

12-23-2010

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Dustbowl

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B.A. English and History, Texas Tech University, 2008

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri –
St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with an emphasis in Fiction

December 2010

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Dustbowl

I

Ward stepped outside his apartment for the first time all weekend. He turned the key to his door six times, making sure all the locks slid over. He did not have much but nearly all he did have sat behind the four inches of that door. On the way down the stairs to his scooter he watched the sky. The sun slid down the greasy spring horizon, leaving a wet red trail behind itself as it went. With dust caking the air outside in Lubbock there never shined an abundance of light, but compared to the closed mini-blinds of the space he rented, there was enough to make him squint for a bit.

He wore a brown leather jacket and denim jeans. These he had on mostly because his ride had no walls and Ward did not want to skid half his skin off in a crash. On his head he wore a black helmet with a single strap and nothing over the face. Goggles went over his eyes; one had to wear goggles, there was too much soil in the air not to. The wind shields on the city border helped some with the dirt but not enough. He rode to the nearest store, a good mile away, staying on the shoulder. Sometimes trucks would care if they came close to hitting him when he rode on the lanes, and sometimes they would not. He had purchased the lightest scooter of its class and getting hit would probably send him deep into the infertile cotton fields of the surrounding area. Even on a Saturday when the trucks usually got the day off, he did not want to test his luck. With him getting boozed for the fifth night in a row, any luck he did have was probably already strained.

The ride provided the familiar sight of rows of abandoned vehicles off the side of the road. Pick-ups and SUVs at the front, sedans, coupes, and even a few cycles more towards the back. Rainbows of wreckage that could be found any place big enough to create a supply. A dozen or so families lived in the cars he passed; these car families existed in every city with wreckage, and some magazines had even written about how normal the families' existence seemed. They even had yards. They had each other, they had together. Ward had not felt together for months but he did have central air and he was about to have a bottle to enjoy it with. Like most anything worth feeling in his apartment, it was worth feeling while drunk.

The city around him did not appear either especially prosperous or poor, different places ever-teetering on the edge of either. The cars on the side of the road signified the incumbent gas-starved future of every city more than they signified economics, though Ward was sure the reverse argument had been made on any number of news stations that he did not watch. News did not count as such when a person had a surety of the bleakness of his surroundings. Wide, brick buildings and their outmoded parking lots took up acres that trash and dirt contended for in the swirling gusts of the day. Ward could not remember a day in the flat plains city that was not windy. The older inhabitants he had encountered, professors at the university, said Lubbock looked much the same as it always had despite the war. Being on the nation's side had enabled that—staying unbombed unlike spic-heavy San Antonio, but then not receiving much of the post-war reconstruction money due to the wrath of the rest of the state. Vengeance due to lack of geographic loyalty as opposed to lack of racial principles, his professors explained. A certain thing Texans could not stand.

Ward caught his reflection in the nearby windows of the store when he parked, and decided that he would look younger than his nineteen years if he would ever bother to sleep without passing out first. Drinking had deformed his once-athletic frame, softening it around the edges without actually bloating it. Long circles had taken root beneath his dark eyes, and his brown hair grew out in a tattered mash. The shop was all metal frames and glass in between, except for where it was bottles. Ward opened the door to the inside with a kind of violent nonchalance, as if pushing a child to the ground. Inside he walked to the far end of the vodka shelf and picked up a plastic handle. It being the middle of the weekend, he told himself that he could make the bottle last longer than until Tuesday, but this he thought only so he wouldn't feel so pathetic about buying it.

He checked himself out at the front. Ward knew diversion from shame and embarrassment was one of the reasons people liked to drink in the first place, instead of just making it simpler for those feelings to gain an extra foothold in their souls. Sometimes a person wanted to feel bad. He probably might not have even bought the liquor if the place still had clerks with eyes and memories instead of impersonal computer kiosks at the register. The cheapest handle cost him twenty dollars and he thought about what part of his money that came from. He had been saving steadily ever since he had gotten his first job at the age of sixteen, and his account had never had less in it at the end of a month than it did at the beginning, though usually not by all that much. Most of what he had in currency now was through student loans. Even so there was a continuum of cash, a foreverness to the numbers in his account. The idea that maybe the money he spent now had been earned years before in a nothing job while he left those closest to him

to die—even inadvertently—shadowed his thoughts, but he would drown that soon enough.

Before the sun had set Ward stood in his apartment pouring the vodka into a smaller plastic bottle with a screw-top. No spills. He added grape juice, and that was what it tasted like, mostly. In his apartment the walls and shelves remained uncovered, the only decoration a hand-me-down couch, a cardboard box used as a coffee table of sorts in front of that, and a picnic table bought from a yard sale that he ate meals on. In his room he had a short dresser doubling as a desk and then his bed beside that with most of its covers at one end. His screen sat on a stand in front of his couch in the living room, but it was light and easily moved. He put a movie about cars and their destruction on the viewing device, and after a few hours he ate a bowl of cereal and stumbled into his bed. When he woke up four hours later he could not return to sleep. Already hard, he masturbated thinking about women that were happy to see him. The drowsing edge of that act eroded long ago, and so he did it again twenty minutes later and then he dozed for three hours more.

The ringing of his phone, forgotten in the living room on top of the box-table, finally dragged him out of bed. His mother. A twinge of unexpectedness hit him. He coughed and cleared his throat and tested a few words before answering.

“Hi Mom.”

“Hello son,” she said. “School alright?”

“I suppose.”

“Well.” She sighed. “A hospital just called me telling me your father’s died. Consumption. He never told anyone. Funeral’s tomorrow, I thought you should know.”

He said nothing in response, and he assumed his mother thought he had hung up on her because she hung up on him. He sat down on the couch behind him, got up, sat down again, then finally rolled backwards until he came over the back of the couch and flopped slowly onto the floor. He breathed there for a half hour, watching the rising and falling of his chest and thought about how it once mirrored a living person. He recalled his head more than ten years before resting on his father's wide belly; a breakfast the day after Christmas when the old man had made everybody waffles and orange juice slushes; Ward hiding under a blanket on the couch to fool Mom, and Dad playing along. The old man never, ever lying, even when maybe he should have. These the first items brought to mind of a dead man who had fixed machines for a living.

Ward got up to go to his computer and checked there what he already suspected. Five hundred miles in gas to Houston meant he wouldn't make it to the funeral and probably not even to the grave. The shields on the Lubbock city limits took care of the more severe effects of the dust and heat, but outside those the elements would take care of what the star cult or the highwaymen or any of the other morally equivocal forces of the world did not. Walking might get him ten miles out of the city limits before someone ran him over or down. The highwaymen hated having people on their roads. Everyone else that could traverse upon the tar and concrete with any regularity was well-equipped enough not to take any chances with any person encountered, or so the talk went. He stared at the screen for an hour almost, examining the prices. The exact dollar amount that would make him a good son matched in his head against the bills and fees that would enslave him if he let ethics outweigh reason.

Ward got up from his chair and went to the shower and put a twenty dollar bill in the slot and let the spray run across him for the full ten minutes allotted to him from the utilities company. His professors said that water was not really so expensive; even so, it was. Things owned for a long enough time somehow always gained more monetary value than actual worth. Dried off and dressed he felt clean enough to start drinking again, and so filled his bottle half and half as he had the night before and began. Silence and stillness served as condiments to the alcohol while he drank. He looked at his backpack and books in the corner of his room and knew already he would miss his classes the next day. Without mandatory attendance, usually he fulfilled the role of one of the few regulars. If a professor had noted that, then his absence would serve as a reminder for them not to try so hard. Ward thought about that and drank and then he poured himself another bottle.

In his player he put in a movie, one about knights, and he watched that and refilled twice, emptying out the vodka he bought the day before. He picked out another movie to watch and after a bit felt his eyes starting to refocus and his body turning not quite so warm and floating. Thinking that perhaps he should not be so alone, he picked up his phone and found only four numbers there. Outside of his mother and father and the sandwich-delivery place down the street, there was only his former dorm mate that had punched Ward in the face for allegedly smoking all his weed.

Ward had not done it, had not, in fact, ever felt a desire to get intoxicated with anything outside of alcohol. And it hit him then, looking at those numbers on the screen, that he had no one to call. That without him realizing it, his solitude had reached such momentum it had vacuumed his self inside it. With nothing but the alcohol left, he could not imagine a time when he wanted to feel sober and so he then left his apartment to go

back to the store. The light outside, or what passed for such in the Dustbowl, was nearly faded. He forgot his jacket but remembered his helmet, and decided that would be enough.

Down the road he swerved and nearly hit a cat that belonged to one of the car families. They yelled and shook their skinny fists at him, mad at him for nearly killing an animal that they likely would have eaten for dinner if he had. Inside the store he bought enough bottles to fill up the small basket on the back of his scooter. A kind of experiment in the liquid volume of grief. On the drive back home he swigged one of the clear handles with one hand and with the other he veered into a dog.

Waking up late the next morning his eyebrow and his chest stuck to his sheets, arms coiled in red wet bloody thickness from having not bothered to bandage himself. It had not seemed so bad in the dark. Miniscule craters in the white walls of his apartment peered back at him as he stayed where he lay, just awake enough to know that moving any more would tear the patchwork scabbing that had formed in his sleep. Probably part of it had healed the lint and thread of his blanket into his body.

He could remember the last time he had woken up, lying on the road face to face with the beagle. Its eyes looking into his, the reflection there of his eyes looking into its and the reflection inside of that doing the same. An eternity to be explored, and then it faded. Isolated halves of any living being would die fast and the dog did not surprise in that regard. Ward had raised a dog only once and felt that the experience had ruined him for future pets. When you keep something that's only purpose is to show obedient adoration, and it dies without reason, it's almost like there's nothing that can survive very

long after it loves you. Down the road a few yards his scooter had sat on its side, where it rested after bouncing off his chest when he had flipped off.

On his bed he snapped up like a mousetrap and brought the pain all at once. A solid red line on his pectorals began to drip downwards as he leaned forward with his palms in his eyes, manufacturing whiteness against the sheet of his eyelids to blot out the burning of the cool air on his exposed skin. When he got up it was to walk into his bathroom and stand over the sink, and every minute for nearly a half-hour he spat into the yellowed bowl, looking for a trace of red, anything that might signify an internal problem. Couldn't afford the hospital, even with his insurance, but he didn't believe he could afford to die either. When no blood came except for that on his chest and hands, he sat on the toilet and wrapped an Ace bandage slathered in antibiotic ointment around his torso. His chest had started to bruise and he made sure to wrap tight but gingerly.

Ward hadn't been injured much, and never seriously, so it was possible wrapping and ointmenting as he did could stave off a complication from the wound. He didn't have a whole lot of knowledge about such things. He knew that at hospitals they injected folks with kinds of viruses now to get rid of infections. He washed his hands under the sink to take the dried blood off the scrapes there. It was cold in his apartment, always, and Ward liked it this way. He liked it more now—if he hadn't been wearing long sleeves when he drove, he'd probably have a lot more scabbing to deal with.

Only after all this did he look in the mirror and see the blackness that enveloped his right eye. He had been squinting but the light of the bathroom always seemed bright. Now he tried to open the eye and discovered it swollen tight. The angry, fist-happy owner

of the dog, member of a car family. Ward had stooped over to pick up his still-intact plastic bottles on the road and the man charged him.

Ward walked to the kitchen and opened the freezer to see a half-empty tray of ice, a bag of corn, and only five handles looking back at him when he markedly remembered buying six. So a bargain had been made. He grabbed the nearest handle and made a drink and a bowl of oatmeal to go alongside it. The taste was not all that bad if he waited a few seconds in between trading off between the two. He tried holding the frozen corn to his eye but that tired his arm and he did not feel like lying down so he found some tape and fastened it there. His father dead from an old disease because life got caught up in a war against itself; Ward could change nothing but the level of his sobriety and so that's what he changed.

His meals for the next two days went something like that. He thought he could remember his mother calling, and either he ignored her out of fear of being reprimanded for his slurred voice or he picked it up and she did just that. Or both. He stripped the sheets off his bed but did little else to improve his living conditions. Minutes and then hours ran into one another like bad watercolors. The walls of the apartment became his walls, and Ward had trouble creating thoughts that starred ideas in the outside world. His hands he kept bandaged though they healed well, along with the swelling around his eye.

The wound on his chest smalled a bit but remained red and purple and scabby. By the end of the second day, though, the infection of the long scrape there re-ignited its offensive, and spread its blackened corners on every side. The smell of it made Ward's nose wilt and he had to do something about it.

He drank a few ounces of vodka before putting a brush handle between his teeth. Then he grabbed either side of the doorway to the bathroom with both hands. Holding on, he stepped forward and stretched out the scab until the flesh broke. The pain made him glad he was drunk, and he was strangely happy because of this, thinking that life had a par. Minutes later in the shower, the brush still in his teeth, he ran the same kind of liquor sitting in his belly across his chest until the bottle had only drops left, hoping the burning was enough to kill anything that did not belong. His throat and his teeth hurt from the screaming through his biting teeth. Another twenty bill and he washed the stink off, along with all the broken pieces of scab. Then he re-wrapped the wound.

Eventually he ran out of vodka. Changing the pace of his drinking did not seem a viable option so Ward felt at least he ought to change the scenery, and drove on his scooter to a sports bar past the liquor store. The longest drive he had made in over a week. The place used to be a restaurant until it went bankrupt, then half of its space got bought out by an ice cream shop. A foot of concrete now separated the two establishments. There was a string of bars just like it all down the road leading into the school where Ward was enrolled. Old wood, loud music, repetitious rows of Christmas lights on every wall. On the screen above the bar two men fought one another with clubs in their hands in a crowded arena where athletes used to run with pads on.

Ward watched the people around him—members of couples that saw people they had slept with other than their date; old friends from high school reuniting, leaving one with a good mood and the other with a sense of wasted time; those that could hold their drinks and those that would have surprised Ward had they been able to hold their dicks. Hours of this. Before the night had halved itself, tall, blonde Barry Hewitt walked into the

door with a few friends. A semester before Ward had taken two classes with him by virtue of coincidence, and got to know him well enough to categorize him as an acquaintance. Rather than make up a lie as to why he had arrived, Ward passed out of Barry's sightline and went out the back exit.

Staggering to his ride, Ward kept his eyes on the ground and so did not see the cop approaching him. Ward sat down on his scooter and started it up and then a skinny black hand came down over his own, causing him to look up and see the skinny black face to match it, and then a badge on the shoulder connected to that.

"Officer?"

"Now I've been following you for about two minutes," the cop said, "and this is the first time you've made any notice of me. Somehow I don't think you're all right to drive."

"Oh," Ward said, and put his face into his bandaged hand. "Shit."

"Uh huh. So do you want drunk in public, or a DUI?"

"Aw, man, I . . ." he sighed. "Look, you got a dad?"

The cop's face twisted a bit. "Not anymore."

"Yeah?" Ward's heart leapt a bit as he slurred his words. "Neither do I. Just started school here ah, like a couple of months ago and put uh, y'know, all my money towards doing that, so I can't leave and go and leave to his funeral. Can't even pay the bill, the cell, the phone bill to talk to my mom. My mother, y'know. And I had to get out my place 'cause I kept watching and seeing things he had bought for me, and I wound up here."

The cop looked at him for a minute without saying a word. Ward wondered if the earpiece he wore could detect lies. That he had just started school when he actually had in the fall was the one that stuck out to him—how many undergraduates at his age actually started school in the spring? Hard to say; hard to say if a lie even counted as such if you prepared it in your head all day long in case someone offered to hear your thoughts and you actually started to believe the fiction a little.

“Get off the bike,” the cop said.

Ward did as told, and then watched as the cop picked his scooter up and walked over to his patrol car and put it in the backseat.

“I’m going to assume that the reason you tried driving was ‘cause you’re new in town, and don’t have anybody to give you a ride.”

Ward could agree with that, and did.

“Now you’ve got a ride,” the cop said.

On the way back to his apartment the cop revealed his name to be Carter and that his own father had been one of the last men to die from prostate cancer.

“Son of a bitch, right?” His laugh came down like a hammer as he drove. “Spent all that money keeping him alive, the doctors kept saying they were so close. Spent all that time at fundraisers, charity marathons and that kind of thing. And then the cure gets out and he’s too far gone for it to work. Said there was only about a hundred folk that they couldn’t help.”

Ward almost felt like he should exchange his own story but didn’t know if that would count as rude. Like with anyone else, he assumed listening to the cop was payment for the ride. So he didn’t talk about tuberculosis.

“Nobody ever really thinks about that last hundred unless it’s them, I guess,” he said instead.

Carter nodded. “Damn straight. I know I wouldn’t have. Not that curing the one thing even matters anymore with so much else around. All of it just strikes me almost as, I don’t know, collateral damage in man’s war against life.”

Ward found this hilarious but the cop did not laugh so he did not either. Awash in alcohol, all his emotions simplified. The drive in all did not take longer than eight minutes, and soon Ward stumbled back up the stairs to his apartment with the cop driving off behind him and his scooter chained back to its post. In no time at all the cop passed completely from sight and Ward stumbled back down the stairs. The way to the liquor store, even in his state, came practiced.

