

# THE HOUSE OF MEMORIES

BY NICK HAYDEN

...and when he woke, he could not tell whether he had slept for a night or for a day or for a moment. Darkness still shrouded the room in indistinct shadows. He lay unmoving and stared at the ceiling. It was high and lost to his sight, but he somehow knew that it was shabby and bare.

Slowly, he gathered his thoughts and tried to remember. His name was Jacob, and he had taken shelter from the storm in this dilapidated house. He had stumbled in, wet, disoriented, anxious. He had found the bed. He had meant to rest only until the downpour lessened. Someone was waiting for him....

The bed springs moaned as he sat up, and he moaned, too, a bone-soaked weariness weighing down his limbs. His sleep had only increased his fatigue. He felt uneasy, as if his mind had been interrupted in the middle of some important problem he could no longer recall. His memory was tattered, full of fragments and the echo of emotion. He stood, his bare feet touching cold wood. He could feel the raw, splintering boards and the deep grooves between them. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness. Across the room was a twilight outline of a window. He stepped lightly, afraid of nails, and drew back the thick curtain.

It was barely morning. Fog suffocated the view, its hand hard upon the throat of the world. It shone with a faint, fey light. Jacob turned away. The sight repulsed him. He flung the curtain closed.

The sliver of light that escaped the pall of the curtain fell upon an object dangling from the ceiling. Jacob stared at it, trying to resolve the shadows into a form he understood. The thing hung over the bed, so he stepped onto the mattress, the coils shrieking, and reached to touch the object. He comprehended in an instant. It was a rope between his fingers, a noose, empty and waiting. Jacob leaned forward, stretching to his full height on his tiptoes. His head could fit through. He could kick the bed away. The rope would hold.

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Jacob's hand trembled as he gripped the rope, but he did not let go. For minutes he considered. He put the noose around his neck; he recoiled, tore it off. Frightened, he scurried off the bed and backed to the wall. "This...this is...." He rubbed his face. He didn't know what it was.

A door knob dug into his back. He gripped it and twisted the handle. He stared still at the rope.

He slipped quickly into the next room, plunging into darkness. He had to leave this place. He had brought supplies—a tent, a backpack, some food. He didn't remember seeing them by the bed. He could not go in to look, not yet. Not yet.

With the door shut, he could not see, so he edged about the room, following the wall with his hand, hoping to find a light switch or even a shuttered window. The floor was dirt, hard-packed beneath his feet. He rammed his hip into something. He felt along its surface. It was a table of some kind, and on one end, a candle. He could feel the dried beads of wax along its length. More thoroughly, frantically, his fingers searched for matches. There was a drawer—he tugged it out, the wood scraping. A box, matches. It slipped from his fingers. He got down on his hands and knees and scrounged beneath the table. Thick dust and pools of viscous liquid coated his fingers before he grasped the box again. He struck a flame. Light flashed to life. He lit the candle.

Jacob turned in a slow circle, not sure what he was looking for. His supplies? Or something else? His orb of light was feeble. His eyes kept returning to the table. It was narrow, long, old, rough-hewed. He felt a familiarity with it, not a fondness, but an unease, like the ghost of a bad memory. He ran his fingers along the grain, illuminating the surface inch by inch. He found a scrap of paper. It had evidently been torn from a larger sheet. All that remained of what had been written was a fragment: *s finished.*

He pressed it into a pocket, wondering. He seemed to feel the weight of the scrap against his leg.

He turned away from the table suddenly, bored of it and a little frightened. The candle did not penetrate far into the gloom, despite the claustrophobic dimensions of the room. Like the table, it was long and narrow, dark and ancient. Sharp little stones dug into his feet as he inched

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forward, the candle slowly revealing the room's far wall. A bench, low and simple, sat in front of a shallow pit. A man sat on the bench.

Jacob stopped. The man did not turn. He did not make a sound. He leaned forward in a repose of thought, still as a statue. Jacob could not see his face.

"Awake again," the man said. His voice was soft, a wisp of music barely caught. "Rested?"

"Who are you?"

"Always the same questions. I've grown used to it. Come, sit with me. Perhaps we'll light a fire."

Jacob felt compelled to obey. He took a seat next to the man. There was barely room for both of them. Jacob could not bring himself to look into the other's face. He looked, instead, into the pit, a hole three feet wide.

"Have you found any of the letters?" the man asked.

