

one story

*Midnight Sessions*

*Josh Riedel*

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# *Midnight Sessions*

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Late for work, Moot Mangorski raced across the Cleo Corp campus to the Research and Development Building, where that morning a crowd of protestors had gathered in the lobby. What was it this time? A man bared his fuzzy teeth. A woman waved a poster of a moldy tooth. Two children squeezed out sparkling coils of green toothpaste onto the marble floor. Ah yes, Forest Fresh. Rumor was, the toothpaste encouraged the growth of a peculiar mold. Probably true, but what had they expected? The company's hygiene products always caused certain cosmetic alterations, usually minor. Why else would they sell them so cheap? Besides, wasn't it too late to worry about all this? Hadn't earlier generations already poisoned the earth? How did anyone find the energy to protest toothpaste, of all things?

Still, Moot liked to acknowledge the protestors. "Good morning," he said to a rangy man with aqua hair. The

protestor blocked his path. “Excuse me,” Moot said, pushing his way to the elevator. Stars swirled in Moot’s skin, clustering at his fingertips. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Wait,” the protestor said, watching a star travel up Moot’s neck. “Are you—” He reached for the ID badge clipped to Moot’s shirt pocket. Moot turned away and stabbed the button for the elevator. “You are!” the man exclaimed. “You actually work here, after what they did to you?” The elevator doors opened, and Moot rushed in. “Wait!” the man cried. Moot mashed the buttons until the doors sealed shut.

A senior harvester for Cleo Corp, Moot was no stranger to interacting with the most potent research subjects, though what had just happened in the lobby was unusual. Not in years had he allowed his condition to be publicly visible. Stars burned beneath his skin, always, but he knew how to keep them from surfacing. A fluke, he told himself as he rose to the rooftop. He kept his hands in his pockets even though no one else was in the elevator.

On the rooftop, Moot spotted his boss, Mr. Sackamoray, wedged into a gap between the snack machines. Flecks of orange energy shake fizzed on his thick mustache. “He’s a perfect candidate, don’t you think?” Mr. Sackamoray waved his phone at Moot. On the screen, live footage of the protests showed security dragging the aqua-haired man across the marble floor of the lobby and out of the building.

Moot leaned against a snack machine, trying to act casual. “He’s not bad, though I observed other subjects in the lobby

with considerably more fungal hyphae.”

Mr. Sackamoray dropped his empty can to the ground. His green eyes faded pale yellow—pigment degradation, a known issue with the unreleased energy shake. “I think he’s perfect.” His eye twitched, or was it a wink? “We’ll arrange for him to come in tomorrow.”

Years ago, when he started at Cleo Corp, Moot might have questioned Mr. Sackamoray’s ability to convince the protester, but he now knew his boss had an unmatched capacity to turn even Cleo Corp’s most ardent adversaries into supporters. He’d promise money and a cure in exchange for three days of their time. “Whatever you wish, sir.”

Mr. Sackamoray winked again and tucked a vial of *Midnight Sessions* into Moot’s breast pocket before scuttling across the rooftop, back into the building. Moot waited until his boss was out of sight and then reached for the vial. He liked to be alone with it, the cologne that had started all of this, whose chocolate and tobacco scents he still longed for. Impossible to find anywhere but here, at Cleo Corp, taken off the shelves years ago, deemed illegal, unsafe. Mr. Sackamoray knew he couldn’t resist. Moot rubbed the cologne into his neck and wrists and waited for it to soak into his skin. When he brought his fingers to his nose and sniffed, a hot crackling shot through his star-flecked limbs.