His mouth tasted like rain and copper and shit. Ward coughed violently, sending wet brown spray across the ground beneath him and into the puddle he spent most of the night in. His surroundings were dominated by the back of the liquor store and its wind-beaten wood and iron plating. Shaking his head to dry it somewhat, he tried to stand and failed. One of his eyes would not focus no matter how much he shook, and he heard and felt solids crackling in his torso. All of him hurt. He found he could not lift his right arm above his shoulder for the pain it provided.

He took a deep breath and coughed blood for the effort. Trying to walk forward brought him to his knees and Ward had no idea what was wrong with him. He was still a little drunk but that wasn’t it. He closed his eyes and tried to think back. Next to nothing. Shadows of images that tugged at his consciousness with all the power of a gentle breeze.

Looking up he saw a woman in a dark brown cloak on one knee, staring at him. He waited for her to say something but she just smiled and looked. A few more attempts to stand and he ended up sitting on the puddly concrete, heaving wetness. Bits clumped off of his face when he touched it, red mixed with brown. His skull felt tender, and he looked at the woman.

“Enjoying yourself?” he said. His voice raspy, wet, like a bad cough.

She tilted her head. “Are you?”

“Does it look like I am?”

“Not at all. But the state of you seems like you’ve been doing it for a while.”

“So?”

“So why would you persist if you didn’t enjoy it?”

He said nothing and scooted backwards until his back came up against the wall of the store. Ward looked at her, really looked, wondering what her game was. She was pretty enough to be a whore, maybe, but not rough enough around the edges. Nice cheekbones. There was a peculiar wizened innocence about her eyes, as if she had never seen anything before and yet had the capacity to explain all the world’s existence anyway.

“If what you do makes up who you are,” she said, “and you hate what you do, why keep it up?”

Ward frowned. “I didn’t ask for your advice.”

“You should have. The people I advise don’t get beaten up by police officers.”

She stood up. “In fact, the people I advise don’t worry about police at all.”

Ward smiled, cracking dry lips. “Pharmaceuticals.” He shook his head and the pain made him regret it.

“Not quite.” She stood up and stepped towards him and offered him a hand. “My name is Kansas. What do you think about the stars?”

In the long, wide car two men dressed in dark lay Ward down on a stretcher. In moments his body began to be pumped full of liquids it had started to forget. Blood, electrolytes, water, insulin, the elements of recovery. Medicine, too, though he could not say what kind. It made the world congeal. His ribs sat broken and his head drowned and so he did not move much even when Kansas, sitting down next to him, began to speak.

She talked to him, and between the painkillers sprinting through his circulatory system and his floating vision, she seemed almost an avatar of information. A ziggurat of flesh in the old world before his consciousness dawned. Ward looked at her and the walls breathed and he found himself breathing with them.

Kansas talked about the ego and how selfishness had been necessary since man’s fetal stage. The only real chance of immortality anybody had lay within spreading their seed or eggs and hoping the harvest in a thousand years time brought fruit in the same shape that their own had. She talked about how the world had gotten too small for such an idea while the people had become too many.

She said that if the world was intended to hold as many people as it did then it would not be doing its best to kill everyone on it. The dust they breathed was a fine example of this. The dirt area swirling around over the earth more than three times larger than the Dustbowl ever had been back during the old depression years and years before—

even if the war between the Southwest and the Rest accelerated ecological apathy, it wasn't as if breathing dirt anywhere had ever been much good for humans. Then there were the diseases coming up through Houston and New Orleans and any port town, sicknesses killing through diarrhea, the filling of lungs with fluid, the deformation of skin and organs, the creation of blood-filled cysts, the reprogramming of lymph nodes and endocrines, and whatever other manner of unnatural natural death that might be spreading through the land. And even these were not items to be solved, but rather items that required those suffering from these issues to create a solution.

They drove past the car families and Kansas told the driver to slow down. Hands took a hold of Ward's shoulders and pulled him up to see a group of car people barbecuing something with four legs. Eight young hungry mouths and only two people to feed them. The family being a time-honored tradition has also been a time-crafted one, ingrained in to us like the clothing we wear. Like so many of its kind, she said, it has fallen out of practicality. With connection from one end of the earth to the other instantaneous, there exists no reason to depend on those related to you for support, companionship, insight. Just the same, there exists no miracle of your life that makes those related to it somehow better or smarter or more tolerable. The children played as they watched and one of the boys pushed a girl and got pushed in return by what Ward assumed was her brother. We love ourselves most in this life, and what we call family we love by the virtue of shared memories, shared selves, for your identity is nothing but what you remember of yourself.

Speeding up and going along down the road into town. Kansas talked about the coming together of people, forgetting family, forgetting wants. Wants drove people apart

and on Earth there no longer existed space for people to spread out to. The cycle of things demands rejuvenation, separation, the intricate orbit of birth and birth again that descends from time began. The stars and what new lands lie with them must be sought out to bring ourselves together so that we may separate once again, to begin anew. On one of the streets they stopped and in between the buildings Ward saw a woman in childbirth and a young man no older than himself helping with the delivery. Kansas told him to watch.

Ward looked instead at where he was and who with and how come, and only then really looked at that kid just about his own age giving a new life breath. A sliver of jealousy snuck into his chest. Before long a slimy mess slid into the hands of the kid, crying and quivering. A fresh sack of life. The kid drew a knife from his back pocket and cut the umbilical before striding casually down the street with the baby quickly wrapped in a cloth, its mother crying weakly after them.

Kansas talked about how she had seen this more times than she had toes and fingers. The kid would go down to a nondescript white building in the middle of the city and the baby would be seen again only by traders and assembly line foremen. The kid himself would be paid enough money to support himself for a time, or perhaps he was an altruist and would be paying for his mother's or his father's or whoever's insurance. This would last him for another week or maybe two to keep them alive in the hospital or wherever they were and then the kid would either have to somehow find another child in the streets or sell himself to the same type of corporation he stole the child for. And this is the way the world has become. They drove on down the road and soon went out of the city while she quoted Yeats to him and talked of the second coming. The terribleness of man too much for morality alone to hold it in place. Living in a house built on the

precipice of apocalypse, we must be above morality. We must be above family. We must be above the Earth and go to the stars. We must order. We must *be* Order. And even that will save not the world, but rather what the world has created. Ward's breathing became shallow and he wanted to cough but could not.

"I think I'm dying," Ward said.

And she nodded and stroked his hair, and explained that his death right now would be a symptom of our population's disease. But it could be a blow. An immeasurable loss for the new way of things, and she would show him how.

After the car ride came a dozen different images and sounds that worked at the fog surrounding his incapacitation like a saw at a log, shoving in and out before finally snapping through with a single word heard, or the flash of a sight. A long string of blood and shouting and pale men looking at him with hopeless faces. Sweaty bouts of shaking and medicine to stop that and then new medicine to make sure that the earlier medicine didn't make his insides bleed again. Ward remembered bits of conversations regarding his vita but could not place who with or in what order and in fact did not remember what the last thing he remembered was. He woke on top of a narrow bed dressed in white with his chest and legs wrapped down but his arms free. In his arms there was clear plastic tubing hooked to his veins that came out without much effort. He loosened the straps and sat up to look at the small room given to him. Gray walls, no windows, a single door across from his bed that would not open regardless of which direction he turned the handle.

His hands had healed almost completely except for a few patches of pink skin. When he touched his ribs he did not feel a sack of pebbles as before but rather the long, thick fingers of a cage. The skin on his chest still looked red and scabby in a few places but overall it looked to have recovered well. He did not try to touch his head because he couldn't see it and there still was a bandage wrapped there, but nor he did feel as if his nerve-endings would punish him if he were to do so.

Ward looked for something to do or a camera to signal and slumped down next to the door when he found neither. He wondered how many days exactly had passed since his last drink. He could not say if it was days at all, and surmised that probably meant weeks were the operative term. Weeks away from home, from his things. His movies. All he had done as of late had been integral with those items and he could not say if it mattered to him that they might as well have been thrown in the trash.

Inside the wide neck of his gown he had several stitches on his sides. Some bruising still here and there but nothing severe. On the floor he stayed for an hour, waiting for someone to come. Banging on the door did not bring anyone either and Ward wondered for a moment whether they ignored or had abandoned him. None of his personal effects could be found in the room, but the money he had in his wallet wouldn't have paid for the hospital bills that healing him like they had would have cost.

Even without much in the way of friends in the area, words had come to him about the Order. Their numbers alarmed authorities and young mothers and now Ward himself. Out on the highways, anyone that wasn't well-guarded was at risk for the highwaymen, but even more for the Order. They never left a body behind. His fists had never been used as clubs and he doubted his ability to fight his way out of wherever he

was. He could not say, all things considered, that they wanted him dead, but there were always things to be scared of from a group that wanted you alive. When brooding found him no solace he returned to his bed and tried to sleep. Lying down made his head swim but soon that coalesced into grogginess.

Not quite asleep, Ward thought about his father. His dead father. They had not talked much lately. Who could or would talk to someone that was just the best memory of a sore spot on his heart? He understood the reasons for their lack of communication, but all the same he wondered what his father had sounded like with tuberculosis in his lungs. If it was any better or worse, if knowing the sound of what his last words must have come out like would have eased the blow. Ward thought about this, the thought of the decision to become so isolated as to resign yourself to dying alone, and strangely it angered him more than he could say.

When he woke from this trance of hurt confusion he remained in the gray room but now there sat Kansas beside him in a chair not there when he had been awake last. In her cloak she looked a brown cloud looming over his horizon.

“Ever had surgery before?”

Ward shook his head.

“Disorienting. No idea where you are, how you got there—”

“You brought me here.”

“—must be a lot like coming back from a blackout. The anesthesiologist we use here tells me that’s exactly what it’s like. You’ve had blackouts.”

This wasn't phrased as a question but the manner in which she said the words made it seem as though she thought about doing just that. Ward looked at the wall for a minute and then nodded.

"Imagine that," she said. "Genuinely. Do. You've put yourself down more times than any cop with a father issue, or any doctor with the goal of rebuilding a man. Taking bits of yourself down every time you do. Maybe just the brain cells that are part of the eighty-five percent of ourselves we don't use. Or maybe the ones holding the smell of the last time you held your mother. Or the sounds when you saw your father be wrong for the first time. Most masochists just cut themselves."

"I'm not a masochist."

"Then why didn't you tell the cop to stop?"

Ward couldn't answer that, but it made him think.

"Why didn't you?"

Kansas smiled. "I want you to think about history. Every decision in this world has led in some way to you being here. Fate or not. It's an unshaken chain of events, one after another, breaking through the tedium of everyday existence in an arch of purpose. The human race to the finish. And here we are. The last days of man on Earth."

"So?"

"So? Doesn't it make you angry, all that suffering you've put on yourself, only to realize that human suffering will only ever go down in the long run as an annoying echo across the chasm of the universe? Not even a pittance. "

Kansas looked at him for a minute with blue-specked eyes and then got up to leave. Ward watched her with a strange feeling in his chest, this person who knew exactly

what to say, who knew exactly what she was about. He wondered how someone could feel so strongly about a person so different from themselves.

She left the door open behind her.

In the bunker facility the only passage that remained off-limits to Ward was the one that led up to the outside. Other than that, most of the doors that did not lead to sparsely populated infirmaries and highly occupied dormitories with long rows of cots and trunks opened up into thickly populated co-educational classrooms with green chalkboards and stained tile floors. He was not absolutely certain he was beneath the earth, but there were no windows anywhere and the distorting effect of that made him believe they were underground. Ward wandered a while and found bathrooms and a cafeteria. Though he kept his eyes open for a brown cloak, he did not spot Kansas. It did not appear anyone else wore one but her, though. People of all sexes and shapes and colors walked with him—though almost no Hispanics, which was to be expected ever since the Trail and then the war, and then the Trail again, pushed so many out—and Ward did not often find himself alone. Most of the people around wore the same plain grey jumper that he did. Maybe one person in ten wore a brown uniform with black buttons running from the left shoulder to the right hip. No one questioned Ward or his purpose. Before long he got bored walking and along with several other people decided to enter a classroom.

In his first class, a tall thin man with a beard gave each student a pack for them to keep and taught them how to put their heaviest items in the middle to keep the weight off their shoulders and the smalls of their backs. The algebra of hiking revealed to them in

that five pounds in the morning would become fifty by evening. If the weather turned too cold for their new sleeping bags to keep them warm then extra clothes could be stuffed into the bag for insulation. The importance of water to health and how to purify it by either boiling or using iodine. They had a short quiz at the end that was self-graded. The teacher said many times that the secret to survival was Order, and this made sense in a certain kind of way. To maintain a sense of order in your life was to continue to know how to live.

The last class Ward went to for college had been weeks ago. Maybe months. With all the repairs to his body it was hard to say. Philosophy of mind was the subject. In it a professor detailed the debate on the ship of Theseus. After returning from slaying the minotaur and finding his father dead, Theseus put his black-sailed ship on display in Athens. Over time the ship decomposed and parts of it had to be replaced so that appearances could be upheld for those who wished to see it. After enough time had passed the ship still resembled the original but was made up entirely of replacement parts. If someone could do that to a mind, his professor asked, if they could make it up entirely with replacements, what would that say about consciousness? Would it be the same person? Ward left his hand down. Matters of the mind could be thought about over and over without ever knowing or changing a thing. Useful for thinking and not much else. But even so, he had enjoyed learning about it; he enjoyed learning in general and the idea that there were items worth keeping in the world.

The day went on and Ward followed a person at random to another room where a short, stocky blond woman in a brown and black uniform named Malta taught him how to read a map. The importance of the date on one, how to use it to find sources of water,

what the different lines and their proximity and shape and thickness meant. Circles closing in on one another represented elevation. She taught how to use compasses by putting red Fred in his bed, triangulating different points, using the map in conjunction to approximate distance and the reminder to re-evaluate position constantly. The reiteration from Malta that the secret to survival was maintaining Order.

For the next period Ward remained in the classroom and Malta passed out three-foot cords of rope for each person in the class. With them they crafted knots for fishing, camping, and packing, for figure-of-eights, cloves, and sheet bends. He tied his knots right away and when the teacher was not checking his progress Ward looked through the book he had been given to find more he could try. Written there the difference between hoops, loops, bends, hitches, lashes, splices, and slips. He crafted a noose and then one a hangman could use. If rope got splayed at the ends it could be melted or whipped. Ward paid attention to all but the last few minutes when he noticed a black head at the front of the classroom.

In the hallway he put his hand on the head's shoulder and the face that turned to look at him shifted in sudden fear and amazement.

"They let you here too?" Carter asked him.

Ward shrugged. "Closer to dragged."

Carter's fists had bunched up, and one vein stretching across from the back of his neck up to his ear pulsed rhythmically. Ward had held his suspicions already about who had beaten him behind the liquor store, and seeing Carter's reaction to him was all the confirmation he needed. The black man was skinny enough to make it seem unlikely, but not impossible. Besides that, as Ward stood in front of him he could see something that

he had not before, a kind of charged current beneath his surface, a flexing tension that fermented in his dark eyes.

“You finished with me?” Ward asked.

“I don’t know,” Carter said. “You finished lying?”

Ward’s tongue pushed against his bottom lip and he sniffed. He considered how a falsity could become almost a sort of investment. Then he nodded.

“I wasn’t lying about my dad, y’know. He really did die.”

“Maybe. A drunk says anything to get himself out of trouble.”

“They do,” Ward nodded. “But I’m not in trouble now.”

Carter said nothing to this, staring at him. Ward didn’t blame him.

“It’s around lunch time, right?” Ward asked him. “You hungry?”

Carter was and did not have plans so in the mess hall ten minutes later they sat down across from one another with plates of mashed potatoes and thin slices of tough meat.

“So . . .” Ward stretched out the word a bit. “They brought me here.”

“Yeah,” Carter said, in between a mouthful. “Did a real spot on you. Don’t like people taking a favor for granted like that. I guess I lost my temper.”

Ward understood that, after a fashion. If you took someone into your trust because of your vulnerabilities, there was no telling what you’d do when that person lets you down.

“Huh,” he said. “I think you found it.”

Carter laughed. “She said something like that too. That Kansas lady.”

Ward had already known that Kansas would have talked to other people besides him. His grip on his fork tightened anyway.

“I meant, “ he said, “that they had to bring me here. You look fine, though.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I didn’t think cops would go for this.”

“Yeah,” Carter said, and then, “Yeah. Way it happened was, I was out on patrol in mid-city, this shit operation. Arresting anybody’s liable to kill more folks than it’d save, at least short-term. Firefights, and all of that. And now everybody’s so wound up in themselves that the short term’s all we see.” He took a bite of his meat. “Anyway. So I’m cruising there and I see this dude dealing ambrosia to some kids. Knew it was ambrosia ‘cause they one or two of ‘em was dropping it in their eyes from the dealer’s own stash right there on the street in front of him. You ever seen somebody on that shit?”

Ward had. A euphoric hallucinogen, ambrosia built up its tolerance exponentially from hit to hit, decreasing the high while thusly increasing the user’s sense of ego and self-importance. On it, a person could feel entitled to have or do anything—from benignly watching a screen all day to holding up children for lunch money or burning old ladies in trees. With no real telling what a person would see, there was no knowing what they’d be inclined to do. At the age of twelve Ward had come home to play with the dog he had gotten for a random New Year’s gift from his father, only to see it being cooked in the alleyway next to his apartment by a purple-eyed, smiling husk of a man. “I love turkey.” The man held up a leg. “Like some?”