"I...*know*...you." Jacob struggled for the connection.

"The ruts are growing deeper," the other replied, satisfied. "The world is wearing thin. The bones show through. How does it feel to taste the marrow of your own existence? Let there be light—oh, but you have only that feeble candle. See how it flickers? It only takes a breath..." And he blew, elongating the flame until it nearly winked out.

Jacob drew the candle away, and at the same time he looked at the man. His back was still to Jacob even as they sat side by side.

"Let me look at you!" he cried, taken by an irrational fear. "Turn to look at me."

Jacob grabbed the man by the shoulder and twisted him about. His back still faced him. Jacob stood and stumbled away. "Where is your face?" He stepped into the pit, twisting his ankle. The candle fell from his hand. Darkness swarmed over them. "Where is your face?"

The other answered soothingly. "You have not yet imagined me a face. I will explain everything, but you must calm yourself. We need light. Bring that table here. We will smash it and use it for fire. That is why the pit is here. It is for a fire. Everything is here for a reason. You must trust me."

Jacob listened. The words calmed him. He did not trust the man, but he thought that he might learn something from him. The sense that he *knew* the man, that he and this other had

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a relationship, even if he could not remember it, reassured him. He stepped out of the pit, pawing for the candle. He lit it. “This is enough light for now.” Jacob tested his ankle. It hurt, but it was not badly injured.

The man stood at the other side of the pit, face averted. “It will not last. It will not even last the day. Today is important. Today you will make the choice that will determine your future. Do you understand? Get the table. We’ll build a fire and we’ll talk. But first, we must burn the table.”

Jacob wanted to ask why it had to be the table. Why not the bench? He hadn’t finished exploring the room yet. Perhaps there was a chair or broken door, something more manageable. But the man’s words carried weight. They seemed to settle on his shoulders like a pair of hands to direct him. He was reminded of the paper in his pocket. It, too, seemed to weigh upon him. He took it out and examined it again.

“Throw it in the fire,” the man said. “Burn it up. It leads nowhere. It leads here. Circles, round and round. It is better to burn it all.”

“Do you know what this is, what it means? It reminds me of something....”

“Everything here is a memory, Jacob. You have done it all before. We have had this same conversation a hundred times. You have burned the chairs and the shelves. But you have not yet burned the table. Burn it, and you will almost be free. It must go into the fire. Everything must go through fire. Then you will be free indeed.”

Jacob shuddered at the words. Something...something hovered at the edge of memory, at the tip of his tongue, at the corner of his eye. “What’s your name? Do you have a name?”

“Let us say that I am an angel with whom you wrestle. Call me Peniel if you must call me something.”

“What does this mean?” He held up the scrap. “*Finished*. What is finished?”

The candle went out with a snap. Thick darkness choked Jacob, and he fumbled for his matches. Two left. He struck the first, shielding it, and re-lit the wick. Peniel was gone. Jacob turned in a circle, fearful for his exposed back, searching for the black back of that other and finding no one. “Where are you?” he screamed. The darkness was full of watching eyes and formless beings.

He checked the matchbox again, to be sure he had not miscounted. Only one, no matter

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how he looked. The candle, too, seemed shorter than before. Perhaps it was only his imagination. Perhaps it was *all* his imagination.

He went to the table, took hold of the leg, and pulled. It dug shallow ruts in the dirt, shuddering forward, the whole construction creaking. At the edge of the pit, he hesitated. What did it matter if the table burned? He set the candle in the corner of the room, took the bench upon which Peniel had sat, and slammed it against the table with all his strength. A leg came loose. The table crashed to the ground. Jacob hammered it again; a sort of horrid joy shot through his body. The bench cracked, so Jacob took up the broken table leg and swung it with the force of a home run. The snap of wood set him trembling. His fingers tingled as if they had fallen asleep. He felt sick and giddy. He realized that he wanted to demolish this table. For a long, long time he had wanted to demolish it but had feared to do so. He feared no longer. The fulfilled desire and his guilty conscience intermingled. He could not stop now. He was committed; he was afraid to stop; he reveled in the splintering destruction.

When it was over, his arms ached. He sat on the ground, wiped his forehead, and watched the sad flame of his candle burn. Some time later, he piled the pieces in the pit; it was perfectly sized. But the candle could not ignite the wood on its own. He looked again at the scrap of paper in his pocket. Were the edges blackened? He set off in search of tinder.