The next morning, Moot found a stack of new-subject paperwork on his desk. The consent form listed the protestor’s name as Flux. In his headshot, he looked

friendlier than he had at the protest: a crooked smile and hair down to his jawline, aqua bangs chopped neatly over his brown eyes. Moot looked at the photo objectively, the way a good harvester should. He reviewed Flux's medical forms and set the dials on the harvest machinery to levels appropriate for Flux's height and weight. He inputted data from the forms into the computer. When he was finished, he glanced at the photo again, and it was then, in the dull light of his cubicle, that tiny stars sparkled on his knuckles. "Shit," Moot muttered. He put on a pair of latex gloves and walked slowly down the long hallway to Flux's suite, trying to gather himself. When he arrived, he closed his eyes and took five deep breaths, picturing the translucent mallards that swam so peacefully on the pond outside his duplex on the west end of the Cleo Corp campus. In this calm state, he knocked and slid open the door. The subject's clothes were draped over a chair in the kitchen. "Flux, you there?"

The bathroom door opened. Flux stood in the steam, his hazy body wrapped in a mustard-yellow towel. "It's you," he said, stepping toward Moot. "I wasn't sure they'd keep their promise."

"Moot Mangorski," he said, holding out his gloved hand. "Nice to officially meet."

Flux didn't shake Moot's hand. Instead, he pushed up Moot's sleeve and ran his fingers over the tiny stars on Moot's arm. "Brighter than on TV." Moot pulled away and rolled down his shirtsleeves. He almost began to lecture Flux about subject-harvester etiquette, but he was too flustered.

He averted his gaze. Flux smiled, showing the black-and-green fuzz on his teeth. "Are you still mad at them?" he asked. He was close enough for Moot to catch a whiff of his hibiscus shampoo. When Moot didn't answer, Flux nodded as though his silence explained something. "I see."

After Flux changed into his white jumpsuit, Moot explained how the research process worked. All Flux had to do was remain inside his suite for three nights, and Cleo Corp's sophisticated instruments would collect samples from his body and analyze them to find a cure. "You won't notice a thing," Moot assured him. "Most subjects are cured of their side effects within the three-night period." He handed Flux a stack of informational pamphlets, none of which mentioned that Cleo Corp would use the samples from his body for further research and development. "Any questions?"

"What if I don't want to be cured? What if I want to stay like this, like you?"

"Then you should leave," Moot said. He had encountered Flux's type before, protestors who wanted to ally themselves with him in order to find purpose in their otherwise empty lives. He had no patience for them. Cures existed, and as long as they acted fast enough, his subjects could return to their original states. It's what Moot would have done had the technology been in place before it was too late for him.

Flux walked toward the small kitchen, found a cocktail shaker, and began to mix a batch of Negronis, carefully measuring out the gin, vermouth, and Campari. "My civics teacher let us watch the trial, you know."

Moot looked up from his forms. “Please, that was ten years ago.”

“Then there was the *Dateline* special, remember? I thought you looked so cool, like a superhero.”

Stars swirled on Moot’s cheeks. There was a time when, upon being recognized, Moot would attempt an explanation for why he worked for Cleo Corp, but he no longer felt he owed subjects that. Besides, all anyone wanted to hear was what it was like to be addicted to a cologne, what it felt like to use it, if it was a coke high or a boozy low. His addiction was more complicated than they could have known. How could he explain it? He liked his new, star-filled body, and whenever he tried to give up the cologne, he didn’t like the plain man left over. It wasn’t *him*. “I’d prefer not to talk about it,” Moot stated. “I’m here to do research.”

Flux sat next to Moot on the couch and handed him his drink. A sucking sound, like a tiny vacuum, came from the cushions. “What is that?” A strand of Flux’s wet hair slithered across the sofa.

“It’s collecting samples.”

Flux readjusted and whispered, “You deserve better.”

Moot scooted away. “I’m fine,” he assured Flux, and then he repeated a PR script he’d memorized during orientation. “You can trust Cleo Corp. Any perceived mistakes are simply the effects of one company pushing the boundaries of the possible.”

Flux finished his drink in one gulp. “Jesus, how much are they paying you?” He held a hand to his mouth, failing to

hide a small burp. “Look,” he said, scooting closer, “even if you’re at peace with what they did, aren’t you concerned about what else might happen? One day the effects will be more than cosmetic.”

