

A Change in the Air

by Dominic Sventor

Dillan scratches graphite to paper as his eyes scan through the black and white blocks of text and images of crime across the computer screen. The high school library brightens as multiple rays of light shine through the transparent windows. Through the silence in the air, Irene shuts off her animal sticker-decorated laptop. Alex animates the library window with two action figures of police officers, which he tosses up and down in the air and clashes them together like tiny blue kites. Beyond the window resides a large group of skyscrapers that reflect a slice of light within the blanket of clouds.

Sounds of a keyboard clack throughout the walls of the library. As Dillan goes through article after article on the internet, he discovers heading titles, such as, “BREAKING NEWS: Father Kills Entire Family” and “Hostage Situation Gone Wrong.” The coloration of his face freezes down to a pale white as his eyes read through line after line. An insignia of a red and black skull appears in most of these articles, which causes chills to run down his spine.

“Come on, Dillan. It’s getting late. Mom says dinner is ready soon, Dad’s going to be home in a while, and I need to feed Choco,” Irene says, as she walks up to the high schooler, who whips his fingers around the keyboard. “You’ve been here all day.”

“I know. Just let me finish up. I’m reading about these crime scenes from earlier today. Just trying to figure how they’ve happened still makes me feel uneasy,” Dillan says.

“Well, can you please hurry up? You know how Mom and Dad are when we’re home late.” Irene leans against the wall and glares out the window. She shoots her eyes across the fields of concrete and grass beyond the glass.

Dillan sighs and swipes up his paperwork. “Alright. Come on, let’s go.”

Dark, gray clouds roll out across the bluish sky, which devours the sun’s golden rays. The sound of concrete crunches under Dillan, Irene, and Alex’s shoes as they walk down a shadowy alleyway.

“Look, Dillan, how can you be able to join the law enforcement if you get too frightened of violence? I mean, the whole point of joining that is to protect people from getting hurt” Irene says.

Dillan stares off into space with a sulk. “I know. I just think it’s all too realistic for me; however, I want to do this. I want to help people—help my family and help my friends. Find the truth about things. Make the world a better place.”

While halfway through the alleyway, a crack disturbs the silence as it strikes into the frigid air. The three kids come to a halt and stare at a dark corner near a dumpster against a brick wall.

Crunch.

Dillan and Irene step closer to the dumpster where a snap causes the kids to wince. As they approach the corner, the three kids wince at the smell of vinegar and rot sting their nostrils

and throats, and they all cannot not hold in a cough. Dillan takes out his cellphone, enables the flashlight button, and then he directs it towards the corner.

“Oh my god!” Irene says.

Irene shuffles her feet in haste as she leans forward and pulls a ball of fluff out of the corner. The creature bears two small, round ears, a burglar-type face, and a jet-black fur coat.

As Irene goes to lay the creature against her chest, she removes her hand for all three kids to discover a moist layer of red and black on Irene’s palm. The creature’s jet-black fur has an additional coat of reddish and blackish gook.

“It’s a baby raccoon! It’s hurt!” Irene says with a cry.

“How can you tell that it’s hurt?” Dillan asks.

“It’s got a bite mark on its back. Look.”

Irene lifts the baby raccoon over to Dillan, and her fingers brush away a patch of slick, matted fur on its back. There, three pea-sized holes rest on the surface of the poor furball’s flesh.

Alex tries to jump up and peek above the arms of Dillan and Irene, but Irene covers it up with her cup-like palms.

“We need to get him to Mom and Dad,” Irene says.

“I don’t know, Irene. Shouldn’t we check to make sure it doesn’t have rabies?”

“Dillan, he’s bleeding bad. We’re not leaving him here. Our house is right around the corner, anyway, so let’s hurry. Alex, stay close to us.”

As Irene and Alex race around the corner and out of the alleyway, Dillan takes one glance over towards the dumpster. Various papers litter the concrete floor, and on those papers, traces of dark-red cover them. Dillan winces and hurries behind his brother and sister.