Ward ran away and twelve hours later his parents picked him up from the police station after the cops found him huddling next to a trash can behind a coffee shop. The

incident served as Ward's introduction to death. A week later his aunt on his mom's side got knifed coming home from a grocery store because she didn't buy a fourteen-year old some cigarettes. A month and a half after that her adolescent son got shot in a schoolyard when the janitor came to school on the drops and with a pistol. Only a week after that, Ward's uncle on his dad's side, the one who had used to give him things like antique coins for Christmas, got trampled when protesting the Hispanic Trail and a riot broke out. These kind of incidents piled up and before he had turned nineteen Ward had gone to over a dozen burials, including his younger brother Russ's. The last had been for a cousin he had never met. Ward cried anyway. All his life just shelving with the pegs getting pulled out one by one. Nobody asked him about it.

"I guess you have," Carter said, after a minute of silence.

"Sorry."

"It's alright. I get that way too, now." He pushed his tray in front of him, seemingly losing interest. "I got out of the car to pick him up. I'm the witness, I figure I can at least put him in holding for a few days and maybe keep a kid or two from getting on the shit. 'Freeze' is coming out of my mouth and that lady Kansas comes out from the dark in the alley and cracks his head open with a brick. First thing she said was that she'd seen what I'd done to you, otherwise I probably would have shot her. Says she can smell potential change and a man doing what I did to you and how just reeks of it." Carter sighed, looking to the side. "The dealer turns out to be selling drops loaded with ethanol. He'd track the kids down later for who knows what, and with them blinded they'd be like cattle lining up for him. She told me how he paid to one of my superiors and even if I

took him in he'd be out the next day and dealing and killing and dosing and hurting. And she said if I wanted I could shoot him and he'd never do any of that ever again."

"You do it?"

"I had my gun on him for a full minute. Not even conscious, just a bloody face attached to a wasted body. Wouldn't feel it, wouldn't know it. But I couldn't. Kansas, with that brick, she did it. And I didn't even want to stop her. She said nobody does it their first time."

The next morning two men in brown uniforms asked Ward to come with them to see his doctor and he complied without complaint. The examination room had low ceilings and a countertop on one side with a stainless steel sink in the middle of it. Ward did not look through the cabinets above it, but expected that inside sat the normal regalia of a doctor's office in tongue-depressing sticks, stain-absorbing cloths, and thermometer covers. Even so, he would not have been surprised to see small animals and body parts hanging in formaldehyde jars. A stool stood lonely in the middle of the room and Ward gave it some company. Soon after, a thick, short man wearing a white lab coat and small, circular, opaque glasses entered. He held a clipboard and a brazed pen.

"Good morning, young sir," he said. "I'm Dr. Kaufman. I put you back together."

Ward gave himself a once-over and found nothing missing. "Good job."

The doctor smiled. In combination with his glasses the effect sent a chill down Ward's spine.

"I hope so," he said, "but I still must make sure. Take off your shirt and stay still, please."

The doctor looked him up and down after Ward complied, before stepping close to him in order to trail his thick fingers across his torso. First light, then hard, at times massaging, at times grabbing.

“Three of your ribs we had to replace completely,” he said. “Much quicker than waiting for them to refashion themselves.” He looked at Ward’s face. “Don’t worry, it’s all matching. I’m just making sure everything is still in alignment. I am positive I cut them correctly but, you know management, always wanting another piece of paper to prove it.”

“I have new ribs,” Ward said slowly.

“And a new liver,” the doctor nodded. “One of the old ribs split it open when it caved in. A few other smaller organs as well. You had been bleeding out when they brought me to you. From the report, I’d guess it was all the moving around you tried to do on your own.” The bespectacled man shrugged. “Just as well, to be honest. I assume you know you had been overworking your body a bit. Could be that chemical reliance got taken out with those organs.” He smiled. “Do tell me if that’s the case, I’d love to let others know.”

“New bits of me,” said Ward. “From other people.”

Kaufman scoffed. “You take in new bits of you from other people every day and simply call it memory. In a way, you could say I crafted memory as flesh.” He paused in his prodding. “I wonder what sort of things you could remember from them.”

He said little else and Ward did not press him. To do so seemed more of a headache than it was worth. What the doctor said about chemical reliance stuck with Ward. He didn’t think it was the case that the new organs helped with it. He hadn’t

thought much about drinking since he had regained full consciousness but that did not mean those thoughts weren't there. Thoughts about drinking for him started as pebbles on top of the subconscious and ended as avalanches of liquor on the liver. He'd want to drown in them again soon enough and he did not know how he felt about knowing that.

He followed the doctor out the door when he left and then walked down the hall to go to another class to think about something else.

In every classroom, hallway, bathroom, even above Ward's own bunk, there were messages about the Order. Not about its greatness, so Ward couldn't think of it as propaganda in that regard, but more of how it simply made sense. The Order put things into perspective, into the long view. How time ignored at the aspirations of man, and how anything beyond the need for survival was simply fooling itself.

After he was in the bunker for a week Marta and some other brown uniforms came by to the room where he slept on a cot. He shared the room with several dozen others, including Carter, each with their own cot and trunk. Marta and the brown uniforms led them all through the various hallways of the installation to an enormous cylindrical room with a colossal ship inside.

There was a catwalk around the craft that they stood on while Marta talked. Marta explained that the ship would go on to hold more than ten thousand pods, each with a human inside. Some adults, some children—typically more children than adults. Ward looked over the side of the catwalk, examining the wide, bubbled surface of the metal. He could not see the bottom clearly, even though there were lights all the way down.

Looking up, past the layers of antennae and fins attached to the ship, were hanger doors that Ward assumed opened to the surface.

The pods, Marta explained, would keep a human body in stasis for as long as needed to travel to the hundreds of solar systems the ship could potentially go to. Enormous amounts of research had been accomplished on traveling through the vacuum of the heavens, funded by the Order, designed and produced and placed onto the ships. She said that order requires utility. Some people repeated her when she said that and Ward didn't know why exactly. If those inside the pods could not arrive there would be no point in leaving. After centuries, if the leviathan engines of the ships died out and could search no further, the bodies would die out as well after a time, but at least they would do so in the search of something greater.

Some ships would be sent to stars and areas that seemed likely for life. Thousands of satellites and probes had already been sent out by the Order in search of habitable environments, but for the most part the only way to know for sure was to simply go. To leave before the planet gave out on itself, to escape before everyone asked for a ride. Malta invited her crowd to look around as much as they wanted but to touch nothing. The equipment could be delicate in any number of places.

Ward looked around for a little while but left before too long. There was only so much time that could be devoted to looking at something gigantic—eventually, a person just got used to its presence and then it was no longer interesting. In the hallway outside there were pictures of the stars everywhere, on all the walls and doors, just like there were in every hallway of the bunker. Some of these framed, some of them sticky-tacked posters, some were paintings.

Ward had not originally recognized the subjects of these as the stars at first, seeing in many just huge black expanses dotted with white and multi-colored spots and spirals and masses. But from overhearing people around the bunker he came to understand. He stopped outside the enormous hanger, looking at a framed photo. It had dot after dot, each in a plethora of colors, some clumped together like flower petals, some far out and spread apart. Malta, coming out of the double-doors that led to the ship, approached him.

“They look like stars, don’t they?” She said.

“Do they?”

“Actually, they’re . . . oh. Maybe you don’t know. I forget with you young ‘uns. Even outside the Dustbowl, you probably got raised in a city, huh? Light pollution to add to the everything-else pollution. Light pollution,” she shook her head. “Even our sight’s been tainted.”

“These are what stars look like, then?” He had seen stars, of course. Here and there one would shine through in the cities he had lived in, coming in through the lights in Houston or the dust in Lubbock, but never on such a scale.

“Essentially. From the Earth. But those,” she nodded at the photo, “are galaxies.”

“But they’re small.”

“From our perspective, sure. But where we are wouldn’t even show up from where they are.”

Ward looked at the picture. There were thousands of dots there.

“Every one is a galaxy?”

“That’s right. There are millions and millions. Each one holds billions and billions of stars, and each star has its own collection of planets.”

“Are they all livable?”

“Not even by half. Not by a quarter.”

“Seems hopeless,” he said, thinking of the plans of Order and the stars and the legions of planets to colonize.

“Hope is a word men use when their plan of action either fails them or does not exist. The Order does not hope. The Order acts, and each action a succession of movements along a line, and at the end of that line is the stars. Inevitability supersedes hope, or the lack thereof.”

“Is that a tenet?”

Ward had heard of the tenets, even knew one or two of them, but had not committed them to memory just yet. The ruling ideas of the Order.

“No,” she said. “But it’s true all the same. You don’t know the tenets?”

He shook his head.

“Come with me”

Malta led him and several others to a classroom and began to talk about the tenets. There were twelve in all, grouped equally in four tiers. One of Ward’s favorites was, “Never Squander Potential.” At first he thought it something personal, for himself only, that with the drink he had been killing his mind and his body and thus ruining any future he might have had. That maybe he still wanted to. He had studied history in school because of its ability to reveal what had been wasted, what could have happened. He

hadn't expected to find so much undone good, though, so many starts into better societies made false by the greed and pride of man, and had to wonder about what it meant about himself. But the Order was not personal. It viewed things globally, and while each tenet could mean something small, it operated largely on that same global scale. That tier, the third, was mostly concerned with utility.

Malta had explained it the best, holding a hammer in her hands in front of the class, a black thing with a rubber-grip and a silver head. "Treat anything like you would a hammer you came across. If the hammer is good, then keep it. Never squander potential." They repeated. They always had to repeat, if only because everyone else repeated. "If you need something done, then make sure the hammer can do the job it's assigned for. Order requires utility." Again they repeated. "If the hammer is broken, or cannot work for whatever reason, dispose of it. Anything that cannot thrive deserves death."

Ward always remembered this, especially the hammer. Anything—people, plants, animals, or even the planet itself—*anything* that would not (which was just the same as could not) thrive deserved death.

The second plateau, that of Self, began with "The Only Love Is The Love Of Order." Someone in class asked Malta about this, and was told that it was simple—love was the emotional poisoning of a biological imperative in lust. The idea that sex could only be had with one person to help the species, to remain decent, is and has been ludicrous since weapons were invented and women could learn to defend themselves. Love was ultimately just an excuse to distrust others. "The Highest Aspiration of Man is Order." A double meaning, once Ward thought about it for a bit. There was nothing higher than the stars, and reaching them would be attaining Order. There could be no

reaching them without it. Finally, “There is no luck or fate, only consequences.” Man and man alone was responsible for his actions, and that was why he had to pay for them.

The Order on the whole shared a harsh view on things. But maybe you needed that. Ward played baseball his tenth and eleventh years of high school. Third base. The first day of practice Coach Grant had them run sprints until they puked. People complained, but something kept Ward quiet. He thought it was fear of punishment at the time. But when the complaints went to parents and parents went above Coach Grant’s head, and they barely did any extra running and had a season of two and twelve, he figured the feeling out. If you wanted to do something tough, you had to take a tough line on it. And if somebody drew that line for you, then there were only two ways about the rest of your life.

Death was the subject of the fourth tier. As the Order was the only way to keep mankind alive, “Death is the failure to serve Order.” Ward thought about that often and what it meant for the implications of his own stay, and the things that he learned. The result of this was almost a half-tenet, in Ward’s view, a logical conclusion of the preceding one—“To Delay Order is to invite Death.” Ward thought tenets needed to have their own strong footing, pillared to the ground far from any others. But that one served as a branch into the very last one, “Fear of Change is Fear of Order is Death.” Anything that would try and stand in the way of Order, it seemed, would die.

Ward wondered if they meant the tenets as imperatives or guidelines and decided one afternoon while eating lunch by himself one day that it was probably something around both. It was strange the way the logic worked, making death seem a reasonable thing. Ward saw it working and he couldn’t say he minded. The last tenets were

warnings, perhaps, though only to the members of the Order, reminders of what should happen if they failed. Should they decide to fail, maybe. He thought about the drink and how he wanted it and how he didn't even really know why he did either—the thought, the want—and couldn't stop anyway.

The first tier had to do with Order itself, and its first tenet was, “The Order Pervades.” It was a bit ominous, but it made sense. The Order had to be on every level of every single spectrum of human culture in order to succeed. Man could not go to the stars half-assed; this had been proven time and again in the past. If an organization could be pervasive, truly pervasive, there would be no stopping it. It had to operate everywhere, it had to be the defining operator everywhere.

The second tenet of the tier was, “The Only Law Is Order.” The more Ward thought about this the more he could apply it to, and the more he liked it. Any law that did not add to the greater Order of things was to be ignored. Family law, governmental law, religious law. Like every tenet in every other tier it flowed into the other and the last—“There is no salvation to be had with the soul.” Ward found it curious that the same tenet that promised no end after death was the last one of its tier. The end. Even so, he respected what it said.

Ward did not like religion. The last conversation he had with his mother, before the last one, had solidified this opinion in his mind. It was only a little while after he had come to college, a phone call.

“So what, were you guys just waiting for me to leave?”

“Ward!” His mother was a short, curly-haired woman that he knew paced when she was on the phone. “Don’t think that. We never wanted you out of the way. You’re our son, this won’t change that.”

“Yeah,” he said, thinking. “It just means I’m the only one that still wants to be in this family.”

“Oh, Ward.” She drew his name out, sighing. “I’m sorry you feel that way. I’m sorry for how you feel period. But your father and I have just been . . .” She paused, and in that pause Ward imagined he could hear all the unspoken real reasons for their separation. “. . . we’ve been growing apart.”

“All that’s changed is that you started taking Sundays seriously, and he stopped pretending to.”

She had been entreating Ward to join a church in the area ever since he arrived at college. He had gone to service with her back in Houston to humor her but that was about it.

“Well, my faith is important to me. And I needed it to be important to your father.”

Ward, in his room, started to knuckle his hand against his forehead.

“Why? You never explained that to me.”

“Because I wanted us both to think that . . .”

Another pause, and Ward couldn’t resist saying the reason that he knew wasn’t being said.

“You wanted to think Russ’s still alive somewhere.”

A sigh. “Yes.”

Maybe he forced that idea on her. Maybe that was better than believing that God was the only thing that still let her love her one live son. To think that his part in his brother's death was part of a plan.

“So you got faith because nothing else would let you think that. Maybe there's a pattern here, Mom.”

“Ward, please—”

“And now you've got Jack Layton, too.”

For a moment she didn't say anything, and he almost thought she had hung up. He hoped not. He wasn't finished. At home he had seen the two of them working together, late at night. God's work never slept, they would say. He had seen their looks but had thought at the time probably he was being paranoid.

“What? Ward, he helps me organize the church's charity drives, that's all. He is a good man.”

“And a single one. Does he know he's a home-wrecker?”

“I don't know *what* you're—”

“You know what the worst thing is?” Ward said, voice hot. “That you would go to a church every Sunday and thank the same god that that pedo Wallace Mason does.”

“Oh Ward,” she sighed. “That was never proven. And you know our Lord works in mysterious—”

“Shut up, Mom. Don't call me anymore.”

It felt so nice, having someone else's manufactured righteousness wash away the sting of more than one hundred nights spent in regret.

After being there and conscious for two weeks, the Order allowed Ward to leave. He did, and right away, because without having seen the sun for so long he felt obligated to give its presence certainty. The bunker's door came up out of the ground at an angle and so the gray horizon came to him in steps. The dirt didn't move in the air, at least not that day, the wind strangely absent on the plains. He found the sun to be as it always had been, a big brown-orange ball behind a curtain of dust laughing at him and the rest of everyone from ninety-three million miles away. Not just anybody got to leave, or at least he didn't see them when they did. Perhaps he had been singled out for one reason or another. His first real thought once he was outside was that now he could go get a drink. He could just run until he found civilization and then he could fall into a comfortable stupor for a few days. That was a thing he could do, which usually was enough of a reason why to do something.

A dead eighteen foot oak tree stood only a few yards away from the entrance and beneath it stood Kansas with a pile of sticks at her feet. Brown cloak all around her as before, obscuring the shape of her body. She waved and he walked towards her slowly. From the others inside he had heard tales of her saving and recruiting and killing. So much killing. Enough for an army. His heart beat fast just looking at her.

“Have they taught you how to make a fire yet?” She asked him.

He shook his head. He learnt more in the past couple of weeks than in almost a year of college. How to make rope, to cook from the land with sprouts and roots and bark, to build shelters from stones and logs and metal and snow. They taught him to survive. To live anywhere that wouldn't be Earth. Carter had been a Boy Scout and much of what he knew he passed on to Ward in the conversations they shared between their

cots in the dormitories. Fire being so essential to the way of things it struck him now as odd that he had heard nothing of it before. Perhaps she had organized it that way.