Moot didn’t tell Flux that the hygiene division was relatively tame compared to Cleo Corp’s other initiatives. Few knew that the trendiest respirator masks, including the ones with the patterned print of kitties sleeping in hammocks, were manufactured by Cleo Corp, the very company deemed responsible for decreasing the quality of air from bad to worse. Same with the one-piece, anti-microbial swimsuits all the public schoolchildren were now required to wear. And the good-morning pills, and the good-night pills. Even the soundtrack of rare birdsongs that played on loop in city parks was a Cleo Corp product, meant to give the impression that the birds, all close to extinction, were alive and well, singing in the trees.

“I just want you to know you have other options.” Flux set his hand on Moot’s. On his knuckles, a hint of moss, the same as on his teeth. Moot’s heartbeat quickened, and the stars in his wrists flickered, hot pinpricks beneath his skin.

“They get so bright,” Flux said, brushing his mossy fingers over the stars on Moot’s neck. All the stars in his arms moved to his hands, and tiny halos formed around his fingertips. Moot took off his latex gloves, thinking that might help, but the stars only shone brighter.

“They’re not always like this,” Moot said, standing. He clasped his hands behind his back. “You need to settle in.”

He left his cocktail on the table, unfinished, and hurried out of the suite.

He walked briskly along the creek that ran through campus, toward employee housing. The creek water was turquoise and smelled like onions, oddly pleasing. He pulled down his respirator mask to breathe it in, unfiltered. Fumes, tinted crimson by the setting sun, billowed out of smokestacks up the hill, at the Cleo Corp factories. Moot paused to take a picture with his phone.

At the duplex, his neighbor was in a bikini, on the shared patio, applying sunscreen vigorously, even though the sun was nearly gone. “Good evening,” she said. Moot tried to avoid eye contact, to give her some privacy, but it was always tough not to watch. She rubbed the sunscreen in a circular motion, like she was washing a car, her large body covered in bruises from where she had rubbed too hard. “Shit,” she said, when she had squeezed out the last of it. She unscrewed the cap and stuck her pinky finger in to gather a little more. Moot had seen her only hours earlier hunched over her desk at the lab. Her high wasn’t visible yet, but it would be soon. Nights, Moot watched her through his kitchen window as he washed the dishes. She placed a boombox on the bench where Moot always sat to feed the translucent ducks, pressed play, and then hovered a few inches above the pond and began to dance. Sometimes Moot woke in the middle of the night for a snack, and she would still be there, above the pond, dancing. He would stay up even after he finished his snack and watch her, glad for this proof that his colleagues,

too, could appreciate the returns of their hard work. It made him feel connected to something larger.

On Flux’s second day, Moot arrived at the suite just as the lights began to increase in brightness, an artificial sunrise. Flux pushed away the sheets, stretched and yawned. The moss on his body had traveled in a neat line down his torso, to his navel. Clumps of moss ran down his legs and dotted his toes. “It always gets worse before it gets better,” Moot said. He pointed at a flower in Flux’s armpit. “What’s that?”

Flux inspected the flower. “I don’t know. Never happened before.”

“What if you pluck it? Does it hurt?”

Flux pinched the flower between his fingers and yanked it out like a stray hair. “Not really.” He handed the flower to Moot, a bead of blood at its stem. The flower’s minty aroma disoriented Moot. He turned hot, a sudden fever. His skin glowed through his shirt, his pants, even his shoes. A cluster of stars leaked out and floated to the ceiling. That had never happened before. He hadn’t even known it was possible. He excused himself to the bathroom and splashed cold water onto his face. When he was decent again, he muttered apologies to Flux, who begged him to stay (“No, no, it’s incredible!”), and escaped the suite.

He was self-conscious about leaving so abruptly a second time, and so on the way to his afternoon meeting with Mr. Sackamoray, he texted Flux. *Sorry again for my sudden departure. I’ll be back tonight to check in.* Moot looked over

the text, already sent. *My sudden departure?* What a stiff way to say it. But how was he to describe what had come over him? His words couldn't keep up with his body. He sent Flux the photo of last night's sunset to distract from his clumsy words.