Irene, Dillan, and Alex hurry in through the front door of their home. A dining room table almost covers the entire wooden floor. The smell of roasted chicken, sweet peas, and fresh-out-of-the-oven bread fill the air.

Warm, blistery tears sting Irene's eyes, which stream down her cheeks.

Isabelle comes out with a turkey. Her eyes widen at the sight of the dirtied-bloodied creature in her daughter's hands.

Choco hops around Isabelle. His snout points up like a mountain towards the scent of the baked food. His tail wags like a window wiper.

"Irene, what is wrong, honey? What's that in your hands?" Isabelle asks.

"It's a baby raccoon," Alex says with confidence.

Isabelle plops the turkey onto the table with a thud and hurries over to Irene.

Choco peeks his eyes back and forth between Isabelle and the turkey on the table.

The baby raccoon squirms around and shivers in Irene's palms.

"We need to bring him to the vet, Mom!" Irene says.

"We can't, baby. Your Dad's got the car. I don't know... We're going to have to keep him in the house for the night and treat him here."

"Mom, I don't think we should," Dillan says.

"Really, Dillan? We stayed in the library long enough for you!" Irene says with a piercing cry. Dillan winces as if an invisible wave hits him.

"For research!"

"Okay, okay. Shh. It's just for tonight, Dillan. When your Dad comes home by tomorrow, we'll drive him to the vet. Alright, let's wash him up in the kitchen sink."

As Irene turns around, Choco jumps up on her and sniffs at the baby raccoon. A shriek pierces everyone's ears as the raccoon bears his tiny, yet sharp jaws and chomps down on Choco's snout. Choco lets out a whimper as he dashes up to the second floor.

"Choco!" Irene says with a cry. "Mom, can you please take the raccoon? I have to check on Choco."

As Isabelle takes the raccoon out of Irene's hands, Irene darts for the stairs.

"Why don't you boys go upstairs with your sister? I'll take care of this."

Dillan climbs the steps as Alex follows close behind him.

Soft light shines out of Irene's bedroom. Colorful posters of various animals, such as dogs, cats, and horses, hide the purple paint of the walls.

As the brothers enter, they witness Irene, whose tears flow down her cheeks as she rubs noses with Choco. His tail thumps against the wooden flooring, and a white bandage covers the surface of his snout.

"Is Choco okay?" Alex asks.

"Yes, he's okay, now," Irene says with a snuffle.

Dillan smiles and looks down at his phone. He turns it on, as the news app pops on the screen. His smile droops when he witnesses a familiar headline: "BREAKING NEWS: Father Kills Entire Family." He can feel his blood thicken and curl when his eyes sweep over to the image of the now-deceased father and an eerie, bloody skull insignia tattooed on the side of his face. Under the picture, it reads, "This is the fourth sighting of this symbol this week, which spans across other multiple tragic deaths." A few streaks of a grotesque mixture of red and black ooze covers his face, as well—just like the stuff in the alleyway.

“Listen, Irene, I think we need to stay away from that raccoon. Remember those reports of deaths from earlier today at the library? They are saying that the victims actually were poisoned or drugged to the point where they lost control, and that stuff that made him lose it—it looks exactly like the same gook that was on the raccoon.”

“Really?” Irene says. Her head sways back and forth to get a clear view of Dillan’s phone.

Alex sits upon Irene’s bed to get a closer look, but Dillan flips it before he could see it.

“Perhaps you and Mom should cage it up tonight, just in case,” Dillan says.

“Alright. I’ll try to tell her.” Irene sighs and pats Choco’s head, whose tail pounds at the colorful wall.

A stack of books about CSI and crime reports lie on a nightstand next to a bed. The smell of fresh-cut grass sneaks in through the window. Black shadows of other houses and trees scatter beyond it, as Dillan slides into his bed. As soon as Dillan grabs hold of his phone, the door creaks open, and Isabelle walks in.