“You need wood to start, of course.” She held up a thick, halved, yellow log. “This is ash. Good flame, good heat, burns when it’s green. Like any other wood, it burns best when split.” She laid the log on the cleared space on the ground at her feet, a circle one meter in diameter. “Always clear a space first, unless you want the fire to spread.” She looked at him and smiled slightly as if that might consist of exactly the sort of thing he would want. “This is called a pyramid fire. There exist a plethora of types of fires but they build mostly from this foundation. You start with the big logs like these,” she said. “Fuel. In this way you know what will burn later.” She placed more logs like the first in a pile, placing four beside each other before putting another two on top of that width-wise. “Then you need kindling. These keep the fire alive long enough to get down to the fuel.” She showed him long, narrow twigs and placed them as she did the logs. “Last you find tinder. Pine needles, leaves, dead grass, birch bark, even bird down.” She piled dead grass from the field around them on top of the newly-made stack. “These burn the fastest and start the fire. The big logs don’t want to burn, but if you fire up enough small ones they have no say in the matter. They don’t want to burn and yet it is they who burn the brightest and best. It all burns, you just have to prepare it correctly.”

Before too long the pile next to her had been exhausted and reformed into the precarious wooden structure sitting between the two of them. She reached into her cloak and pulled out a carbon steel file and a flint spearhead. They sat in her hand for a full half-minute before Ward got the idea and took them. Her hands were smooth and hard.

“This world,” Kansas said, “is a finite place, and we have all but exhausted its possibilities. Any and all past solutions for the way things are would now be but stop-gap measures, a shot of morphine to an Ebola patient to ease their pain before they bleed out. This world is not fit for ten billion people. It is not fit for ten thousand. We must leave and grow and we must stop any from interfering.” She pointed at the pyramid. “Destruction leaves nothing behind. Destruction sets us free from the inhibitions of the past that brought the destruction in the first place. This world is a finite place,” she repeated. “You can turn it into a fire place.”

She nodded at the structure. Ward looked at it for a minute.

“So am I tinder or kindling?”

Her lips curled into a smile. “Who says you’re part of the fire? Why not the flint?”

Ward looked at her and then the pyramid and then at the objects in his hand. It took him several tries but eventually he got the rhythm down and a spark hit the leaves. They began to burn quickly. He blew on the orange glow created and soon a blaze began. The two stood together in the dim daylight watching it dance from log to twig to stick to log. Dead twigs weighed down every branch of the oak tree they stood beneath. Every now and again one would fall from the wind or the pressure from the heat of the flames and ignite, sometimes before even touching the meat of the blaze. He watched this. A plethora of ways to start a fire. He wondered how the oak tree had stood for so long. Why tolerate the presence of something that couldn’t live on its own any longer. It was just the shell of a living being. It wouldn’t get enough sun to be reborn at any point.

He thought about what she said and realized he wanted it more than anything else. There was an appeal to leaving the planet, to going to the stars, but the real appeal was to scourge. To consume the world from the inside-out for no other reason than it had failed in the same way that he might have. To take humanity apart because it had reared him and raised him up and then abandoned him and decided to die without letting anyone know it was on its way down, without even leaving a goddamn message.

He reached into the border of the flame, and his hand escaped from the heat towing a log that was half afire. With a yell he spun and tossed the blazing cylinder into the tree like a hammer. It swelled into a giant torch against the gray of the sky behind it. Kansas said nothing as they watched it burn and fall and when she took him by the arm back inside he saw for the first time dozens of other blackened pocks littering the ground around the entrance to the bunker.

The first gun Ward got was a bolt-action Springfield M1903. The door to the shooting range in the bunker was a foot thick and made mostly of cork, and after passing through it his entire body felt the assault of a hundred sound waves cracking against it at once. It was a large room and able to fit nearly two hundred fifty, all firing all the time. Quickly after entering he grabbed a pair of the orange headphones next to the door.

Carter had been to the range many times before him, but being a cop he already had been in the habit. They would give him a loaner rifle when he went; today with Ward was, like Ward's, Carter's first time on the range using his own rifle. Ward followed him down a narrow blue hallway with interconnected boxes on one side. They stepped inside one of the such and the sound instantly lessened, the only hole in the box being a small

one on the clear plastic opening atop a sort of bench across from the door. Carter motioned for Ward to sit on the stool provided and to place his rifle with the barrel into the hole and so he did. Bending his head to maneuver his vision into the iron sights, Ward fired at the yellow target about fifty yards away. The stock shot back hard into his shoulder and he swore from the pain. The black man smiled at him and readjusted the gun so it sat on the meat of his shoulder and not the bone. Ward reloaded. The visceral thrill of the clacking, not a sound like it. He shot and reloaded and did so four more times until the bullets had been spent.

After this Carter pressed a button and the target sucked downwards and seconds later popped up in a small tube next to where Ward sat. Carter laid it out and took a coin from his pocket and placed it over the hole nearest the middle. No other holes fell under the metal's edge and Carter shook his head, telling him it was no good, and handed Ward another handful of bullets. He handed him another after checking the results of that target and then one more, Ward's grouping improving minutely each time, before Carter took his turn to shoot.

Carter's positioning worked in such a way to make Ward believe the gun had been playing tricks on him. The rifle rebounded against Carter's shoulder after it fired and then immediately bounced back to where it had been, no swaying, no seconds of rearranging the barrel so it faced straight down the range. When Carter handed him his sheet a few seconds later Ward laughed at first.

“You only hit one.”

Carter smiled, and pointed at the small distortions at the open circle in the center of the bull's-eye.

“Trained a lot as a kid,” he said. “My dad was a championship shooter.”

Ward re-examined the target and understood. From a distance even excellence could look inadequate. Up close, though, he saw how the hole was just slightly bigger than any of the holes he had made in his own target. Carter shot some more and then took a break while Ward went, and the two traded in that fashion a few more times before leaving to mess. Once they left the deafening chamber Ward asked Carter the question he thought of when first seeing the results of the man’s ability.

“So you ever shoot anybody?”

“As a cop?”

Ward shrugged. “As anybody.”

Carter nodded. “Five times.”

Ward waited, feeling the follow-up would reveal itself.

“Five times. Five bullets. Five deaths. Five therapy stints to make up bad dreams about killing rapists and child-abusers and addicts.”

“Aren’t there positions for people that can shoot like you?”

“Sharpshooters, yeah. But dad hated me becoming a cop because it would mean I might have to shoot people. After he died I couldn’t think of getting a job where I definitely would.”

“Didn’t seem to help.”

Carter shrugged and Ward didn’t ask him anymore. People became all sorts of things they didn’t plan on, things that their fathers would never know. In all of this training and education Ward could not think of a time when he didn’t want to drink. The new organs didn’t help, like he had hoped they might. But even so he didn’t try and get a

drink, so that was something. Maybe it was the constant presence of the tenets and the reminder that to try and drink would be a death warrant. Maybe it was because he was losing the desire to hide what he felt.

Carter had not wanted to be a killer and yet he was. Ward had not wanted to be a follower, and he was, if for no better reason than it was better than being alone all the time. He accepted this, just like he accepted what Carter and he were drilling for.

In between shooting Ward continued to go to classes, sometimes with Carter and sometimes not. He made few other acquaintances and no other friends. But still he shared camaraderie with others in the Order if only for the reason that they were united against a common cause. The people outside the Order, the ones who did not agree for whatever reason, these were called wastes or blisters or changeless but mostly blisters. Open wounds on the flesh of the world that had so gotten in the way of it moving forward that now it never would. It was easy to paint the name on them. It was nice, in a way.

Their teachers never handed out exams and there was no reason to study besides curiosity or fervor. Testing happened daily through exercises that challenged their knowledge, like bringing in the fresh carcass of a fawn to skin.

The first time Ward witnessed something being skinned he had to clench his torso muscles to keep anything from escaping his mouth. A few more times, with calves and billies and leverets and pups and hatchlings, and he began to volunteer. Skin, then clean, skin, then clean. The art of butchering. If the animal was fresh then sometimes it aided in the practice by shaking its body, loosening tendons as bits got pulled down from it. The

simplicity fascinated him, turning a living being into a future meal and in that way a future piece of shit. The process could take only minutes.

They taught him to differentiate between edibles and non-edibles. Steaks cut from the rump and shoulders, sweetbread organs shaped like beans and knobs and other organs just long gooey ropes and some like the heart with a shape unto themselves. He learned how scent glands and anuses and reproductive items of all animals existed mostly just as the appendices of an old diet that no longer needed to be adhered to.

His knife they gave him to keep when he first drained a deer. Strung it up by himself with a thick black cord in the middle of a stark white room with a bucket underneath to catch the blood. The salt of that gave flavor to foods and could be mixed into sausage, soup, sauce, all manner of things which he could enjoy. The students watching and note-taking, the teacher Malta standing and shifting her weight every so often, all of them measuring his performance in some way.

What they gave him was a drop point knife with a fixed five-and-a-half-inch stainless steel blade, serrated an inch on the side opposite the cutting edge. The rubber handle fit seamlessly into his hand and would not slip so long as his grip did not either. Its sheath fit on his belt and he kept it there constantly, almost as a badge of his progress in the new education. Once he had the knife he began to notice the others in hallways and classes who had one as well. The blade's wide, curved surface cut easily into the deer's throat and within fifteen minutes he had laid out the former beast on the classroom table in its different parts. The meal some of these parts created tasted good to Ward when they let him cook it later in the day but he knew it would have been better had he done the whole job himself, in the wild.

Everything Ward learned had to do with keeping himself alive, some of it more direct than other bits. Again they emphasized the importance of water to homeostasis and its irreplaceability no matter the time or place. How to clean a wound and how to bandage and the importance of re-bandaging regularly to prevent infection; to prevent skin from growing into the cloth. How to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation and how to do it without breaking the sternum or at least how to lower the chances of such a thing. How to execute the Heimlich maneuver on others and on himself using a chair or any other solid edge. How to stop bleeding via hands, via tubes, via cloth, how one could fashion a makeshift tourniquet from a shirt. He discovered a new kind of rice in rest, ice, compression, and elevation for everything from shock to a sore muscle. From his pants he could fashion a makeshift floating device by tying off one leg and wrapping the other around his waist. He learned if someone was too dehydrated then the best thing for them was to put water on their lips and skin, not to let them drink straightaway. Ward learned all of this, and by the time he had, he was still not a medic but he could do until one arrived.

Everyone learned these things, it seemed, though with Ward and a few others such as Carter the teachers gave particular care to ensuring that they had certain knowledge. Only these chosen few were able to go into the gun range, for example. The Order taught those same few, in addition to learning to handle a firearm, how to handle themselves in a fight. How to put power into a punch, a kick, the different kinds and their different uses. The basics of self-defense—reach, speed, keeping your defense up. If you stayed out of range then you couldn't be hit. If you were fast enough then strength was

not so important. If you let your defense down, then you were opening yourself up to failure.

They taught them how to hold their knives for thrusting and for slashing. How to keep the blade-hand moving, how to attack any extremity that was put forward. The basic principle of fighting a person that did not know how to fight was to use their conceits against them. They thought their arms would protect them when their arms were a big part of them in the first place. If you cut an arm in the right place the person would bleed out and die quickly. The basic principle of fighting a person that did know how to fight was to discover their pattern, to be able to anticipate. If you knew a person's mind then the fight was already won. Their teachers made sure they got used to having a fist and foot get in front of their faces until they did not flinch. They made sure they were relaxed when they fought, when they struck and were struck.

The instructors also taught these chosen individuals the difference between the different kinds of injuries and how to treat them. Why gunshot wounds should not be treated as stab wounds and how burns existed on a level unto themselves. The wrong things to pour on broken or torn skin, like salt or blood or oil or lemon juice. These could make a person delirious with pain and make them willing to say near anything. Again and again they showed them the most vital parts of the body, the ones that could kill a person if punctured. Which ones, like the carotid artery or the jugular, would bleed the most and spray everywhere. They mentioned in passing, almost, where the pressure points stood on the body and how using enough force on a spot like the solar plexus could make a heap out of a grown man.

Ward went to sleep every night thinking about what they taught him, what it meant. Giving out such a kind of knowledge only had so many implications. These things came naturally to him. What did that mean, to be a natural at such things. They clearly wanted him to kill and he knew he was doing a good job of learning and he knew that would only lead to doing a good job of killing. He had been destructive his whole life so it made sense in a way for him to destroy others, at least for a while before he destroyed himself. Maybe it wouldn't get the drink out of the way but at the least it would be something else to think about. He grew eager for the next day when he would learn again and for a day somewhere in the future when he would not have to be taught anything at all.

When Ward could finally group six shots from his rifle inside an inch they gave him a uniform. They came in the night, leaving the items on top of the small trunk at the base of his cot. The clothes came in three pieces — boots, pants, and a shirt. All of the clothing brown, heavy, and tough, but it breathed as well, and when Ward put it on his temperature remained steady. He could not place the fabric. The shirt had long sleeves that ended at his wrists and dull black buttons that ran from his right shoulder to his left hip. The boots felt heavy but sturdy, the kind Ward had learned would serve well in hiking over rock, over dirt, over grass or snow or whatever else. They fit snug over his ankles and gave room for his toes.

Looking to his side he saw Carter get up from his own bunk and see his own uniform waiting for him there. Ward dressed and moved his arms and legs out at regular and odd angles, feeling the push and pull of the tough fabric in the different positions. It

clung over him like a shadow. Carter and he went to mess with the dorm's other occupants. Kansas stood outside the dorm waiting for them and took the two aside.

“You are now on assignment,” she said.

“No more bunker?” Ward asked.

She smiled and walked away and the two followed. She did not speak and so neither did the two. Ward watched her closely, the attempt to discern some sort of shape to her form inside her cloak a distracting excursion, and after a bit she stopped and opened a wall by pressing it in a way Ward would not have been able to duplicate without watching again. She waited by the opening before Carter stepped inside and Ward after him.

Inside sitting down in a circle were six faces Ward only partially recognized from classes and the mess hall. Not one of them did he recall wearing a uniform like the one he had on. Like the ones they now had on. At one end of the room stood a man with a shaved head and a trimmed red beard. After a second Ward noticed the buttons on the shirt of his uniform went down the opposite way of his own.

“Good morning, buckos,” he said. “Have a seat.”

They moved between the desks and did as told. Ward sat between a slim, tall black woman and a man who looked just like the man sitting to his right, presumably a pair of brothers. They both had the kind of look that saw the whole world as in front of them and in the fucking way. Ward saw that look on all of their faces, in some more than others, and imagined they probably saw it on his. Kansas moved behind the circle and waited in the corner of the room. The man who greeted them had sat down as well, leaning forward as he spoke.

He sounded off his own name, Yale, and had everyone beside him start to say their own. From Yale's right, there was the big woman with a comely face and short brown hair, Sue. Then the tall, pale man Clancy, then Carter, and then the two men that looked like brothers, Austin and then Bryan. Then Ward himself, and finally the slim black girl Elaine. Then the red-bearded man spoke again.

"Like I said, my name is Yale. I just got in from assignment in New Mexico. Not the toughest work out there, for the most part, but it still needed to be done. Many of you might be ready for action already, but this is mostly a team that needs endurance and patience. I'll give you mine and I expect the same from you." He had a slight Southern twang and an easy, permanent grin.

"I don't know much of anything about you, or at least not the way you'd say it." He grinned. "I like knowing how that goes. So what we're going to do is a simple game called, 'Two truths, one lie.' Just what it sounds like. Everyone gets a turn. You just say two true things about you, and one lie. Nothing complicated. Everyone tries to guess what's the truth and what the lie is.

"I'll start. I grew up mostly in Arkansas. I enjoy fishing. I've lived in Peru."

"You didn't live in Peru," said the man next to Ward.

"Sorry, Bryan. Ages two to five. My father was an archeologist."

"You don't like fishing, then," said the burly, green-eyed woman next to Yale.

Yale grinned again. "You got it. Don't even like the taste of fish, so I hope you folks don't mind if we don't run by too many rivers on our way out. Since you're next to me anyway, Sue, you go ahead."

She thought for a moment with her head to the side. It looked like something she did often. The movement moved her hair over and Ward could see how the brown strands were just long enough to cover a birthmark running from behind her ear to behind her neck. “I love dogs. My favorite color is yellow. I can . . . I don’t know. I can deadlift two hundred pounds.”

“The dog thing,” said Austin.

Austin had blond hair, a lighter shade than that of the similar-looking man Bryan. It was strange for Ward—the two were alike, but not. Unlike Bryan, Austin’s looks appeared completely crafted, a countenance of careful consideration as opposed to the lazy molding of manufacture on display with the man Ward assumed was Austin’s brother. Ward thought that in a way that was how it was with all brothers, if they were all made but not all designed.

She nodded. “I don’t really like any animals. They can be so vicious. And they smell.”

This wasn’t funny, really, but her delivery made almost everyone laugh, except for the pale man and Ward.

“Good guess, Austin,” Yale said, after they quieted. “Do you want to go or do you want to keep going around the circle and have Clancy go?”

Austin shrugged.

“Clancy it is,” Yale said. “Try and fool us.”

The lanky, pale man sighed. “Uh.” He sniffed, moving for what seemed the first time during the whole meeting. “My name’s Clancy. I’m from Chicago. I like peas.”

“Let me guess,” said Sue. “You don’t like peas.”

He nodded slowly. His turn passed, what little light had shined in his eyes faded, and he melded backwards into his chair. A statue of disinterest.

“Well, I guess Clancy didn’t quite want to get into the spirit of the game,” Yale said. “How about you, Carter?”

“You got all our names down already?” Carter asked.

“I surely do. Be a terrible crew leader without at least knowing that.”

“So we’re in a crew?”

“That’s right. These people are your crew members. Get used to their faces.”

“What kind of crew?” Ward asked.