Behind his desk, Mr. Sackamoray stared at his computer screen, cackling. "Look at this, Mooty boy." He turned the screen. The pop star Jessica Shine, smiling wide with her moldy teeth, strutted around the Mission in a T-shirt that said I DON'T GIVE A FUZZ. The photo had gone viral. "That's the genius work of our marketing team thinking big, thinking quick." He paused, cocked his head, and sniffed the air. "What's that smell?" he asked. "A delicious minty aroma."

Moot wanted to keep Flux's flower for himself. He held his hand to his chest, over the jacket pocket where the flower was hidden. The tips of his fingers lit up. "An experiment," he said.

Mr. Sackamoray stared at Moot's flickering hand. "Listen, Moot. You know how this works. These subjects, the most potent ones, they'll mess with your head. You've done this a thousand times. Deliver the results we expect and everyone's happy." He took from his velvet jacket a small glass bottle from which he spritzed a dash of cologne onto his sweaty palm. Leaning over his desk, he patted Moot's face. But when the cologne made contact with Moot's skin, spirals of stars were not set into motion across his cheeks. He did not light up, did not flicker. Mr. Sackamoray sprayed

the cologne again, this time directly onto Moot's neck. Still nothing. "What is it, Moot?"

Moot snatched the cologne from his boss and sprayed it until the bottle was gone. He felt nothing, and then he felt terribly ill, like he needed something he couldn't have. He lit out of Mr. Sackamoray's office and bolted across campus, to his duplex. It was strange to see his neighbor's lawn chair abandoned. She was at work, of course, and yet somehow he had imagined she was always here, on the patio, waiting to greet him. He craved the familiarity of his routine. Inside, he hurried to his bedroom and crouched to open the safe in his closet. He took out his reserve bottle of Midnight Sessions, filled with the last drops from each bottle he'd been awarded since he started at Cleo Corp. He'd prepared for a day when Mr. Sackamoray determined his performance wasn't deserving, but never for a day when the cologne lost its power. He took off his clothes, lay chest up on the scratchy carpet, unscrewed the bottle, and poured the cologne onto his body, the way he did years ago, when he could purchase it in three-packs from his local pharmacy. He emptied the bottle onto his chest, and when he didn't feel anything, he rolled onto his stomach and rubbed himself on the cologne-soaked carpet. When that didn't do anything, he sucked and licked until the cheap pile scratched his lips and tongue. Through it all, he could smell the flower Flux had given him. His body knew what it wanted. Exhausted, he gave in. He rolled over, reached for his jacket, and brushed the flower on his skin. The stars appeared again. So bright. He rubbed

the flower on his arms and chest, then everywhere else, and when his skin was covered, he scrunched up the flower and ate it, felt its slow burn down his throat.

He dressed and left the duplex for his cubicle, fast-walking across campus, feeling excellent. He considered the nature of this new attraction. If he didn't need Midnight Sessions, did he also no longer need Cleo Corp? He told himself when he started that he would work at Cleo Corp only as long as it took to save up enough cologne, though he had never teased out how much was enough exactly. In the intervening years, Cleo Corp had become home. How could he leave?

At his desk, he put on a pair of latex gloves and opened the collection drawer, full of samples from Flux's body. He sifted through deposits of dried skin, stray hairs, fingernails, and clumps of mold until he found another flower, this one smaller than the one Flux had picked for him, but enough to tide him over. Moot took the small flower from the collection drawer and began to rub the petals on his arms and neck. He would need more; he could feel that. Turning from the collection drawer to the control panel, Moot cranked the fertilizer dial higher, so that more would flow into the tap water. Ten times as much as was required for a subject of Flux's size. *Warning, Warning*, the control panel flashed as fertilizer filled the water lines to Flux's suite. Moot hit *Ignore*, bypassing the warning, and swallowed what was left of the flower.

His phone dinged: a photo of the stars he had lost, lodged

in the ceiling panels of the suite. *A Moot constellation*, Flux texted.