“Hi, sweetie. I just said goodnight to your brother and sister. I believe it’s time for me to say the same to you. Right?” says Isabelle, as she covers Dillan’s phone screen with her hand.

“I know, Mom, but let me just keep researching this. I really believe there’s a link between those murder reports on T.V. with that raccoon downstairs.”

“Oh. Dillan, are you really making these weird theories again like that time with the homeless man from our block?”

“No, I just... where’s the raccoon anyway? Did you lock it up?”

“Yes, I did. It’s in your sister’s room.”

“Wait, what? Why! It could be—”

“She wanted it in her room. She said she felt bad about it. However, she told me what you said earlier, so I did put it in a cage. Now, it’s time for bed. Goodnight.”

Isabelle grabs Dillan’s phone and puts it on the nightstand. She plants a kiss on Dillan’s forehead, then stands up and walks over to the door.

“Goodnight.” As the door clacks, Dillan leans over and switches off the lamp. Dillan peeks out into the black sky through his window. His eyes race across the stars as his finger taps at the edge of his mattress. After a few minutes, his heavy eyelids close.

Shatter sounds shoot across the sky and through Dillan’s window, who whips his head up in a millisecond. The darkness blankets his room. He turns to the alarm clock. It reads 1:46 AM. He looks towards the window and could see the blackness of trees sway with slight movement outside.

Through the complete silence, Dillan kicks off the covers and slides out of bed. He takes another look outside the window, but nothing usual. He picks up his phone and turns it on. A message in bold, red letters, which reads, “Emergency Alert,” and nothing else.

Dillan twists the cold knob of his door and pulls. A filter of darkness fills the second-floor hallway.

Out of nowhere, a flash of light swipes across the ceiling, and Dillan rushes towards the edge of the stairs to see where it comes from. He steps down the staircase with silent footsteps. As he steps along to the last step, he looks around the dark foyer and sees the light flash again near the kitchen. He takes a single step to look around the corner.

Isabelle looks through the windows of the backyard patio with the flashlight in frantic movements.

Just as Dillan moves his lips, he catches something in the corner of his eye.

Across the kitchen and the foyer, the moonlight casts a brilliant shine on the dining room table. Underneath, a tail swishes along to the table's end. Out pokes Choco's head. His eyes, however, grayish, and a blackish ooze seeps out of them and onto his snout. He pads out from under the table and heads towards the kitchen with sharp, longer teeth than earlier.

"Mom!"

Isabelle whips around to Dillan whose face shows utter shock. In the corner of her eye, something rushes up alongside her. She jolts up and backs away before she opens one of the kitchen drawers.

Choco leaps with great strength towards Isabelle's face, but he comes into contact with the drawer.

Isabelle, who rushes over to Dillan, catches a glance at the black-caked eyes of the twitchy family dog.

"Dillan, upstairs, now!" Dillan grabs hold of Isabelle's arm as she pushes him up the stairs. As they reach halfway up, a shriek falls down on them, and their feet pick up haste.

Dillan and Isabelle reach the second-floor as fierce sounds of growls and huffs build up behind them. They open Irene's door and slam it shut.

"Mom! Dillan!"

Dillan and Isabelle turn around.

Isabelle screams and rushes over to Irene, who covers herself in her own bloody blanket. Dillan watches with a frozen body—unable to move.

The raccoon bears an unrecognizable shape. The claws of the once-tiny creature have doubled in size, which now digs at the threadbare blanket that Irene covers herself with. Blood spatters the walls and her bed.

Isabelle takes a firm swing at the deformed figure with the flashlight, but it disappears in the shadows of the room. She wraps the blanket around the monster tight, then swings it with immense strength to launch it out of Irene's window with a loud clatter.

"Are you okay, baby?" Isabelle asks Irene, who whimpers and shivers on her bed. Scratch marks cover almost her from head to toe. Irene trembles a nod.

The door cracks open as Choco's enlarged and blackish snout bursts in through the door. The family screams and backs up against the wall.

"There's no way out!" Dillan says as he looks out the window.