“The best kind,” said Kansas from the back of the room. “The cleaning kind.”

Yale frowned good-naturedly at her, shaking his finger. “Come on now, don’t steal them away from me already.” He looked back to Carter. “So let’s have it. Two truths, one lie.”

Carter put a hand to his head and rubbed his eye against it. “Alright. I’ve seen close friends of mine die. I am . . . I was a cop. I’ve seen cars explode.”

“The friend thing,” said Austin. “I mean, shit, I hope it’s the friend thing.”

Carter shook his head.

“The exploding cars, then,” said Ward.

The black man rolled his eyes. “Cheater.”

“I don’t know about that, man,” Austin said. “I would have gone that route too. You sounded like you had been a cop.”

“Why don’t you go and see how hard it is to lie, Austin?” Yale asked.

“Okay,” the blond man said. “I . . . am medically trained. I’ve lived on the other side of the Pacific. I slept on a couch for three years straight.” He turned to Bryan. “You shut up, now.”

“Didn’t live on the other side of the Pacific?” ventured the slim woman next to Ward.

“Shit,” Austin said. “I thought the couch bit was a sure thing.”

“So,” Yale said. “Why did you sleep on a couch for three years straight?”

“Cause he couldn’t find a woman to let him into her bed,” snickered Bryan.

“Fuck you, hombre,” said Austin, looking at Bryan. “I didn’t have the money to upgrade. Your turn.”

Bryan considered a moment. “I’ve owned three properties, I used to collect rocks, and I met a governor once.”

“The rock thing,” said Sue.

“Hell no,” said Austin. “That was annoying as all get out.”

“Didn’t meet the governor,” said Carter.

Bryan shook his head. “I never even owned a house. Always rented.”

“Met the governor.” Austin shook his head, smiling. “He met an *ex*-governor, and it was of Alabama. The one who only got in for like two months or whatever before they kicked him out.”

“Samson?” Sue asked. “He doesn’t count. The government doesn’t even count it.”

“That’s what I said.”

Bryan crossed his arms stubbornly. “Look, elected is elected, it doesn’t matter what y’all think.”

“Okay, folks, settle,” Yale said, talking over the gathering voices. “Now the young’un.”

Ward sighed, not entirely happy with the choices he had decided on. “I used to drink too much. I love history. I’ve been near beaten to death.”

Kansas frowned at him. “It’s supposed to be ‘two truths, one lie,’” she said from the corner.

He smiled at her, feeling daring and liking the fact that she didn’t know something about him.

“History doesn’t seem to have much of a place in a world that uses itself as a toilet,” he said.

She tilted her head at him and narrowed her eyes. Ward turned away, eventually, and the black girl next to him spoke to breach the silence he made.

“I’m Elaine,” she said, “I don’t know if everyone knows that. I’m, um, not counting those as my two truths.”

“Lie!” shouted Bryan.

Almost everyone laughed, including Ward this time. The lightness of it felt strange against his chest. Clancy remained faded into his chair, staring listlessly at the strange, interlocking shapes of the linoleum floor.

“So,” Elaine continued. “I was a gymnast. I am scared of heights. And, I couldn’t tie my shoes until I was eight.”

“You look pretty nimble,” Bryan said. “And it seems like you couldn’t be scared of heights if you were a gymnast,” Bryan said. “I’m gonna go with the shoes thing.”

She shook her head, smiling and blushing.

“Then you weren’t a gymnast?” asked Carter.

She shook her head again. “Being between the bars was the only time heights didn’t bother me, really. Until I made it here.”

Yale smiled. “Fear of change is fear of Order is death.”

They all repeated him.

Yale spoke to them at length about where they would go and what they hoped to do and, chosen well, none raised any objections. When he was done he recited and they repeated: anything that cannot thrive deserves death. Ward tried not to think about it too much. It was too big of a concept to conceive wholly; in his mind he had begun to find the best way to approaching something like a blister was to ignore all thoughts on them until the moment of their popping arrived. He liked that they would take the children, though. They were innocent. Never squander potential. Ward realized this was the real reason they would be cleaning, taking care of those too old and too stubborn to become orderly. What parent could or would allow the taking of their child? They would investigate, they would inspect, they would interfere, and so they would not be allowed to.

Yale asked each to turn in the rifles they had been given and in turn replaced them with two other firearms — a heavy pistol with a twelve bullet magazine and a black handle beneath a silver finish, as well as a light automatic rifle with a twenty-eight bullet magazine molded from hard plastic with a hair-trigger and laser-sight and a well-crafted stock. He handed out silencers for the both of the weapons and a light for the rifle, and neither they nor the weapons themselves had any sort of make on them. Ward, not

knowing all that much about guns, could not say who had made them or in what year. Their knives they kept having earned them already. The seven new crewmembers were all shown how to use the new firearms, how to load, how to assemble and disassemble. They were allowed to go into the range for a bit to try them out, get used to their kick, though there was not much of one.

They received also a pack with all the supplies, as far as Yale was concerned, that they would need. As far as Yale was concerned was as far they needed to be concerned. It was slightly bigger than the one Ward had already been given, with more pockets and made from the same tough fabric as his outfit. Ward emptied his new pack out and saw two other versions of his current outfit, one also in brown with black trim while the other was black with brown trim. Casual clothing in a pair of jeans and a striped shirt. Also a first-aid kit with adhesive bandage strips and wraps and moleskin and needle and thread and antacids and aspirin. Inside the pack was also a flare gun with some ammo. A compact shovel, matches and a container for them, a compass, layers of maps of the Southwest and Midwest, a flashlight with a kinetic battery, a watch made of shatterproof plastic, a sleeping bag, a bedroll, the poles of a tent that Carter carried the canvas to. Two large canteens filled with purified water. Enough food for a week in the form of small, silver-wrapped rations containing toilet paper and chocolate fudge that looked like cousins. A few pounds of jerky and hard bread that looked tough enough to feed a month full of sailors. Ward unwrapped all of this and examined its quality and then packed it again. All the others did the same.

Once gathered they followed Yale and then Kansas up and out of the bunker into the gray mid-afternoon summer day. In the middle of the panhandle, they were just under

the center of the Dustbowl, and there were no wind shields out there like in the cities. The tiny hard particles swept at them in waves of relentless, cloud-choking dust. The air pressed warm and fast against their bodies, but their faces were covered with thin masks like the rest of themselves to prevent breathing in too much of the environment.

Kansas dressed differently and looked warm most of the time, her dark cloak largely shrouding her form, making Ward's gaze on her linger from time to time, still trying to see if he could catch her real shape. He liked to do this. He liked also to imagine the two of them sitting down and sharing a bottle of vodka. Getting smashed until they did something stupid. He imagined this but he knew it wouldn't work. He wasn't going to drink anymore; he wasn't. People depended on him.

No roads nor tracks led to the bunker, and it stood alone in a field of tall brown grass that brushed against their bodies as they marched. After a while they came across a gravel road and followed its dark surface shifting in the wind for a mile and a half before taking a sharp turn to continue North and East. Eventually the dust stopped blowing into them, but only because the wind ceased. The dirt just hung in the air, coating every breath. The nine figures plodded along without talking much, simply eyeing the dirt-caked grass that surrounded them and the horizon ahead with rifles in their gloved hands. The seven besides Yale and Kansas ready to shoot but not ready to shoot.

That night they made their camp a little bit past a concrete intersection with white signs holding black numbers that read sixty and eighty-three. Ward had never been so far North. He knew that even up here highwaymen were a problem, were the reason the crew slept away from the road and did not travel straight on top of it. The semi-vigilantes stormed into towns and provinces and the like, badges tattooed on their faces and painted

on their cars, taking women and food and guns and lives for their Chief. These were the old guard, the abandoned police that the government no longer felt it could support outside of urban centers. They did not want anyone on their roads and made sure often to remind those that lived off of the long stretches of concrete of that fact.

Darkness came and even so far from a city or even a town the sky held too much a haze to see many stars. All felt tired from the work of the day and no one conversed before fading to sleep. He and Carter set up their tent but Ward left it to him and stayed out on the naked ground beneath only his sleeping bag before the sky. The night was warm and it wasn't necessary to zip up his sleeping bag. His father used to say West Texas was sweltering in the summertime at one point. Ward had learned in his classes at the bunker that it was warmer at night than during the day in the Dustbowl, since the long wave radiation created from the earth got trapped beneath the dust.

Lying face down, he spread out his arms to feel the stillness of the Earth, to feel the speed it held as it spun and twisted, trying to imagine the farness needed that could watch its elliptical pattern unfold. He wondered how something that had moved for so long in one direction could have chosen the wrong one. Once, he shifted his position to lay on his side and through the scrambled moonlight saw Kansas lying face-up nearby. Her face always looked smooth and without lines or bags but still he wondered if she slept.

The next morning they rose with the coloring of the horizon and packed their camp up and ate grits and jerky and dirt for breakfast. The soil could not be avoided in

anything. They formed a small circle and Ward listened as Elaine spoke to Bryan and Austin.

“So are you two brothers or what?” She asked them.

“Of course we are, sister,” Austin said, grinning. “We both wear the uniform, do we not?”

“You know what I mean.”

Bryan looked like he was about to answer, but Kansas, sitting outside of the circle, shook her head. “Does verbal affirmation of something you are already quite certain of really seem like a worthy expense of your time?”

Elaine looked at her. “You have something better to talk about during breakfast?”

Ward already knew her answer but it filled his chest a bit to hear her say it.

“There is always something better.” Her voice had an edge like a drill bit. “The notion that we should settle even in our conversations is offensive.”

In the sudden awkward tension that hung over breakfast Bryan chuckled impulsively and Austin nudged him with his elbow.

Elaine looked a bit cowed, and tilted her head down before nodding. “Right,” she said. “I won’t forget that.”

“You shouldn’t,” Kansas continued. “Every conversation can be a gift. Never squander potential.”

They all repeated her. Nobody said anything else after that, except for Yale to compliment Sue’s job on the grits and then the rest of them for how far they had already gone. They walked and continued in the same direction through the panhandle, crunching through dirt and grass and rock and through the emptied remains of a dead town called

Canadian. Signs hung off of buildings like rags on the homeless. The only real resident was the dust, and everything else made room or got weighed down by it. Further North and East still and near the evening they saw a fire in the distance. Yale instructed Ward and Sue to change into their civvies and to disassemble and pack their guns, and so they and Kansas and Yale took about ten minutes before continuing the approach to the fire. The others Yale told to wait till dawn.

The brown sky enveloped the three as they walked slowly to the camp, the fading light barely coming through the host of dust. The ground flat and mostly dead and no prettier than the air. Coming near the flames the crew members had their hands up and out and clearly empty. Two men sat at the camp with rifles across their knees. One old with hair like mixed concrete and the other younger but with similar sort of lines running down his face.

“Howdy there,” Yale said, in a more pronounced-than-usual drawl that fit onto his voice like a cap to a bottle. “Mind if we share the warmth for a spell?”

The older man examined them and their packs and especially Kansas in her brown cloak before nodding. He had reason to be suspect. An outsider could be any number of things; members of the star cult that the crewmembers were pretending not to be, highwaymen, or—in that region of the country—the huesos, those savages from the broken innards of New Mexico.

Ward knew there were other terms for huesos all over the country, probably the world. In the South and East they were called hillbillies, or mountain folk. In the West they were fringers. But really they were all just people who saw society dissolving and decided to take every possible sordid advantage. People who looked for survivors of the

dirt, dearth, and disease of America and then dealt with them. The Dustbowl running well into North Dakota, Colorado, Texas, and Missouri on its farthest ends created a plethora of shortages of every kind of supply. Even so it was possible to survive by stealing, raiding, eating anything that was possible to cook. Ward supposed it was, after a fashion, nearly understandable. For folk like the huesos, surviving meant redefining food, meant redefining culture and wearing the bone trinkets of their dealings and occasionally meals around their waist and necks, or so the stories went. Maybe it was possible they didn't have to do such things, maybe they even knew that. Maybe they just decided no one in power had the time to come punish them.

“Sure thing,” the man said. “Name’s David. This’s my boy, Rob.”

“David and Rob,” Yale repeated, watching the guns leave their knees and slide to the ground. “I’m Marvin, Marvin Yale.” He pointed to Kansas. “This is my girlfriend, Wendy.” His hand shifted to the two standing behind him. “And these are my cousins, Kyle and Claire.”

The name felt foreign to Ward but he could fit into it if he needed. He waved as they all waved and then they sat down near the fire. It wasn't necessary to lie about their names, but one lie begets others easily. Feeling a needling of jealousy in his chest, he wondered if there was any truth underlying the claim of Kansas as Yale's girlfriend.

“Just hiking through the area, huh?” Rob asked.

Kansas nodded. “More or less. We're from New Mexico, originally, and with everything as it is we didn't see the harm in just living off the land for a while.”

“Not stealing, I hope?” David said.

“Maybe here and there,” Ward said with a grin.

He wasn't sure if he should talk but it would have seemed weird if he didn't at all. The less strange they seemed the more strange they could be.

Yale grinned with him and punched him a bit. "Don't listen to this one. He'll tell you anything to keep you interested in him."

"We've got all we need in our bags," Kansas said. "Amazing how much can go in them. We ate on the hike, but we've got food, if you'd like."

She made towards her pack, but the old man shook his head.

"We already ate, ourselves. Rabbit."

He pointed at the ground next to the fire and Ward saw the skinned fur lying there. A job well done.

"This your property, then?" Sue asked. "We weren't trying to trespass."

The old man shrugged. "If all's you're doing is hiking then you don't need to worry about it. Far as I'm concerned you're just passing on your way."

"That's right," Yale said.

"Seems like that's all anyone's doing, lately," Kansas said.

Rob looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"Passing on. No mind to the nature of where things are going, just drifting through."

"Could be," David said, looking at his son beside him. "Could be. We try and keep our heads out of politics and all of that. Fight tooth and nail for the land here every year when the state comes by. Want to build up some new kind of highway through it."

"What do you use this land for?" Yale asked.

The old man shrugged. "What I please. Hunting with my son," he nodded his head towards Rob. "Living. Getting away from the world."

"Texas is a good place to get away," Yale said, nodding.

David and Rob both nodded and it was the son who spoke. "Seems like the only place big enough for it, sometimes."

Kansas looked at them both before speaking. "Sometimes I feel like I'd like to get away. Let everyone else worry about changing things."

"Change?" The old man harrumphed. "Change is people killing each other by the millions instead of by the thousands, by the hundreds. I'd like no part of change."

Kansas and Yale exchanged looks, looks Ward thought he knew the meaning of. The kind that lions might give one to another if preaching to mice.

"Don't mind him," Rob said. "Had a brother, or I did, he had a son, I guess, lost in the war. The secession, I mean. Lost his arms and then his life when the hospital got bombed. Old salt on older wounds, ain't that right?"

David looked at him and sighed and shook his head with a small smile on his face.

"What about you, Rob?" Yale asked. "You feel the same way?"

Rob smiled. "He's my father, ain't he?" Then he shrugged. "World can do what it wants. We'll be right here, just the same. Staying to ourselves won't win any medals but then I won't lose any limbs neither. The world'll right itself. Always has."

Sue changed the subject to hunting, saying that she had gone after javelinas a few times and was there was any game besides rabbit around, but Ward already knew the gears that had turned in Yale and Kansas's mind and in what direction. A couple of hours

passed in conversation, talking about hunting, the weather, David's old general goods business and Ron doing the accounting there until it all eroded. Eventually they all made to go to sleep. When Ward pulled out his sleeping bag Yale approached him.

"Dangerous times," he said quietly. "You've got first watch, alright?"

Ward thought about what he asked and then about what he really asked. He nodded assent and Yale walked back to his pack and prepared for sleep. Ward lay down and waited for an hour and a half. When he rose it was with his knife in his hands. The son first, stronger and more able. Blade clean across the throat, mouth covered by his palm, no need to stretch it out. In and out, like they had taught him, dead and done in an instant. Even so Rob's arm came up with a big hand and tried to scratch Ward's.

Over the old man he stood for a moment, thinking of his father and preference for patricide. A death by an old disease or a death for a higher purpose. Ward's knife slid easily into the old skin of the man's throat and even so his hand clawed into Ward's arm before fading just like his son's had in the same instinctive reflex; a kind of family tradition older than their own line.

That done, he wiped his hands on the grass with a bit of water from their canteens and then went to his sleeping bag. In the morning the ground would be wetter and easier to dig into. When he woke Sue had already started on the holes, and so he helped her dig and then to fill and before long the others in the crew had rejoined them. Yale portioned off what was left of the rabbit to Ward and Sue and the rest had grits for breakfast.

"That's a real good job," he said to Ward as they ate. "Quality work. You should be proud."

And he was.

Ward tried to talk to his father only once after Russ died. Much of the time the old man would just come home from work, eat dinner, and then retire to his study. Ward and Russ used to make fun of how he would retire to his study, like he was some eighteenth-century cigar-smoking gentleman. Their father would read a lot, read the news. He liked to wrap himself up in the world at large, and this sometimes withdrew him from the world in front of him.

