste matches. He’d need them again if he made it back to the house and into the safe room. But right now he was alone in the dark woods with an unlit candle and in great danger, if he believed the rumors and folklore. The tremors that gripped his body suggested he did. He steadied his hand just long enough to make a smooth sweep against the phosphorus, which caused the match to light in a sizzling blaze. The eruption gave off a cloud of sulfur-tinged smoke before calming to a controlled flame. He touched the match to the candle’s wick, happy for the light it provided. He calmed his breathing and watched the shadowed forest around him. He listened and waited, and when he was sure he had beaten the clock, he returned his attention to the row of trees before him. Slowly, he made his way forward, carefully shielding the flame as he went—a lighted candle was the only way to keep the Man in the Mirror away.

He made it to the huge black oak tree and saw a wooden box at its base. He fell to his knees and opened the lid. A key rested inside. His heart pounded with powerful contractions that rushed blood through the bulging vessels in his neck. He took a deep, calming breath, and then blew out the candle—rules stated that guidance candles could stay lighted only until a key was found. He took off through the woods. In the distance, a train whistle blew into the night, fueling his adrenaline. The race was on. He crashed through the forest, twisting an ankle and unsuccessfully shielding his face from the branches that whipped his cheeks. As he continued through the woods, the rumble of the train shook the ground beneath him as it roared past. The vibration brought more urgency to his steps.

When he reached the edge of the forest, the train was charging along the tracks to his left in a metallic blur that erratically caught the reflection of the moon. He broke free from the dark foliage and took off toward the house, his grunting and panting overtaken by the roar of the train. He made it to the door and pushed inside.

“Congratulations,” a voice said to him as soon as he was through the door. “You’re the first one.”

“Sweet,” he said, out of breath.

“Did you find the key?”

He held it up. “Yeah.”

“Follow me.”

They crept through the black hallways of the house until they came to the door of the safe room. He inserted the key into the doorknob and twisted. The lock surrendered, and the door swung open. They entered and then closed the door behind them. The room was pitch black, much worse than what the forest had offered.

“Hurry.”

He fell to the floor and, on his hands and knees, felt along the hardwood until his fingers came to the row of candles that sat in front of a tall standing mirror. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the book of matches. There were three remaining. He struck a matchstick along the edge of the box, and the tip ignited. He lit one of the candles and stood to face the mirror, which was covered by a heavy tarp.

He took a deep breath and nodded to the one who had met him at the door. Together they pulled the tarp from the mirror. His reflection was shadowed by candlelight, but he noticed the horizontal lacerations that cut across his cheeks and the blood that streamed down from them. He looked eerie and battle worn, but he’d made it. The rumbling evaporated as the last train car passed the house and continued off to the east. Silence filled the room.

Looking in the mirror, he took one last breath. Then, together, they whispered:

“The man in the mirror. The man in the mirror. The man in the mirror.”

A moment passed, during which neither blinked or breathed. Then something flashed behind them. A blur in the mirror between their reflections. Then a face materialized from the darkness and came into focus, a pair of eyes bright with ricochets from the candle’s flame. Before either could turn, or scream, or fight, the candle’s flame went out.