He had not yet explored the other end of the long room. He made his cautious way. The last tendrils of the madness that had overtaken him when destroying the table evaporated into the gloom. He felt sad and tired and blindly angry. The darkness expanded before him, the walls continuing stealthily on either side, slipping quietly into the night.

He stopped. A door stood before him. It had appeared abruptly. It was made of smoke-stained wood. It had a filthy knob, as if handled by generations of unwashed hands. Letters had been etched crudely into the surface of the door.

L I E S

Jacob traced the rough lines of the letters with a finger. Was it a complete word? Or, like the scrap in his pocket, was it a remnant, a piece of a larger idea that had been lost...or never completed?

He pushed open the door. Stairs descended. Stale air rose up. Staring along the steps,

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looking for something to reassure him, Jacob caught a pale mark upon the filth of the stairs. Picking it up, he unfolded a sheet of paper that had been halved five times. A large 2 was scrawled in the upper right corner, and words were written large across it, some trailing to the back side. He read:

*I am at a loss to explain what is happening. I found a note in my own handwriting. It told me my name, where I had come from, where I was going before I took shelter in this place. I don't remember writing the letter. It told me I would not remember. It said it was a test, that if I found it, it proved I was stuck. It proved what old man had told him—told me.*

*I don't know who the old man is. I don't understand what's happening to me. The letter says that something must change, that something must break, that the cycle must end if I am to escape. It said to write everything down, anything I learned, to use the paper. It might be enough.*

*So, I'm writing this down before I search for an exit. I can't remember how I got here, not exactly, but there must be an exit. No one will ever see this, and if they do, they will think me mad, but I have to write it. Just in case. I have the oddest feeling.*

*Why is there a noose in the bedroom?*

In the margins, in a different handwriting, small but clear, were the words, *Have faith.*

Jacob read the letter a second time and a third. He sat down and studied it minutely. The handwriting was his. He could almost convince himself that he remembered writing it. But he did not.

He searched his pockets again. He found no paper. If he had written this, where had he gotten the paper?

He stood and started down the steps, watching the ground for more notes.

It was a brief descent, six steps, but the door was nearly swallowed by darkness when he looked back. He was in a narrow hallway, not wide enough for two men. Within three strides, a corridor burrowed to the left. Another stride and a passage dashed to the right. He kept forward. The branches appeared again and again, one after the other, as if he were inside a monstrous millipede and the corridors were scurrying legs.

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He continued forward. The main hall would not end. It narrowed, as if ready to shrink to a dead end. Then it would enlarge, as if about to open into a foyer, only to narrow again. It gave Jacob the impression of breathing—in, out, in, out—slow, agonized breaths.

He stopped, considering and trying not to panic. He would return to the steps and make a systematic search. A glance at his candle told him he would not finish in time. He pushed the thought away. He turned back. Upon the ground was a scrap of paper. It was the size of his fingernail. It held two words—*They move*. It was written on both sides. He examined it closely. It looked as if it had been carefully torn.

Jacob understood. The same two words had been written on dozens of scraps, perhaps on an entire sheet torn to scraps. It was a warning, placed as widely as possible. *They move*. He thought it meant the papers. He had not seen this scrap when he had first passed this spot.

He stood, undecided. Which way should he turn? Perhaps somewhere in this maze waited a page with a vital clue, even the answer he needed. How could he find it? What hope had he? It was chance alone that could save him, and as he looked at his dwindling light and thought upon the innumerable halls, he knew it to be a thin chance. And then it occurred to him: he still remained here. He had never yet escaped this place. Perhaps he had even stumbled upon all the papers at once. It was possible. Anything was possible, given enough chances—right? A chance in a million might yield him all the papers at once. Who was to say it had not already happened? All the pages, and yet he still remained.

No. He stopped the train of thought. Not everything had been tried. Peniel had told him he had not yet burned the table. (But why were the edges of the paper burnt? Why was the pit there?) It didn't matter. Burning the table was something to do, something to try, a course of action. Something to distract him. He ran down the hallway, looking intently for the steps to emerge from the darkness. Again, something on the ground. He picked it up. Another scrap. *They move*. But on one side, in different writing, squeezed so tightly as to be almost unreadable—*courage*.

Perhaps it was a sign. He was on the right path. Or perhaps it was coincidence and meant nothing. Perhaps it was a lie. He dropped it in his pocket. He needed all the tinder he could find.