When Russ died, this got worse. Or it became bad, and then worse. An interest in the ways of the world wasn't such a bad thing, but it was if it was all you thought about. It was if it replaced communicating with the ones close to you. Their house was small, one-story. Small lawn, small doors, small hallways and windows and tiles and sinks. Ward's mother tried to make up for it with big pictures and plants but this only made it feel smaller. Ward came into his father's study without asking and sat down in front of his desk until the old man looked at him. It took about half an hour. Ward knew his father was trying to ignore him. Ward had let him, because he was afraid of what might be said. But in a few days Ward was going to go to a college clear across the state and finances wouldn't allow him to sit down with his father for a long time. Not even for holidays.

Finally the old man closed the screen in front of him and looked at Ward, looked right at him. Looked at him like he was looking past him, which in many ways wasn't really looking at him at all.

"I didn't think he would do it," said Ward. "Of course I didn't."

His father nodded.

“How was I supposed to know something like that? How was I supposed to have known what went on? He’s a . . . he was a kid. Kid’s cry. Kids do all kinds of things. I couldn’t have known. You remember that time he came home from school and locked himself up in his room for two days because some kid called him Pizza-Back because of that shit on his skin? He overreacted to stuff all the time.”

His father leaned forward a bit. Like he was watching a horse race. “You’re saying this is all a result of an overreaction.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Maybe,” his father said. “Could be. Could be life is an overreaction to this thing called creation. Most of the time it seems too much to handle, doesn’t it?”

“I guess.”

“You better figure it out, boy.” His father turned his screen back on. “You’re able to, and that means you have to. Even in a small way.”

They didn’t say anything to each other for a bit. Ward almost got up to leave.

“I don’t want to think about this anymore,” his father said then. “Things cannot be the way they were. That is the way of things. They are bastards like that. But I can do my best. And I don’t know how to talk to you without thinking about it. Go to bed, Ward.”

His father wouldn’t say anything else and Ward didn’t really ask him to, and three days later Ward left to go to school. His mother hugged him and kissed his cheek and said God would watch over him while he was away. His father did not say he would miss him or that he loved him and all he did say was good bye. He did not even look at him much. He shook Ward’s hand, like they were business partners, as if they had some kind of an arrangement. Ward guessed maybe they did.

Days passed and they did not see anyone else on the road or on the land. Yale had detailed maps of every county the crew went through, and so even though they stayed near the roads they would not have missed any of the obscurely located farmhouses because of the obfuscation of the dust. They stayed near the roads, but always far away enough to duck under the grass or dirty haze of the air should trucks or cars with badges or logos painted on them pass by, which happened every so often. They did not want to risk exposure to the volatile travelers of the road, not yet. As they traveled Ward sometimes felt a part of himself trying to make excuses for his actions with the father and son and he willed that part of his being down. That kind of thinking was the clean air in the dust of himself. They went through another dead town by the name of Glazier possessing the same sort of organized chaos that the last town held. Destruction allotted through square portions, divided by streets and parking lots. Not a soul lived but it had been economics that brought the place to such a level, not the Order. At the end of the day that the nine walked over that town's broken carcass, Ward took off his boots and saw a blister had formed on his foot.

He took out a bit of moleskin and tried to cover it but the positioning was awkward for him. Austin saw him struggling and walked over and got on one knee before taking the moleskin in his hands.

“Here,” he said, grabbing Ward's foot.

“Thank you.”

“Vesicles are serious stuff,” he said. “If you can't walk forward, then neither will the Order.”

“All business today, huh?”

Austin smiled, making sure the moleskin wouldn't move around on Ward's foot. “It's got to be business. If I start caring about your blister, I might start caring about all the other blisters out there.”

“Can't have that,” Ward said.

“No sir, a doctor's got to remain impartial,” he said, then stood up. “All done.”

“You really a doctor?”

Austin smiled. “Closest thing you got, ain't it?”

In the crew everyone had bits of themselves that were understood but never really spoken aloud. Like how Clancy cared more than he let on about his appearance, if only because they could all see him do push-ups and crunches most every night before bed and right after he woke up. And it wasn't just that, the pale man always looked clean and arranged, never a hair out of place. Or how Yale probably owned a horse in whatever previous life he had—always he was talking about breeds and racing and if they came across a horse, which occurred once in a while, he would call for a break and try to pet the animal. Sue had a notebook that she doodled in—mostly pictures of the road, the landscape, whatever sparse wildflowers they came across—a notebook that she would show others but tried to keep to herself. Bryan enjoyed being quiet more than he let on. Though it was usually him that engaged the others in conversations Ward had seen him at nights and during walking breaks just sitting by himself and staring into the distance, a distant smile on his face. Ward imagined the other eight knew that he liked oldies—he hummed in the mornings when he was putting his items together and working on

hygiene. They picked these things up about each other, it was impossible not to, and Ward imagined their collective image of himself might even be better than his own.

By the end of the next day they had come to the outskirts of a town near the Oklahoma border named Higgins. They could see its lights from miles away and made camp beside a long rock canalled and divided by the highway. They made a camp but did not start a fire. No sense in starting the new tradition by being reckless. Yale sat them all in a circle in the dark and asked them if they had any questions.

“Do we go tonight?” Clancy asked.

Ward regarded the tall, skinny man strangely and so did most of the others except for Kansas. Clancy never volunteered himself in conversations and so to hear him ask a question seemed like someone bouncing a square ball.

“No,” Yale answered. “We’re ahead of schedule and we can’t debate with the timetable. Going against a plan sows nothing but chaos. The mouthpieces leave in the morning. We’ll go in tomorrow at dark.”

Clancy nodded but his leg shook and continued to do so throughout the night. Ward had not seen the man be so active in front of the others before.

“Are we going to work by ourselves?” Carter asked.

“Excellent question,” Yale said. “No. Find someone to pair with and make sure you’re comfortable with them. Clancy, if you don’t mind, I’d like to work with you.”

Clancy nodded. He turned his head downwards but Ward thought he saw him blush.

“Great. The rest of you figure out who you’ll work with tonight before going to bed. Kansas will be working by herself.”

Ward's heart contorted in his chest. He had been thinking he would work with her. In the moonlight he saw his desire reflected in the eyes of everyone but Austin and Bryan, the only two who already had someone they definitely trusted. All seven of them had all been recruited by her, had all needed her at some point. Yale did not address this, and Kansas herself remained expressionless.

“Won't they make calls?” Elaine asked.

Yale smiled. “That's thinking ahead.”

Elaine smiled in response.

“They might try, but Kansas is taking care of part of that and the other part is why we work on a schedule. The Order pervades.”

They all repeated this last bit and then no one said anything for several moments and Yale got up.

“If that's all, then, try not to get too fired up so you can have a good night's rest. I brought a couple of balls that we can throw around tomorrow while we wait if you like. We start our work at dusk. I hope you're as excited as I am.”

Ward's body did have a certain bouncy quality, like a current ran against his bones. He wondered how it would be for Elaine or Bryan or any of the others who hadn't yet killed. For Carter who had never done so for such a purpose. Being in the same tent, he and Carter chose one another to partner with. They had lain down for the night and the air between them hung dark and quiet.

“Sue told me that you were the one that took care of those two a few days back.”

Ward opened his eyes but in the darkness it didn't make a difference.

“That's right.”

“Well?”

Ward knew what was being asked of him, just like he knew when Yale asked him to kill the man and his son out there in the field.

“It’s all right,” Ward said. “I kept thinking about what you said about those five of yours. How you had to make up lies about bad dreams. For a while in the back of my head I kept thinking I might run into someone, my mom or an old teacher, and have to make up an excuse about why I did it. But it just is. It’s an end, and it was my job to do it.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow.”

The night after he found Russ’s body, the night after Russ’s burial, Ward was on his own bed with a belt in his hands. They had to bury the body in the backyard. One neighbor showed up, a Misses Caplan. Ward’s mother had Misses Caplan read from the Bible—the priest was too expensive to bring down, just like anybody who could have come and picked up the body, just like any real yard that was supposed to have graves in it. It was about 80 degrees out and the sky was largely clear and that was disappointing to Ward. He would have preferred it to rain.

Ward sat on the bed with the belt in his hands in his lamp-lit room and he imagined throwing the thick leather of the strap around his neck and dumping himself down the stairs. He imagined this but he could not get his hands to move. There maybe was a trick to it, or a strategy. A series of moves necessary before he could make the move to end himself. He thought about how he only needed to get molested so that he

could really understand his brother and be with him and he laughed at the strangeness of this thought. He didn't even know where he would go to do something like that. He didn't even really think it was possible to get molested when you were past the age of consent.

His father had been the one to take the belt off his brother's neck. Russ's small, pudgy body still like a block of flesh by that time, the edges of the belt buckle dug in to his throat. Ward was there when his father moved Russ's body, Ward saw. When his parents came home they just saw their one son laying strange on the stairs of their house and the other son sitting in a corner, watching but absorbing nothing.

Ward got up with the belt in his hands and tried to rush it over his head. Nothing. His hands wouldn't go over and around his neck. Maybe they couldn't. He didn't know why. Maybe he wasn't capable of ending himself. He threw the belt against the wall. Then he sighed and picked it up and tossed it on the hanger in his closet with the rest of the belts. He had chosen the thickest one. It would be a stupid thing to hang yourself and have the belt break. More stupid than that was that he did not want to have any kind of conversation about why he was killing himself with his parents. He didn't want to have that conversation because he knew they would understand, and he didn't want them to, because understanding was just a membrane surrounding condoning.

He sat back down on his bed and tried to go to sleep. Somewhere in his head was the thought that he couldn't kill himself. And somewhere in his head was the thought that maybe he just couldn't be so active about it.

Ward did not think of himself as a heavy sleeper. So, when Carter did not keep him up at night with any tossing or turning, Ward woke the day of the cleaning with a confidence in the man, and also a small and mostly ignored sense of relief that they apparently both slept without nightmares.

After breaking their fast Yale brought out two inflatable balls as he said he would, one blue, one red. Bryan set up a game of touch football and Ward ran as a receiver and even scored a touchdown on the makeshift end zone of the highway, though his team with Carter and Sue did not win. Sometimes when it was not too dusty Ward used to play football with Russ and he would let his little brother win. It was good for self-esteem, for both the brothers. Ward liked knowing he could help Russ somehow.

After lunch, Austin had them play a game in which the person carrying the red ball had to avoid being hit with the blue ball for as long as possible. Whoever tagged that person got the red ball themselves. Kansas sat out and watched and Clancy kept time for the possessions. Elaine wound up winning after a few hours of play, tumbling away from almost every shot thrown at her. Ward's chest burned by late afternoon from having laughed too much and gulping in too much dusty air, even though they played with their masks on. Elaine tackled him at one point and it felt surreal to feel another woman's hands on him after such a time. Maybe they stayed on his hips longer than they needed to or maybe he just felt that they did.

Yale and Bryan and then Austin wrestled on the ground for a while, flipping and slamming and headlocking. When Yale finally told them to stop so that they'd have energy for the night's work the brothers said he was just tired of being shown up. He smiled and shrugged and told them to get ready anyway.

At dark they carried their knives open in their hands and wore their black uniforms and squat-walked to the edge of the town, which was marked by a short line of barbed wire. On their legs they carried full holsters for their pistols and over their shoulders slung the straps of the rifles they had been given. Inches-deep rolls of duct tape hung from their belts. Ranchers lived all along the outskirts in about a five mile radius and divvied up the acres there between themselves, marking their borders with barbed wire. The crew spread out at the wire and Carter and Ward motioned that they would take the small white house at the town-edge of the land. The streetlights and stoplights and any and all lights sputtered out as they moved; Kansas doing the first part of her portion.

Carter jammed the backdoor of the house open and Ward followed him into the unfamiliar dark. They crept past a mock Monet painting and an autumn wreath and philosophical metal signs declaring things like, “If Mama Ain’t Happy, Nobody’s Happy.” Bronzed photo-frames that held within them the knowledge of how many rooms to check for how many bodies. They split up; Ward upstairs, Carter on the bottom.

The first door beyond the stairs led into the room of a teenage girl too old to take. Her walls a pastiche of rainbows and screen stars. His knife was already ready. This far away from a bunker they had to use knives to conserve ammunition—Yale had instructed them. Ward held the girl and cut her and then went to the next rooms on the floor. She had been the only one there. He grabbed a curtain to clean his knife and walked downstairs and did not see Carter in the hallway like he expected.

Ward checked the floor; he went room by room. In the last one he saw Carter standing over a sleeping woman, his knife in his hands. Ward came around the black man at a wide angle, not wanting to get stabbed in the darkness. Carter looked up at him,

looked down at the woman, slapping the flat of his knife against his thigh. The woman began to stir. Ward had heard somewhere that just being watched could wake someone up, as if the body had an exterior security system of some kind, as if people killing each other in the night had been expected since man began.

She stirred more and started to open her eyes. Ward moved towards her and held her down, his hand on her mouth. She struggled and screamed, but, of course she did. Ward nodded down at the woman to Carter. He did not feel he had to say what was implicit in the situation. If Carter did not kill her then Ward would have to. If Carter did not kill her then Ward would have to kill him. But Carter didn't move, staring at the woman. In the darkness Ward could not make out the man's expression, not really, but he imagined it softening, maybe making an apology. An absurd thought to have of Carter, an absurd thought for Carter to have.

"Don't delay," Ward said, after a minute of tugging silence.

She looked up at him, looked at Carter, her eyes fish-wide and her lips sucking in on her teeth. Ward kept nodding at Carter, not saying anything. Finally Carter struck out with the knife; a blind, wild swipe. It struck around her chest and tore off a long piece of her breast. He swiped again and cut her throat and Ward turned her so the spray would not cover his compatriot. It was different to watch someone die when they were awake the whole time. It was different but it was all right. The black man looked down, watching the life twitch out of the body.

"That's good work," Ward patted Carter on the back. "Quality. But we've got more to do."

They went on to the next house.

They left the house and moved quickly forward into the next one a few hundred yards down the road. Ward broke the window over the backdoor and unlocked it and they moved in, once more immersed suddenly in the living decisions of others. The house had two stories. On the bottom the parents slept and they did not wake again. From upstairs Ward heard a thump and the crackle of tape unrolling. Carter came down the stairs with the child over his shoulder and then laid him down on the living room carpet. Ward saw a red blotch all about the boy's eye; he knew that sometimes, probably most times, kids would have to get knocked out.

That done, they moved to the next house where only an old man lived and then to the next where everyone had already left with the Order. Fifteen houses done like this in quick succession with no regard for enjoyment or prolonging the unstoppable, just machine-like incisions into the fabric of the small society until its pattern began to dissolve. The repetition of them ran together like shadows on a cloudy field.

It was three in the AM when shots began to break the silence of their work. The singular pops of the pistols that the crew carried interspersed with the thunder of shotguns and the cracking of magnums. Ward wondered why his comrades hadn't silenced their weapons. Lasted all of fifteen seconds. Ward and Carter headed over towards the origination of the sounds and checked the five houses on the way. In the third some people had woken up and Ward shot them down in the hallway. In the fourth and fifth others had woken to check on their neighbors or call the local sheriff if there still was one and strangely each time their phones got caught in the trajectory of bullets much faster than they, exploding in showers of plastic before the man and then the woman who held them fell dead to the ground.

And so this went with all the crew pairs and by the time the townspeople had begun to run out of their houses, perhaps seeing or perhaps second-seeing their fate, the crew had picked fine spots to sit and aim with their rifles and pick them off as they went. Only Clancy and Carter shot at the running children, as they were the only ones who could safely clip their small bodies and keep them alive.

By dawn the nine stood back in a group once more in the center of the town with the highway running through it and a gas station at each corner, two of which would work if power remained. Bryan had been hit in the leg during the firefight but only with lead shot and from far away and it did not cut easily into the sturdy fabric of his uniform. He had been the one who forgot to silence his weapon. Yale asked for the crew's tally and Ward and Carter told him thirty-five with five more children in waiting. All totaled, the crew's account ran two short and Yale sent Bryan and Austin and Sue and Elaine to check each house again. Carter told them not to bother.

He pointed to the brown and busted gas station to his right. The streetlights knocked down, scattered glass all over the parking lot. "There's movement in there."

Having found them, Yale sent Carter and also Ward to search them out. Carter held his rifle in a ready position against his shoulder and Ward followed him like that before splitting off to go behind the building. A head popped up from inside, looking around. Shots rang out and then Ward did not see any more except for the red bits of the head that had sprayed onto the nearby shelves. Carter's kill; Ward had not even brought his rifle up to aim. From the back door sprinted a gangly young man in a loose white shirt with brown hair and glasses. He looked only backwards towards the store and Ward stepped towards him and shoved the butt of his gun into his face. It was strange but it felt

like the most violent thing Ward had done all day, making this kid twist and slam into the ground like a sack of bricks.

The kid moaned into his own bloodied glasses and still tried to crawl. The wind lessened and so Ward slipped his mask down and breathed in some of the dirty air. He approached the kid silently and then kicked him over onto his back. Eyes went wide.

“Please,” he said, the cut on his cheek like a fissure of lava, bubbling and spilling over. “Come on, man. I didn’t do nothing to you.”

“You’re right.” Ward aimed at his chest. “You didn’t do anything.”

He looked confused and then Ward shot him and he did not look anything at all.

Once, a few weeks after the Fourth of July he and Russ were outside in a field playing with firecrackers. Ward was fifteen so Russ must have been eight. They were both wearing shorts and t-shirts in the cool wet summer weather. It was difficult to play with his kid brother sometimes—a lot of the time Ward felt more like an uncle—but Ward wanted to. It was just hard to find a commonality.