That night, Flux's second in the suite, Moot tried to keep his check-in efficient. The extra fertilizer in the water would make Flux woozy, and it was best for his health and the production of additional flowers for him to rest. But after Moot performed his routine series of tests, Flux insisted he hang out for a while. Declining the invitation might have increased the subject's cortisol levels, which might have led to an inferior harvest, so Moot agreed to stay for an hour or so, to appease the subject.

"Awesome," Flux said. He sat on the floor with his laptop, searching the Internet for something. Though no new buds had appeared on his skin, he was more fragrant than he had been the day before. Moot wondered if he had noticed this but didn't want to raise suspicion. "Found it," Flux said, sidling up next to Moot on the couch. "Mind if I play it?"

This wasn't the first time a subject had tried to show him the *Dateline* clip, but it was the first time he didn't refuse. He wanted to keep Flux happy, so he stayed quiet as the video played. "Look how beautiful," Flux said, pausing on a scene where Moot walked with Stone Phillips along Ocean Beach at night, his stars casting a halo around the two of them. "Back then, you really glowed."

"I couldn't control them," Moot admitted. It had taken him years to learn how to cool the stars, to not let too much of himself show. Before, when he was lit up in public all the time, everyone pointed and stared. They took photos



and videos, which they shared and reshared. His body was a spectacle he couldn't be inside; he was always standing outside of himself, evaluating what he looked like.

"You control them now?" Flux asked, setting his hand on Moot's. His body swayed a little, evidence the fertilizer had been absorbed into his bloodstream.

"When I can," Moot said, standing to leave.

Flux hugged him goodnight. "You don't need to," he whispered.

Moot breathed in deep. A few stars left his fingertips and shot up into the ceiling.

It was dark by the time Moot arrived at the duplex. His neighbor was already levitating over the pond, twirling like a ballerina. As he approached, she moved toward him. "Good evening," she said, hovering in front of him. Moot had never talked with her at night, when she was like this, and wasn't sure what to say. "Don't act like you've never seen," she said, lowering herself so that she was eye-level with Moot. "What's your story?"

Moot rolled up his shirtsleeves to show her the stars on his arm, fading now that he was away from Flux.

"I know all about that," she said. "I mean why did you keep doing it in the first place? Before you really had to."

"Why did you?"

"When I was a girl, I was a figure skater," she said, "but as I matured, my body couldn't move in the same way, until I discovered what the sunscreen can do."

"I always imagined you as a dancer," Moot admitted.

"You imagine me?" she asked.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Like what?"

All he meant was that he hadn't tried to imagine her as someone other than who she was. So many people had done that to him when he lived in public, to the point where he wasn't sure they were wrong. "You're a figure skater," he said.

She nodded. "So why do you do it?"

He felt that he did have a reason beyond the high, but he didn't know how to explain it. It didn't make him feel like any particular thing—certainly not like a figure skater—and maybe that was precisely it, why he couldn't quit: he could feel like a hundred billion things at once. "I don't know," he said.

"Why can't anyone ever describe why they want what they want?" She started to move away from him, then stopped. "What are you up to with this new subject anyway?"

Moot was caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

"You know I'm responsible for reviewing the logs, right? Whatever you're planning, be careful. The machines can clog." She skated backwards, toward the pond. Beneath the bench, where her boombox sat, a translucent mallard slept standing on one leg, the other tucked into the warmth of its feathers.

On the third and final night, Moot noticed Flux's fertile levels had yet to spike. He suggested they cook dinner together and even offered to make his special tiramisu for dessert.

Cooking with the subject was an approved way to make sure fluid intake was high, to guarantee productive harvests. As they cooked, Moot insisted Flux hold off on wine, keeping his water glass full instead.

At the dinner table, Flux told Moot what he hoped to do the rest of the week, when he was away from Cleo Corp: wear clothes that were not the jumpsuit; enjoy a long run through Golden Gate Park, all the way to the ocean; dine at his favorite vegetarian Indian restaurant on Valencia Street. “I’m talking about myself too much,” Flux said. “What do you do when you’re not here?”