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He reached the stairs, reached the long, empty room, reached the pit. He knelt beside it, setting the candle down, and crumpled the paper. It would not be enough. He laughed bitterly. A single wad of paper? If he could collect a pile of splinters to add to it, it might work. He began tearing at the broken edges of wood, breaking off splinters, bloodying his fingers in his effort to force the wood into the smallest pieces possible.

It took too much time and produced too little tinder. He stood, sucking at his fingertips.

He decided to return to the bedroom. The gray light overwhelmed him, despite the drawn curtain. He huddled in the doorway, fearful of the light, as if it threatened to expose what should remain hidden. Even if he had dared to extinguish the candle and work by that dread light, he dared not use the last match, even at the risk of burning down the wick. Perhaps there were other candles here. He had not explored fully.

The noose drew his attention. Death. It lingered heavily in his mind even when he looked away, the circle of rope like an afterimage of lightning. He turned away from the center of the room, toward the walls. They were disfigured, scarred by endless slashes, as if claws had been raked across the surface again and again. A strange pattern helped to organize the mess into something more than collections of scars—that was it, they were groups of fives, tallies, filling this wall, and the next, and the next. Jacob closed his eyes and tried to shut the sight out. He leaned against the wall, weak, his fingers feeling the shallow indentations. Forcing his eyes open, he found a group of four slashes and, digging into the soft wood with his bruised fingernail, crossed it, making it five. One more time.

Lies.

The door had borne its own message. What were the lies? Peniel's words? The marks in this room? The words on the paper? The promise of the noose? The word on the door?

A dribble of hot wax on his hand brought him back. The bed was the only furniture. He searched the pillow and sheet, looked under the mattress, reached into the shadows beneath the frame. Something solid. He grasped it. Thin. He brought it to the light.

A fine point pen.

He tried it on the bed sheet. It scraped dry lines. Jacob licked the tip, trying to get the ink flowing. Nothing. He tried for five minutes. It was dead. No more notes to write. Everything

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had been written. Everything had been known. He was still here.

He sat heavily on the bed. The frame was metal. It would not burn. He felt incapacitated. He stared at the floor, tired, restless, and grew angry with his own inability to act.

“Peniel!” he called in a weak voice. He had not quite worked up the courage to summon the faceless man. The idea of his presence repulsed Jacob, but he needed him. “Peniel!” He managed to strengthen his voice. He did not know why he believed the man would come. In this place, what he searched for might never be found, but perhaps it could be summoned. “Peniel!” This was a cry of frustration. His whole body trembled with emotion.

The answer came from behind him, from the doorway. “I have here two more pages. If we are careful, it will be enough.”

Jacob could not bring himself to turn around. There was too much light. “Only two? There must be more. Dozens.”

“Lost. Never written. Written, but since unwritten. Burned in the fire. I can’t remember all the ways. It doesn’t matter. It’s almost the end. You can cheat time for only so long.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is always today. It is always the same. But these letters to yourself, they are something new. A change. Power. Thoughts frozen and saved, to be rediscovered, as if you had stumbled upon the same train of thought again. Literary *déjà vu*. But the pen is dry. All the thoughts have been recorded. You have tricked the system as far as you were able. Now you must decide. Can you change? Can you escape? Or are you trapped, like a clock ticking away the same second over and over because the gear has slipped out of place?”

Jacob absorbed the words stoically. He swallowed them without chewing. They sat heavily in his gut.

“Who are you then?”

“There’s an interesting theory in this letter here. Number 62.”

“If everything is immutable, what about the table? I broke it.”

“When you wake again, it will be whole. Everything is reset. You are reset. But if you burn it with fire started by these words—words are power, here. Thoughts change reality. If you burn the table with these, when you wake, it will no longer be.”

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“Then what?”

The question remained unanswered. Jacob tugged open the curtain, forcing himself to look into the light. Thick, brilliant, alien fog clung to the glass, obscuring everything, revealing nothing. He closed the curtain with a sense of relief. Somehow, he knew that Peniel had gone.

On the bed lay the two sheets of paper. He sat and read the one with 62 in the corner first.