Things that exploded, though, every boy liked those. Ward had firecrackers in his hands, the little red inch-long cylinders with the waterproof fuses. He would light them in his palm and toss them into a puddle or an ant pile or just up into the air and they would blow up. A sharp, quick explosion, like a gunpowder fart. Ward would light them and toss them and Russ would laugh or gasp or smile and that was good. They did this for about half-an-hour and then for laughs Ward tossed one at Russ’s feet.

His brother screamed and ran away, giggling when it exploded nearby.

“Don’t!” his brother protested.

Ward threw another one. At his feet, like the one before. The fuse was about five seconds long. Russ laughed and ran away again. Ward lit up three in his hands all at once and tossed them out in different directions. Russ scrambled around, trying to dodge them, and just narrowly avoided one exploding at his feet.

“I’m gonna tell Mom!” Russ was bent over, breathing hard.

Ward lit up four, and tossed them in succession, taking his time, so that the last one blew up in the air right in front of Russ. The boy fell to the ground, giggling madly.

“Stop it,” he asked again. “I’ll tell Mom and Dad!”

Ward knew he wouldn’t, though. There was no real danger to the firecrackers—maybe at worst they’d leave a bruise or a burn—but Russ didn’t know that. Russ did know bringing the parents into it would ruin the game. Any kid would know that. And the game was fun. You didn’t bring adults into it until they were necessary, either to solve a dispute or to help with pain.

“Okay, okay,” Ward said. “I’ll cut it out.”

He lit one more and threw it beside Russ. His brother squealed and rolled and got up to his feet, jumping a bit when the firecracker went off and sent dirt flying up in the air. Russ, covered in dirt and grass, tried wiping himself off. With his hands covered in dirt he did not get much done.

“Stop it, Ward. I mean it.”

There was a look in his eyes Ward recognized. A push right to the limit of crying. He didn’t know it but that’s what he had been searching for. To push him right to the edge of his tolerance. It was satisfying in a way, to know the ends of a person. Ward kept throwing the firecrackers, but threw them high up in the air above himself, trying to make

them explode before they hit the ground. He and Russ both had to run out of the way of a few, but they did it together. The game went on.

Many pick-up trucks sat in the town of Higgins with full tanks despite the price of gas, or perhaps because of it. Maybe the people there had found walking a better alternative and saved the expensive fuel for rainier days, as it were. The crew would not ever know but in any case it would help them with transporting bodies to the grave that they had to dig. Bodies ultimately were just a kind of evidence and their work required as little of that as possible if it were to continue smoothly. A twenty yard square was marked off and they had been instructed to dig ten feet into every part of it. The work tired Ward but with each shovel he could see progress and so he enjoyed it. The wind wasn't blowing hard and he was grateful for the ease that added to his job. Kansas, Yale, and Sue had started to gather the children up and put them next to the clearing where the hole was. Most were conscious, with their hands and feet hog-tied, squirming and crying like melancholy worms. They were not touched other than to move them.

In the afternoon after they had finished the cleaning Yale threw out a grenade near the grave that blew out green smoke and in a few hours a helicopter rumbled by with a cargo container swinging from the winch beneath it. Dust ballooned out all around its whirling blades. Austin and Bryan opened the container up when it clattered to the ground and along with Clancy and Yale they began to unload the timber stored inside of it. While they worked, Kansas, Elaine, and Ward all gathered the children up and sent them in the box and Ward did not think about his brother or how if he was alive he would be loaded just like this. After half-an-hour the container had been both completely

unloaded and loaded again, and the helicopter faded back into the dusty horizon. Kids got to live, kids got to go. Never squander potential.

Over the next day, they dug and dug and when they tired they took food from convenience stores or rested in one of the houses. Ward was tired at the end of the day but it was a good fatigue. It made him not want to do anything else. Each person took a house to themselves and in the night the breaking of glass or wood could sometimes be heard if Ward listened hard enough. He understood; he joined in. They had all grown up in homes of some sort, of course, and with as many connotations and denotations that family and the household held for them now it was hard not to go about destroying at least some part of a house that they would never be punished for harming. Ward saw Carter around the town at night, sometimes, but never went up to him and talked. Socialization seemed out of place when all the day got used up for work and all the night was needed for rest.

They kept digging and before the third day they had portioned out a decent enough sized hole, and so started to use the trucks for what they had gathered them for. The masks they wore over their mouths and noses protected them from the dust, but also from inhaling the stink as they dumped bodies into the hole, slumping and thumping them on one another. Yale helped where he thought he should, but largely worked as an overseer and something like a coach, providing them water and snacks and scheduled breaks. Kansas was not seen often but when she was it was arriving at the construction site with tools from various houses—ladders and saws and hammers and nailguns and hinges and sawhorses and all the rest that they would need.

“Will this do anything to the land, you think?” Bryan asked aloud one afternoon to no one in particular.

He was leaning on his shovel with his shirt off; Yale just told him to break for a quarter of an hour only a minute or so before. They each had a rotation off. Ward was near him but didn't have an opinion on the subject. Sue was just as close.

“What do you mean?” she asked, still digging.

“You know,” Bryan said. “All these bodies are going to rot right next to each other. Will it poison the land?”

“I doubt it,” she said. “Probably the opposite, with as many nutrients the ground and all the insects and stuff can absorb from them. If this dirt ever saw the light of day it might even help build some decent topsoil.”

“What's topsoil got to do with anything?” Bryan asked.

“That's what you're breathing, genius,” she said. “The ground's too weak here to keep it from getting pulled up into the air.”

“What, you grow up on a farm or something?”

“Yeah,” Sue said. “Information like that isn't in newspapers or books or anything. It would have to be farm knowledge.”

Ward chuckled and Bryan told him to shut up, but chuckled as well. Bryan would laugh at anything given half a chance—he even smiled about getting shot. When the supply of bodies expended itself they began to fill the hole back up with dirt but this took only half a day. Kansas had brought a table out next to the grave and on it Yale laid out a blueprint and instructed them all to memorize its particulars, as he wouldn't carry it past

this town. Ward took to cutting timber into equal lengths for the walls and before long the various bits of lumber began to take shape into the skeleton of an illusion.

On the second day of lumber construction the nine raised the equal sides and placed them into the front frame, and from there they attached other bits of wall and roof until the fourth day when the entire frame came together. It was hazardous work. While hammering the rafters in, Bryan lost his balance and knocked the industrial-sized orange ladder that they used into the crowd of Elaine, Ward, and Carter. It was Carter that knocked the two aside, taking the brunt of the ladder and the timber that got knocked down onto his back. With the others busy encouraging Bryan not to fall it fell to Ward and Elaine to clear the debris off the black man's back.

"You alright?" He asked Carter when the materials were all moved aside.

Elaine said, "You're not bleeding."

Carter nodded, stretching his chest backwards with his hands on his back. "The Order weighs down on us all, don't it?"

They all three laughed, continuing to chuckle as they pushed the ladder back up to Bryan.

"I don't see what's so goddamn funny," he called down, making them laugh even harder. In true form and against his own words he would laugh about it later.

At the end of the seventh day of construction all the shingling had been placed on the roof and the walls had been closed in by timber to stand against the wind. Inside the structure the dirt laid still and where there laid a town there stood an empty barn.

Yale allowed them one more day to rest their bones and said they could even have some junk food if they wanted, and so they took to the houses they had requisitioned and slept and bathed in the dark and ate potato chips and breakfast pastries and the next morning stood at the end of the town back on Highway 60 with their packs and bellies full, dressed all in brown once more.

They hiked and crossed the border into Oklahoma and saw only prairie dogs in small pockets on the yellow ground. Clancy aimed to shoot them before Yale told him not to waste any bullets. A bullet was a purpose and the Order did not throw such away. On the morning of the second day they spotted a large blue and white house with tendrils of clothes hanging on lines running out from it in all directions. Four immaculately white shithouses stood behind it.

“Carter, Clancy,” said Yale, “let’s go down and check it out. Leave your rifles. We’ll play recruiters.”

Clancy put his gun on the ground and Carter handed his to Ward. Yale offered his to Sue.

“Why can’t I go?” she asked, sounding a bit offended. “It’s my rotation.”

“I’ve got a suspicion and I’m pulling rank.”

“I don’t have a rank,” she said.

“Then I’m higher up on the list than you. Stay put and stay out of sight.”

She narrowed her eyes but took the gun and then walked off in the other direction a ways before sitting down and taking out her knife to sharpen it. Yale unhooked his pistol’s holster and tucked the gun into the back of his pants and Carter and Clancy did the same. Ward sat down and watched the three go towards the house in between looking

at the clouds. With Kansas as distant as ever, and Bryan trying to talk with the annoyed Sue, Elaine walked over to Ward.

“What do you think the deal is?” Elaine asked him.

He shrugged. “Lot of laundry for one house. Big family, I guess.”

“So why couldn’t Sue go?”

He shrugged again. “I guess we’ll find out here in a little bit.”

She sat down next to him with her knees against her chest. When she spoke her voice came quiet.

“I don’t like that house,” she said. “It looks like my uncle’s place.”

“Didn’t like him?”

“I loved him.”

“Oh yeah?” It was the genuine feeling in her voice that made Ward surprised enough to even answer.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding and watching the figures in the distance enter the house. “He would take me to the carnival every time it was in town and every other weekend he’d pick me up and we would go down to the movies and he’d get me candy and popcorn and soda. Mom and Dad never let me have any, with competitions coming so often. It was our secret. He lost the bottom halves of his legs in a car crash when he was ten. I guess he knew that being a kid was supposed to be fun sometimes.”

Ward sat in silence, wondering what brought this revelation on. He supposed Elaine had a hard time not talking when she had something to say, and with Bryan taking up her usual gabbing partner in Sue, she turned to Ward instead. He had overheard a lot of Sue and Elaine’s conversations, but only really remembered Elaine saying that she had

loved going to Lake Tahoe when she was a child. They sat there and she didn't say anything for a while, maybe seeing if Ward had anything to ask. He didn't, and besides knew that people like Elaine generally revealed themselves. People like Elaine, people like anyone.

“When I was fourteen,” she said, “we went out to his house for one of those weekends, it was in the country sort of like this. It had been a bad week. I don't remember why, exactly. I think a boy I liked got a girlfriend. We drove up to the house and there was my uncle's body in the yard, burning and black. The grass all charred around him. Some punk teenagers thought he had a fortune in his house somewhere and wanted him to give it up. So they beat him up for a few hours, this good crippled man, and then set him on fire.”

“Did they get them? The teenagers?”

“Did who?”

“Anybody. You. Your parents.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Well, one of them got picked up by the cops. But he blamed it all on the other one. Had a rich dad with good lawyers.”

Her eyes went over to Ward, and he felt compelled to return the look with her so close. She seemed to sense gears of judgment turning in his head, ones that did not actually move. Sitting in judgment of a person who failed her family by failing to hurt the monsters who hurt that family would make him a hypocrite of the worst order. His thoughts on the subject ran convoluted and together.

“I don't think it would have changed anything if they had,” she said. “The reason in a person's life isn't measured out that simply.”

They heard a scream from the house, and then others joined in before being intermixed with and then finally drowned out by gunfire. Two skinny fair-haired girls ran out from the structure wearing white sundresses and Elaine and Ward both rolled on to their bellies with their rifles out. Ward aimed, but before he could shoot there were guns fired from inside the house. The women fell to the ground in mid-stride. At their distance, the sudden connection of their faces with the dirt seemed to Ward more violent than the sudden wide redness running down their white dresses.

The six on the hill gathered their belongings and began to approach the house cautiously until Carter stepped outside and waved the all-clear. The interior of the place like a vandalized Rockwell painting. Ward's boots stuck to the carpet and what objects had not been spattered with blood still looked strangely in disarray. The kind of idiosyncratic disassembly—clocks perched on stacks of magazines and shelves slumping under the weight of wooden carvings—that only years of isolation could work on a place. Six bodies splayed out in the living room alone, all women. One looked like it had tripped over another before dying.

“Their father's in the back,” Yale said. “Husband too. And brother for one or two of them.”

Sue looked at him. “You didn't want me to come because they were incestuous?”

“He was a misogynist,” Yale said. “They had to give us food before they would relax. Maybe thought we couldn't do any harm that way, accepting a host's graces. Old tradition, kind of like banging your sister. But your food would have been drugged and so ours would have had to have been too. There's proof of that in the basement. Lots of dead blisters. Few fresh ones.”

“You saw this is New Mexico?” she guessed.

Yale nodded. “I saw this in New Mexico and Arizona. Houses just like this, with all the clotheslines and extra outhouses. I almost lost a girl in one of them. Gets his wife, sisters, maybe his mom pregnant and makes the whole lot so dependent on him over time that he’s treated like a king. Any other woman that comes along becomes an example of why their way is best. They loved the situation. Bred to, after a while.”

They refilled their canteens in the house, picked up what foodstuffs wouldn’t be perishable. Then they dragged the two bodies laying outside into the house and set it ablaze. No one would mind one more non-existent house in the world and the dust would keep the blaze from spreading far enough to become especially noticeable. Elaine watched it for a long time while the crew walked away and Ward had to take her by the elbow to get her to move with him.

Other houses had been settled near the road or near enough for them to take a look. Most of these remained empty and had been obviously so for years and years, but all the same they had to check. Every few dozen miles there stood abandoned gas stations that had already been cleared out of food and water and fuel. The only real stations around any longer had to remain near cities and bigger towns, because otherwise the police enclaves wouldn’t bother to help if something went wrong.

Ward knew the enclaves had been intended as a return to law in the vast stretches along the open road, but by then the highwaymen already controlled the roads. Or, the highwaymen at least rented the roads out in some sense when corporations were not pouring money into trying to exterminate the ex-lawmen to get the roads back. Trade had

a high importance and many times traveling by air to do it was not feasible or profitable in the Dustbowl where repairs were needed so frequently from the amassing of dirt in moving mechanical parts. Many times troops in cars and trucks and on bikes would be sent out to kill them and would not return except in aid of staging a highwaymen raid. The power of a cause moving forward will always be more effective in desperate times than the lure and lull of money, and the highwaymen had a cause, a charter. Ward did not know what it was that turned them but he suspected it had something to do with a kind of strange, violent method in achieving safety. In the Midwest and more towards the North towns had begun to arm themselves. Ward doubted it would help the towns very much, but then he wouldn't have been in the Order if he thought some townspeople with guns could stop it.

In the West Oklahoman Dustbowl water did not come easy. After two days of walking beyond the incest house they resupplied at and then burned down, their water supply dwindled and no sign of replenishment came. Ward finished his canteen sometime in the late morning, and saw the others do the same, mouths hanging open beneath empty containers, tongues wagging in silent entreaty to unresponsive idols of satiation. Being thirsty he had a hard time thinking of any sort of feeling or future that didn't involve a dried throat and a nagging headache.

Ward lived in West Texas near the center of the Dustbowl for near on a year, so he had seen dust storms before. There was no sound to a dust storm, besides the muted whistle of the wind, nothing to herald its coming besides itself. They arrived all at once with the browning of the sky, and for their first few minutes the difficulty was in trying to tell if the storm was on its way or if you already walked inside the middle of it.

Even with his experience with dust storms, that day he ran into something that hadn't happened to him before. Above the dusty particles somewhere there was a greater type of cloud that broke and spilt water down upon the flying dirt. It rained mud on the crew for four hours of hiking across the sloppy, rocky landscape. It soaked into their uniforms, made them slip and scatter their legs. Before the storm above the storm finished their throats felt even more caked with dust than before and the weight of their thirst slowed their pace in the soggy, sludgy ground even more. Each of them walked covered in earth liquefied to a fine dark sheen. It got everywhere—all over their hair, their packs, their fingers and faces.

Elaine walked directly ahead of Ward and he had to rush to catch her once or twice. She kicked up a lot of mud onto her pack, and being the lightest and slimmest in the group she could not cope easily with hauling the large load step by step through the mud. She thanked him directly each time he caught her.

With the storm gone, sunlight came down harder than usual, and Ward wished he had some kind of a hat, one with a wide-brim. The mud built up so much as it was it felt to Ward like he walked in an oven. But eventually the dust came back and so did the evening. That night when they lay down for camp, mud-crusting and damp, Yale spoke to all of them, his voice as raspy as theirs.

“How are we feeling, folks?”

“Like death,” Sue said.

Kansas smiled at her. “Then we feel as we are.”

“Creeps long over the countryside,” said Sue after a minute, “to fill its endless maw with those who hide.”

Bryan looked at her. "Is that Hardy? I like Hardy a lot."

"It's Owen," Austin said. "That war poet guy. Or was it Brooke?"

"I don't know who it is," Sue said, looking down. "I just remembered it, just now. My brother used to read it, I think. Or say it in scary stories. Something like that."

"Maybe you learned it in school," Bryan said, trying to catch her eyes.

"Maybe," she said. "Anyway, I just thought it fit."

"Thank you for the lovely poetry, m'aam," Yale said, bringing attention back to himself. "Does anyone else have any inspiring verses to jolly us along to sleep?"

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Sue said, looking like she thought Yale was making fun of her.

"No, no," he said, waving his hand. "I'm perfectly serious. The right words in the right order can deliver messages quicker than any other vessel. Poetry's a powerful force and one we ought to be concerned with preserving."