Moot told Flux about the translucent ducks, how he named a bonded pair Charlie and Parker, and how Charlie always shared the breadcrumbs with Parker even though he was bigger. He wondered aloud what their agreement might be, what Parker owed Charlie for this. Flux suggested that perhaps it was a kindness, a favor that needn’t be repaid. Moot nodded and thought of his neighbor, what her motivation might have been for telling him about the machines. He began to tell Flux about the beautiful way she skated at night, but Flux had become distracted by the TV.

“I just don’t get this Jessica Shine commercial for Forest Fresh. I must’ve seen it a hundred times already today, and every time I’m more annoyed. Her teeth aren’t like mine, right? She’s faking it?”

Moot cut off his story about his neighbor and refilled Flux’s water. “I wouldn’t worry about it,” he said.

“I’m not worried,” Flux said. “It’s just, is this what we’ve come to?”

Moot thought perhaps he could make an argument for how Jessica Shine was redefining beauty standards, but what would be the point? Maybe she was, but her motivations were no doubt questionable, and wasn’t that what Flux cared about, why we do the things we do? “I noticed on your forms you listed film as an interest,” Moot said, changing the subject. “Want to watch something?”

Flux played an old Italian movie about a stolen bicycle and finished both of their desserts, scraping the last of the custard into his mouth as a man onscreen ran after another man yelling, “Thief! Thief!” Moot brought him another tall glass of water and cozied up next to him on the couch, trying to get into the film to distract himself from the guilt that had started to well up. He had to remind himself that it wasn’t a bad thing to look out for yourself. All he did was cure people; why not take a little something off the top every now and then? But what if he had tried to take too much? What if the machines did clog? And worse, there was the issue of Flux himself. Even Mr. Sackamoray had been forced to admit that if a subject is overexposed, like Moot had been, there was no going back. Moot was already haunted by the thought of people pointing at Flux and shouting, *Mold Man, Mold Man!* They’d take pictures and videos and post them everywhere. He’d be an online joke, a viral sensation. And then Mr. Sackamoray would ask Moot to make the call, he knew it. He could already hear himself on speakerphone

giving the pitch: *We offer a competitive salary and benefits, employee housing on the privacy of the Cleo Corp campus, and all the discontinued products you'll ever desire.* “We truly had your best interests at heart,” Moot mumbled, repeating a line he’d heard so many times at his trial.

“Huh?” Flux muttered, already half-asleep, the movie credits rolling.

Moot turned off the TV, took Flux by the hand, and led him to the bedroom. Flux collapsed onto the twin mattress. “Don’t go,” he said, as Moot lowered the lights.

Moot had planned to stay in the suite that night to monitor the new growth on Flux’s body. “I won’t,” Moot said, inspecting Flux for new buds.

Flux scooted to the edge of the mattress and patted the narrow space he’d made for Moot.

The stars began to swirl. Moot undid the top buttons on his shirt and fanned himself, hoping to cool down, but he only burned brighter. It was as though every star in his body was drawn to Flux. He slid between the covers and curled into his subject, pressing his starry body against Flux so that he, too, was illuminated. “Can you feel them?” Moot asked. “Do they burn?”

“A little,” Flux said, his voice far-off, already in another world.

Soon, flowers began to blossom all over Flux’s body, in all shades and shapes: long pink tubes, droopy white bells, giant fluffs of blue. Around his waist, tiny white petals dotted pink. Moot ran to the kitchen for a pair of scissors. As he

searched through the drawers—chopsticks, Scotch tape, pennies, batteries—he heard Flux cough. Cough again. Gag.

“Flux, you okay?”

Moot grabbed a knife and rushed back into the bedroom. Where the bed had been was now a vibrant garden. Moot paused to admire the garden, how beautiful it was. And the smells! “Flux, it’s magnificent,” he said, bending to smell a rose. He plucked the rose, then another, stashing them in a lab specimen bag before the suite’s collection machinery could suck them up. “Flux, thank you for this,” he said, hacking away at the garden with his knife. Flux didn’t respond; he wasn’t even visible. Moot cut into vines, reaching his thorn-scratched arms deeper into the garden, plucking out the most precious flowers. He worked his way around the bed, harvesting as much as he could, telling himself he’d find Flux later. But the more flowers he collected, the more rapidly the garden grew, until vegetation filled the bedroom, spilling out into the rest of the suite. Tiger lilies sprouted through the tiled floor. A creek formed, soaking his feet. Sequoias towered over him. Moot, ecstatic, searched the undergrowth for hidden flowers.