*The man who is here, the man without a face—he cannot be real. He knows too much. I have found 36 and 41. It is evident he knows a way out. He speaks of destruction. There is no creation in this place—what seems to be creation is the embodiment of my own thoughts, what I brought to this place. I am a foreign agent, a virus. He has said as much. This time his name is Father. 36 says he is called Nicholas. He refuses to reveal how he came to be. I think he does not know. I think he is my subconscious. That is why he has no face, why he appears at will, how he knows me and knows what I should do.*

*Perhaps I am mad. Perhaps I am dead and this is hell. Perhaps everything is a dream and when I wake, I will be somewhere else, but still trapped.*

*I do not trust the man. But I do not trust myself either. I will have to decide. One of these days, I will have to.*

*But not today.*

Jacob looked over the letter carefully for those words in the margin. He looked it over twice and found nothing. This disconcerted him. He did not know why. He read the second letter. It was numbered 11. The handwriting was his, but it was messy, slanting awkwardly across the paper, the lines sometimes overlapping, making it difficult to read.

*The candle is out. I am far from the bedroom. I walked all day, trying to distance myself. I'm so tired. But I dare not close my eyes. It will start again. When they slip shut, I begin to see that horrid gray light again. I must find the exit but I want to fall asleep. Somewhere it is tolling 12. Not in my ears. In my soul. I hear it. 8...9...10...11...*

And that was all.

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Jacob wondered if he had written the letter just before he had woken this last time...but, no. It was numbered 11, and others followed. Unless the numbers were lies.

He glanced vaguely over the letter again. He had searched for the extra words before beginning and found none. It was because the handwriting was different, he decided, that he was so interested. It was like a breeze stirring stale air. Were these extra words his, somehow? Peniel's? Another's? Someone he had never seen, perhaps stuck here with him, perhaps escaping this instant? If time did not change, perhaps that other was a ghost, moving about the same passages, moving a minute ahead or an hour behind and attempting to communicate.

Jacob rubbed his eyes, forcing the thoughts down. The more he thought, the stranger the concepts. He stood, hands pressed against his closed lids, for a long time. A sort of groan filled his thoughts, an inexpressible desire and frustration and ache for help, a longing for answers and an inability even to form the questions. He kept returning to the thought in 62—*I will have to decide.*

There was nothing to do, nothing to see, nothing to learn, nothing that had not been done, seen, or learnt before. Except, perhaps, to burn the table. It was the decision before him. The only one. Except.... He felt the presence of the noose like the beady eye of a raven, watching him.

He read 62 one last time, but he had already committed himself. Something must be done. Anything.

He froze, mid-sentence. A brief message had appeared in that clear script. It read: *She is coming.* A small *t* followed.

The *t* was not quite in line with the words, like a marker placed at the end of a magazine article to indicate nothing else followed. The more he studied it, the less it appeared a letter. It *was* a symbol—a cross. This bothered him. He did not know how to think of religion in a place like this. He felt as if any such beliefs he might have once held had been worn away by endless rubbings, like paint beneath the grit of sandpaper.

Jacob crumpled the letters. Taking up the candle, he strode from the room. He gathered the three wads of paper, covered them with the splinters he had managed to collect, then arranged some small fragments of the table on top. He no longer cared if the fire took or not.

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He had almost ceased thinking of it. He wanted only to light the paper and let come what may.

He lit the tinder. The paper caught fire; for a moment, only the edge burned, hesitantly, fiery insects gnawing away at the words. Then an orange-red flame leapt upward, more powerfully than Jacob had anticipated. All three letters burned brightly, the flames almost white now, the fire consuming the wood in a blaze of ravenous hunger. Jacob piled on larger pieces. The flames lowered, becoming more normal, and smoldered pleasantly. A thick smoke rose from the wood and filled the room. The stench was of ash and rot. Jacob blinked his eyes against the smoke but sat near to watch the flames.

Peniel sat across the fire pit, murmuring happily. He wore a cowl now and appeared to face forward, but his face was sunken into his hood.

“Why must the table burn?” Jacob felt nothing at the table’s demise. He had expected some strong emotion, joy or guilt. If anything, he felt a hollow disappointment.

“Everything must burn. You are fettered to this place. Shackles are meant to be broken.”

“Did God send me here?” He could not shake the last letter from his mind.

“Why do you speak of God? He is not here.”

“Is the noose for me?”

“The pit is made for fire. The noose is made for necks.”

“Have I hung myself before?” He touched his neck.

“No. That you have not done. But you will.”

“And then?”