The door cracks more, right before a blast of loud cracks that rocket throughout the room. The family shivers and huddles in the corner of Irene's room.

The door swings open, and Alex runs out with tears that fall down his face like a cascade. Isabelle opens her arms out and grabs him in a tight bear hug.

Dillan's face whips up as a man in a heavy-armored suit steps through the doorway. A glossy, pristine helmet covers his face.

"Are you here to save us?" Isabelle asks.

The suited man unbuckles his helmet and slides it off. The suited man reveals a bald head with a slight aftershave. He cracks open a smile and paddles over.

"Dad!" Irene says with a cry.

Jericho squats down and opens his arms out over his family, who shiver in their own blood.

“I’m here to take you guys home,” Jericho says.

Jericho leads his wife, his two sons, and his daughter out of the house and onto the streets, where a helicopter’s blades whish loud and strong winds through the air.

As the group makes their way towards the aircraft, Dillan smiles at the warmth of his mother and father’s arms around him and his own around his brother and his sister. Dillan looks up, and his eyes catch an insignia inside the helicopter’s interior. He feels the blood in his body turn cold all of a sudden.

“You’re not here to rescue us,” Dillan says in a whimper.

Jericho and the others freeze up and look towards Dillan.

“What? Of course, I am!” Jericho says.

“Are you, though? Then what’s that?” Dillan points to the helicopter, where everyone’s faces turn to examine the scratches of the red and black skull insignia. Dillan pulls his phone out of his pocket and turns it on. He points it towards his family.

“He’s working for the ones responsible for this!” Dillan says.

“You little shit.” Jericho’s gloved hands turn to tight balled fists. His lower jaw tightens.

Isabelle shivers and grabs hold of Dillan, Irene, and Alex. “Jericho, are you serious? Please tell me this is a joke?”

Jericho stares at Isabelle. His eyes glare with fierceness as hers well up with hot tears.

“I did it for the money—and power”

“I can’t believe you would do this! Why?” Isabelle says with a whimper.

“I’m tired of everyone pissing on me for putting my work in to support society—and my family, too. I research a new virus for countless hours to, hopefully, help rid the world of its problems, and this is what I get? My own family betraying me. That’s alright. I wasn’t planning

on saving you all, anyway. Might as well get the job done here,” Jericho says. He pulls out a large pistol that seems to hold small, black, slithery substances in the barrel, which he directs at Isabelle.

“No!” Isabelle says. She grabs at Jericho’s armed hand and points it upward. They struggle, and the kids watch with fearful, ice-cold faces, as the flow of wind rushes around them in a chaotic storm.

Dillan stands and watches. He can feel tears well up beneath his eyelids. All three children would give a horrified glance between their mother and their father every few seconds.

As Jericho goes to pull out a second pistol, a handgun, Irene runs up and gives a firm shove to her father. The firearm flies across the street. Jericho swings his arm around and slams Irene to the ground with a blue bruise.

“I should’ve volunteered to have you all up for experimentation long before tonight—”

A click of a handgun goes off in the street. Jericho turns to see Dillan, who points the gun towards Jericho.

“Ah, my pathetic son, and you wanted to join law enforcement? Hah!”

Dillan clenches his teeth and grips the gun tight.

“You’re too weak to do it. You’ve always been weak. The weakest one in the family. The weakest speck I’ve ever known in the world, and I’ve met many weaklings, already. A waste of a son,” Jericho says. He lifts the virus gun and points it at Isabelle.

Dillan pulls the trigger, and a bullet goes through Jericho’s neck. Jericho trembles down to the ground—lifeless.

Dillan drops the gun and falls to his knees. Tears flow down his cold cheeks.

Isabelle goes over to Irene and hugs her tight.

Alex runs over to join in.

Heavy warm tears slither down their faces like a downpour. Isabelle can hear Dillan whimper in the distance as she lifts her head and calls him over.

Dillan stumbles towards his mother, sister and brother, and he hugs them tight.

They all stand up and walk towards the helicopter.

END