Only after Moot filled his bag did he remember he had work to do and tried to find his way back to the bed, where Flux might be. He wandered, crunching through the forest, unsure where he was. *This tree must be where the stove was, and this patch of mushrooms the TV...* “Flux?” he cried. He could hear a sound like *mm-abhhhh*, a sound that reminded him of the song of an extinct bird piped through the fake-

rock speakers on campus. He followed that sound—*mm-abbbhh*, *glug glug glug*, *mm-abbbhh*—and when he had almost arrived at its source realized it wasn't the sound of an extinct bird but that of Mr. Sackamoray chugging an energy shake. And yes, there he was, his boss, perched atop a fallen oak in this strange forest.

“Wonderful to see you, Moot,” Mr. Sackamoray said.

Moot thought to conceal his bag of flowers, but he must have misplaced it somewhere in the forest. He was bedraggled, lightheaded, could hardly stand. “May I ask, sir, where we are?”

Mr. Sackamoray grinned. “We’re at Cleo Corp, Moot.”

“We’re in a forest.”

“Yes, it appears so. Thank you for that.” Mr. Sackamoray beetled over to Moot and pulled from his jacket pocket a bottle of cologne. “Quite a productive evening you’ve had,” he said. “Here, a way to show how important you are to the Cleo Corp family.”

Hadn't Mr. Sackamoray seen that Midnight Sessions no longer did it for him? Moot felt invincible, knowing that his boss had lost this power over him. He stepped closer, daring Mr. Sackamoray to spray the cologne.

He did.

A star rose from Moot's arm.

“Look at that!” Mr. Sackamoray said. He sprayed the cologne again, and another star escaped Moot's body.

Moot snatched the cologne from his boss, sprayed it, and sniffed. It was Flux's flowery breath, the steam in the

bathroom, his hibiscus shampoo. Fragrances Moot hadn't thought special enough to capture, but which he now so dearly missed. He rubbed the cologne into his neck and wrists.

Mr. Sackamoray stood behind Moot, his hands on his shoulders. The stars in Moot's arms flickered and rose out of his skin. They hovered above their heads and then soared past the treetops, into the night sky. “Magnificent,” Mr. Sackamoray said, breathing heavy down Moot's neck.

Moot tried to roll down his shirtsleeves, to keep the stars inside.

“No,” Mr. Sackamoray whispered, clamping a sweaty paw on Moot's arm.

Moot closed his eyes and breathed in deep. He sprayed the cologne on his face and arms and chest, wherever he could, until the bottle was empty. But it wasn't enough, and it never would be. What he desired most could not be bottled and sold. Stars shot through his skin, blazed and ricocheted off the nearby trees. His whole body burned, and even Mr. Sackamoray couldn't touch him anymore, he burned so bright. He raced through the forest, in search of Flux, stars streaking behind him. He ran all night and all year and still runs, the stars he sheds rising high above the sequoias to fill the sky with clusters of light, the constellations we use to find our way home.

## THANK YOU ONE STORY SUPPORTERS

Josh Riedel worked at startups in Silicon Valley before earning an MFA from the University of Arizona. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Passages North* and *Sycamore Review*. The recipient of fellowships from Yaddo and the Field Studies in Writing Program on Grand Manan, he has recently completed a novel and is at work on a collection of short stories about technology, work, and the environment. He lives in Portland, Oregon. More at [joshriedel.com](http://joshriedel.com) and on Instagram @josh.

To read an interview with Josh Riedel about “Midnight Sessions,” visit the stories section of [one-story.com](http://one-story.com). To discuss the story with other subscribers, visit [one-story.com/blog](http://one-story.com/blog).

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