“Freedom. You spoke of God. Does he not say to die to self? This place is yours. A prison of self. You must die to it.”

Jacob shook his head. “This isn’t mine. I wouldn’t...”

Peniel laughed mirthlessly.

“Why don’t I hang myself now?”

“Why don’t you? I can watch the fire.”

Jacob remained staring into the flames. Too late, he thought to blow out the candle. It was little more than a nub now. He became pensive. Long dormant thoughts began to rise.

“The Lord is said to be hidden in fire and thick smoke. Why is he hidden? Moses could

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see only his back—but even that was glorious. How wild and incomprehensible. But still, forty years in the desert, lost, wandering in circles....” He fell silent. It had been a long time since he had thought of such things. What memories those few crisp words on the letters had unearthed. And now the words were gone forever, smoke and ash.

“The Christ suffered,” Peniel said later. The fire had begun to die. “They hung him on a tree. But it was not death, not really. It was new life.”

Jacob nodded slowly, letting the words soak in. It was a purpose, a reason for the noose, a goal to look forward to. The more he let the idea settle into him, the more his soul lightened. It made sense. By releasing his fears, by letting go, he would regain his life. He would regain the future.

*Future.* The concept sent a tremor through him. A terrible awe constricted his chest and he knew—absolutely knew—that his soul had been shuttered for a long, unchanging repetition of days. Only embers remained of the fire, casting just enough light to outline the wide, powerful form of Peniel. The other did not speak, and Jacob could not bring himself to break the silence. Dimmer and dimmer. The weak glow seemed distant, like a splash of stars in the sky.

“Time is short,” Peniel said softly.

Jacob roused himself. “Is it that late?”

Jacob stood with a deep groan, forcing his spirit, as well as his body, out of its repose. He made his way to the bedroom. His intentions, while sure, were unanchored. He did not know if he could go through with it, and he did not want another watching as he hesitated. He felt ashamed he did not have the courage necessary.

Light as from a full moon shone around the edge of the curtained window. The lines of the room were edged in silver. Even the tally marks were tipped with feathers of gray. The noose hung in the gloom above, barely visible.

With slow steps, each one willed, each one easier than he had hoped, Jacob approached the bed. It moaned like a wounded man as he stepped up on it. His breaths came in quick gasps. His fingers tingled. He trembled, the coils shivering and groaning. He had visualized the act again and again before the fire. He sat down, face in his hands, and scrubbed the tears

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away.

“Do not fear.” Peniel stood in the doorway. “It will soon be over.”

“I will not be able to do it.”

“Then we will continue this dance. But I fear that all hope for you will be gone. Things do not change in this place. You cannot become a different person than you are at this moment. If you will not do it now, when will you? The more it begins again, the more the rut is worn. There is no outside influence. There is no sudden revelation. There is only you and me and the rope. You cannot change. You can only decide as you were always destined to decide.”

“And I have been here before? This close?”

“You have had the rope around your neck.” Peniel stepped into the room. The cowl fell back, revealing his face. Jacob saw his own there; it did not surprise him. He felt sick.

He had no choice. If he shut his eyes and waited for it to end, it would only start again. The halls were endless, the letters useless, the days unchanging, the world confining. He wanted to cry out, but who would listen? This devil dressed in his skin?

Pushing away thought, tamping down emotion, he stood again. He gripped the noose in his hand. He looked one last time at the room that imprisoned him. The hundreds of tallies blended together in swaths, like crop designs meant to be interpreted from above. They appeared almost to hold a meaning, blurred and distorted by the dim light. Everything here held the illusion of design. His brain tried to decipher the symbols, and he let it, hesitating, foregoing the last step into darkness.

NO MORE LIES

A tremor ran through Jacob, a terrible, inexplicable shock. He had caught the words like a flash of insight—but it had vanished. Nothing was written upon the walls. It was a delusion, a desperate attempt to escape what must happen next.

“It will be midnight soon,” Peniel said.

Jacob put his head through the noose. One step...a single motion and his feet would leave the earth forever.

“I can’t...” he cried, hoarse.

“Then don’t.”

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“But...” He was weeping.

“Coward,” Peniel hissed. “Wretched coward.”

Jacob gritted his teeth at the words. “Move the bed!” he cried. “Kick it out from under me. Now!”

“No. Take the step. A single step.”

Jacob stood unmoving, trembling, for a long minute. Then he removed the noose and collapsed onto the bed. His whole body ached. His face pressed against the musty pillow, half suffocating him.

“Coward,” Peniel said again, whispering in his ear. “You are a lost soul.”

Jacob knew he was right. He hated Peniel, but he hated himself more, hated that he could not take that final step....

“I will see you again soon,” Peniel said.

“Wait!” Jacob looked up. He needed Peniel. “Don’t leave! Wait, I—”

Pitiless in the dim light, his own face stared back at him. “There is no more time.”

“You’re a liar!” Jacob screamed.

“There is no truth here. Only illusions.”

Jacob clenched the pillow in his fist, but his anger melted away. He had no strength left.

“This is the labyrinth of your own mind,” Peniel said. “There is only one way out.”

Jacob didn’t care if it was true or not. He couldn’t go through with it. The words in the margins came back to him; those alone comforted him, even as they mocked. *Courage*. He had none. *She is coming*. Who? *Have faith*. In what? The cross—what had Peniel said? He must die to self. Perhaps Peniel had lied. He didn’t care.

No more lies.

Jacob gripped the pillow again, now in both hands. A startling idea had come to him. “Peniel, I...I have a question.” It was nearly midnight. He could sense it in his bones. His nerves were on edge.

Peniel approached. “Quickly, now.”

Jacob threw himself at Peniel, knocking the man to the ground. He pressed the pillow over Peniel’s face, rage and hatred giving him strength. No more lies.

## The House of Memories

Peniel screamed, his voice bitter and wrathful. His fingers scratched at Jacob's face. He thrashed with demonic power, bucking, kicking, clawing, twisting. Pain pummeled Jacob. Blood dripped onto the yellowing pillow. Jacob bore down upon the pillow with all the strength he had. He pressed his eyes shut against the claws, shut his mind against any thought. No more indecision. He had acted and he would not relent until Peniel stilled.

He was so tired.

Time expanded. In the darkness of his closed eyes, Peniel seemed to grow extra limbs. They pounded his chest, bruised his shin, dug into his back, struck his groin. Jacob cried out, but he remained unmoved. He would not relent. Not now. He had decided.

With a final, sudden spasm, Peniel went limp. Jacob lay upon the corpse, utterly exhausted. Midnight tolled in his soul. Eight...nine...ten...eleven...and when he woke, he could not tell whether he had slept for a night or for a day or for a moment. Darkness still shrouded the room in indistinct shadows. He lay upon the floor, stomach upon the rough wood, pillow beneath him.

Slowly, he gathered his thoughts and tried to remember. His name was Jacob, and he had taken shelter from the storm in this dilapidated house. He had stumbled in, wet, disoriented, anxious. He had found the bed. He had meant to rest only until the downpour lessened. Someone was waiting for him....

He moaned as he turned over, a bone-soaked weariness weighing down his limbs. His memory was tattered, full of fragments and the echo of emotion. Dried blood splattered the floor beneath him.

He did not want to move. He shut his eyes and tried to sleep again. He passed a long time in this self-imposed exile, waiting expectantly for some sign or change. The room brightened imperceptibly beyond his eyelids. Then he thought he heard a voice, but when he strained to listen, he heard only the buzz of silence. It came again when he did not expect it, rousing him out of a half-doze. It was closer.

A creak startled the house. The entire structure seemed to tremble. Jacob opened his eyes and waited. The voice came again. It called his name.

"Here I am," he cried. Someone was looking for him.

## The House of Memories

His name again, more urgent. He sat up. “Here I am.”

As he got to his feet, the door opened. A woman stood there, round-faced, bright-eyed. Amy.

“Here I am!”

She ran toward him, dropping her backpack from her shoulders as she crossed the floor and embraced him.

“Jacob!” She could barely speak from emotion. “I came looking as soon as the storm let up. I didn’t sleep. I kept looking and praying—I don’t think I’ve prayed so much in my life. And you slept safe and sound! How dare you!” She reprimanded him with tears. “This place isn’t on any of the maps. How did you find it?”

He pushed her back gently. He had to be sure. He walked to the window and drew back the curtain. Sun streamed through the window, making the forest beyond glow.

It was a new day—finally, the day after....

He laughed and turned to embrace Amy, but she was distracted. He followed her gaze.

“That’s creepy,” she said.

The noose remained, an eyeless socket, swinging slightly as they closed the door to the room and left the house.