But no one had any more verses to speak, and all of them looked tired.

"I suppose we'll simply have to do our best without it," said Yale. "Got to make an early hour tomorrow."

The next morning they rose slowly and no one ate much of the jerky rations appropriated for breakfast. It was hard enough to chew fruit without the benefit of saliva, let alone dried meat, but they managed. Life was a long string of managing poor portions. Ward tore his into strips and stuck it in his mouth like tobacco, sucking on the dried meat how he could until it finally softened.

Next to the highway there were many dilapidated shacks, small wood and metal structures that looked as if they had been tasked with holding the weight of the world

around them. If so, they failed, sunk-in with their walls spread outwards, rust-covered and more ancient than the latest paving of the road. They came by one of these that looked strangely re-arranged, with an untarnished roof on top of old walls surrounding a thick, shiny steel door with a combination lock.

Kansas approached the door, a small black square with a screen in her hands. She cracked the faceplate of the lock open and used a wire to connect the square with the lock. Ward didn't know how the device worked which he supposed meant that he didn't have to. After a second or two she opened the door and Yale motioned for Ward, Elaine, and Sue to follow her inside.

The inside was sparse, a few empty cans of soda and beer and the occasional package of peanuts, except for a dark-haired tan woman fallen over in front of a stool. Her eyes were open and glazed over and purple and she laughed when she saw the four. Kansas shot her in the head with her silenced pistol and dragged her body to one side of the shack. Underneath where her body had been was a small domed hatch with a metal wheel on it. Kansas looked at Ward and then the hatch and so he got down on one knee and turned the wheel until the hatch released a gasp of air. He waited until they had a position aiming down into the hole and then pulled the hatch open.

Nothing happened, no one shouted or shot, and so they began to climb down the ladder. Elaine first, then Sue, then Ward and Kansas. The other five guarded the top. The light was dim, flickering at the bottom from a caged bulb, and all he could see of his compatriots' forms were outlines and the mind's filling-in of outlines. He doubted the people inside would have all the lights off if they were working. But, he also doubted that they would bother to have someone supposed to be guarding at the top, even a passed out

someone, if they weren't there at all. At the bottom there was an open doorway that had its door unattached and laying at an angle towards the ladder. It was possible that it didn't even count as a doorway if you took the door away; he did not know what exactly needed to be taken away from something and for how long to change the nature of its definition. Inside the next room there was darkness and not much else.

The four of them all turned on the lights attached to their rifles. Kansas motioned for Elaine to step into the next room. Ward saw her go in, saw her light streaking over the interior, flashing quick silhouettes of tables and lab equipment on the ceiling and walls. She stepped further inside and there was a hard whacking sound and her light scattered to the floor. Sue stepped in right after and fired her weapon, sounding like she hit someone. Ward flashed his light through the entrance and saw Elaine on the ground there, her head weeping blood out from a short gash on her forehead. Sue dropped to one knee to check on her.

Loud cracking shots rang out from something that sounded like an automatic. Flashes like bad fireworks in the dark. There was a wet thud and Sue spun and cried out in the opening, landing and knocking her head against the concrete. She lay still on the floor. Kansas turned her light off and Ward did the same. The place started to smell like smoke and rust.

Kansas fired at the direction of the flashes of the opposing gun's barrel, then nodded at Ward to do the same while she hopped inside the door to the left. Once there, she fired again and Ward used the covering fire to go to the right. He crouched next to Elaine's unconscious body and Sue and her hard breathing. Sue had enough sense not to moan about the gunshot wound. As hard as his heart pounded he might not have heard

her anyway. It felt like his ears had closed up. The person on the other end of the lab fired again and Ward and Kansas returned shots, and heard someone cry out.

They waited thirty seconds and Kansas shot out another five rounds, but nobody returned fire. She flipped her light on. Ward again followed suit, shining it in her direction to see a huge, purple-eyed man throw her through a table stacked with glass beakers. She rolled and crashed, the glass snapping under her. The big man was bald and had thick veins crisscrossing his skull, his skin the shade of terracotta. His arm had broken glass jammed into it down one side.

Ward shot at the junkie immediately, but only got off two bullets before his clip ran out. One hit him in the high shoulder, the other not at all, buzzing off the confines of the wall and through a few glass containers. Ward swore and dropped the rifle to go for his handgun. The second he drew it the big man knocked it out of his hands and grabbed him by the throat. The junkie punched him in the face twice before Ward had presence of mind enough to kick him between the thighs. That loosened the grip on his throat. Ward took out his knife and stabbed the man in the stomach. The crewman withdrew the blade, wanting to stab again, but the drugs in the man's system allowed him to continue without even grunting and to punch Ward over the eye. Blood ran down into his vision.

The junkie's punches were big, wide and pan-handed. Ward backed up and waited for him to punch again. The fist came and Ward stabbed with his knife. The blade went through the junkie's wrist, and when Ward pulled the blade out blood shot all over his uniform. Ward kicked the man's shin from the inside, sending it out at a funny angle. He went down to one knee, where Ward stabbed him in the side of the neck and cut his throat.

Kansas had gotten up by then and put her hand on his shoulder as he stood over the body breathing hard. He tensed, and when he saw it was her he did not relax. As if wanting to seem ready for the next task available to prove his worth. Kansas found and turned on the lights and began to look around slowly while Ward called up to the top for Austin. They had a codeword for this type of situation but only if one of them was in danger, held hostage or the like.

Austin brought his bag and Bryan came down with him. That was good. Ward was of a fair size but Bryan was the strongest of them and they'd need him to carry one of the two hurt women up. Austin checked Elaine and then Sue and said the latter was the immediate concern. They picked Sue up and lay her down on the ground. She asked to sit but Austin made her lie down. The top of her uniform came off easy, slippery with the blood oozing from the ugly mess on her shoulder, and Austin had Ward hold her shoulders down to the ground. Bryan stood up, looking away.

"She's gonna be alright, huh?" he asked, alternately bouncing his calves quietly as he stood.

Austin grunted in response and pulled out his tools, prying things to grab metal inside of bodies.

"I mean it's just a flesh wound, right?" Bryan continued. "Flesh wounds aren't bad. I mean she'll probably be fine."

"Would you shut up?" Sue asked, turning away from Austin's work.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Bryan. "Sorry for wanting you to be fine. I guess it's my fault if I'm concerned about the wellbeing of my comrades and all that. You believe this chick, Austin?" He hit his brother softly on the shoulder.

Austin turned up briefly. “Why don’t you ask Kansas if she wants help looking around.” Bryan didn’t move, not right away. “If not, then go somewhere else anyway and shut the hell up anyway.”

Austin must have had something harsh in his eyes because Bryan swallowed and then went to do as his brother said. Ward watched as Austin attended Sue’s wound, cleaned it and closed it in less than a quarter hour. He was surprised somewhat that he did not mind the gore of it. Maybe messes had lost their effect on hi; that could be a good thing, that could be bad. The slug took him a bit to find but after that it was a simple thing to clean up the blood and stitch the opening closed. Sue said she could manage to climb the ladder by herself with her good arm. They let her, though Austin followed right under her, ready to catch. Ward grabbed Elaine and carried her up over his shoulder, slowly but surely, both wishing Bryan hadn’t been told to leave but glad he was.

They checked the rest of the lab and found nothing but more tables with containers on them and several burners and crates of eyedroppers. They found the third dead body—the one they had shot at the back of the lab, lying in a pile of water in front of a pair of overturned, twenty gallon jugs with the caps off. One other jug had been shot through. Water puddled up all over. A little bit was left and they canteened what they could, sharing it evenly. There was a faucet and they tested its water. All tainted with pesticides, parasites. In the far back there were a hundred piles of cash, amounting to enough of a fortune as to make an entire person’s existence seem worthless in comparison to the long amounts of daylight they would need to work to attain even a fraction of it. The highest aspiration of man is order; anything that cannot thrive deserves death. It all had to go, it all had to burn, and so it did.

They stopped for break the next day next to some telephone lines that ran alongside a barbed-wire fence with rotted logs. Elaine had been walking next to Ward lately and she leaned against a telephone pole while he tried to use a mostly-dirty cloth to clean his goggles in his hands. She and Sue both recovered well. There wasn't much wind and the dust had settled. Like most calms there were times when periods such as these would last for a while and there were times when the calm would not last at all.

"Sometimes I wonder," she said.

"What?"

Both of their voices were dry and raspy and he was surprised she wanted to talk at all. Water was sparse and in the heat of the day saliva sparser. But he didn't want to stop her.

"I look at my childhood now and it's nothing but a series of images. Flashes of different stuff. And I wonder what it will be like when I'm old enough to think that about this. If it'll just be a blur."

Ward rubbed the thick lenses of his goggles. "Probably. I guess life likes to keep pace like that."

She nodded and scratched her leg, lifting it up to her arm instead of bending down. He watched her move, every movement performed with a solidity of grace, a fearlessness in motion that he had never possessed. He watched her because of this, because of many things.

"What are you doing that's making you think about being a kid anyway?"

Ward could think of things that he did when a child but he did not want to. There was no sense in thinking of a good time, a time when he looked forward to dinners with his family or weekends with his brother, not when he would just feel bad about it. Not when he did his best to never think about that sort of thing.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Just a track of things.”

“A track.”

“Yeah, like one thing to another. I was thinking how I hadn’t been laid in forever and then I thought about the last time I was and then about the first time. That was kind of fuzzy so I thought about something else before that, a birthday I think it was, then another thing before that. A different party. Just testing my memory.”

“And it’s not holding up?”

“With a lot of it, it’s probably better.” She shrugged. “Stupid problem to have, I suppose.”

Ward finished with his goggles and re-attached them around his head.

“Well,” he said. “I haven’t been laid in a while either, so I can relate to it affecting your thinking.”

With the masks on he couldn’t see whether she smiled and he knew she couldn’t see him doing so at her, but when the crew started moving again they still walked together.

They kept marching and by mid-afternoon the next day Bryan, at point, led out a raspy whoop of relief. The next town, a place called Vici. They could see the blue and black semi-trucks of the Order still there. Elaine, Ward, and Austin got in their civvies

and walked down towards the town. All of them covered in dirt like anyone outside would be.

As they neared, they heard voices over loudspeakers coming from the trucks posted in all four directions of the town. They could hear only snippets of the preaching until walking right by a truck posted outside the convenience store they found. Everyone walked in the town, and the speakers could reach anyone out for the day. The semis opened up at the side and created little platforms for members of the Order to speak and hand out pamphlets.

“We live in a broken country, stitched together with the words of false men,” said a blue-clad man with a beard and a megaphone. “Europe is nearly entirely blacked out and not even the Eifel tower lights up anymore. The whole of the East is at war with itself. Disease is and has been rising for years. New plagues of man and old plagues of the world descend upon every corner of every continent. Technology, once the future of mankind, allows us only to hide from our doom in video rooms and pleasure cocoons. But you can choose not to hide from your fate. You can choose to overcome it. You can choose to seek out a new place for humanity, one not tainted by the poisons and corruptions of our forefathers. Humanity needs a fresh start, and nothing else. There is no fresher start possible than the one of searching out a new place to live, and there are no new places left on this planet. What more can . . .”

Ward ignored the rest, scanning the faces of the small crowd formed in front of the platform. Who stopped, who strayed from friends to listen, who mocked. Only a few seemed to genuinely pay attention. There were no threats or anything close issued to the Order’s speakers, there never were; even so several local men with button-up shirts and

badges and shotguns stood on the fringes of the crowd and at different points throughout the small collection of streets that made up the infrastructure of the town. Even without making words explicitly hostile, strangers always elicited some kind of a threat in a small town.

Inside the store they drew a long look from the curly-haired teenaged boy working at the register. Ward let Austin speak with the cashier, and stepped outside with his arms full of bottled water before they even finished paying. He twisted one of the bottles open and sucked it down before running some of it across his muddy face and neck. They got enough food for a decent dinner that wasn't weeks or months old, two loafs of bread and a load of bologna and Swiss cheese with a few jars of mayonnaise and mustard on the side. Elaine said it would taste terrible, but with enough condiments Ward found he could manage the taste of anything. Or the sight, the feeling. Most of dealing with life's poor portions came down to a matter of condiments. The next morning the truck full of Order left Vici with all its new recruits.

They slept through half the morning, camped beneath a pockmarked blue sign advertising the various fast food restaurants and gas stations that Ward had noticed no longer existed in Vici. By the time it got dark enough to enter the town they all had been lying about and playing in the sun all day, the same as the time before. Ward, with Carter, entered the houses of two dozen men and women and families. He cleansed his knife each time, on sheets, or tissue from boxes on nightstands, or on the curtains in small living rooms with tiny, antiquated televisions that had electron tubes inside. There was no

more trouble with Carter. The only people left breathing by the time the sun rose again were the nine and whatever children they found.

“I thought there might have been more shooting,” Austin said to Ward as they walked back to the sign where they had left their packs. “Did you see all those cops yesterday? Bryan told me that bruise from where he got shot still hasn’t faded all the way.”

Ward took a minute before answering. “I think maybe they deputized a lot of folks with the trucks around. Small town thing to do. Show strangers they wouldn’t tolerate anything shady.”

“That makes sense,” Austin nodded. “Was probably a relief seeing them gone.”

When the two reached the packs, they each picked up four, two over the shoulders facing front and back, and then two held by the straps at their arms. Kansas kept her pack with her at all times and so the two carried all there was. It wasn’t a pragmatic solution for long distances but the town was only about a half mile away. They walked slow and steady.

“So uh,” said Austin, voice straining a bit with all the weight, “What do you think happened to Yale’s last crew?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, why’s he here with us if he had one already?”

Ward didn’t know and said so. “Maybe he got promoted or something. You could ask him.”

“I have,” Austin said. Ward had wondered what Yale and Austin found to talk about with each other. “He just says that the Order’s not concerned with the past.”

“True, isn’t it?”

“Sure. But he was on one of the first crews.”

“I thought we were one of the first.”

“Concentrated, sure. In a big movement. But they had to experiment first.” Ward saw Austin trying to shrug and finding this nigh impossible with all the weight he had working on his shoulders. “I just wondered what he saw that maybe we didn’t.”

“Probably he’ll tell us if it gets to be important.”

“Probably,” Austin said. “Maybe.”

Back in the town the crew measured out another hole, the same dimensions as the last. Another helicopter dropped down lumber and received the children. In the heat of the day the men all took off their shirts while they dug. Ward’s skin had already begun to bronze before the setting of the sun, and through all their walking and working their bodies had trimmed and toned noticeably. Alcohol and its abuse had not done his body any favors, but in the last few months the Order had managed to make it unnoticeable that he had leant on the stuff at all. Ward noticed Elaine looking at him more than once.

The crew dug and dug and when they took a break at night Ward walked through the town with Elaine’s hand around his waist. He picked up food for the both of them from the convenience store they visited the day before with the curly-haired clerk who was now dead and waiting to fill a portion of a hole. He took her to one of the empty houses, where they ate on the carpet of a living room crusted with shadows before coming together to fuck. It came natural, like a part of something that been there the whole time. It had been more than a year since his last time, his first time, a series of awkward motions locked away in the small bed of a messy dorm, but he did not mention

this and she did not seem to notice. That girl had been drunk and Ward had always strongly suspected that was the only reason he had shared her bed to begin with. After a while he and Elaine both took showers and fucked again. It was a nice release, an exercise in forgetting.

The next morning, he woke surprised to still find his arms wrapped around her waist. Her hair smelled like the house owner's shampoo, apples and cinnamon. A short-haired black and white housecat stood above them, sniffing their heads inquisitively. Sometimes pets stayed alive. Dogs usually didn't, being so loud. Ward did not know what Elaine expected, and did not know if he wanted to be in the spot that he suspected she expected, so he pulled himself up, got dressed, and left to go work on the hole. He ate nothing for breakfast and so was one of the first ones to start digging. When Elaine arrived she took up a place opposite him on the hole and they traded missed glances for the first half of the day. At lunch, Yale intercepted Ward when he began to go to talk to her.

“Good night?” He asked Ward.

“Sure.” Ward shrugged, not knowing if Yale knew, but knowing he wouldn't ask him something like that if he didn't. “Is there a problem?”

“Only if there is.” He put his hand on Ward's shoulder. “Humans have needs. That's fine. Don't turn them into wants.” He moved his hand to the side of Ward's face, then brought up his other hand with two fingers going back and forth between their eyes. “Look at me. You understand? This crew's a unit. I can't have it acting stupid, for any reason.”

Ward nodded. “I'm fine with that.”

“I’m sure you are. Just make sure you still are if and when things change.”

“The only love is the love of Order,” Ward said.

“Atta boy.”

The days passed with digging and then filling and Ward’s nights passed with Elaine and he made sure to work just as hard at his duties to make sure no one could accuse their relationship of slowing him down. At night, between the sheets, Ward listened when she talked.

“My second boyfriend was a drug addict,” she said. “Coke and alcohol. At the worst of it he’d lay me down and split lines with a razor on my belly. If I moved at all I’d get cut, and then slapped ‘cause I fucked with his stuff. I think we really only ever had sex, like honest-to-goodness sex, once or twice. Most of the time he’d get so riled up beforehand that he’d take four shots of his cheap twenty dollar vodka and then fall asleep inside me before he’d ever come.”

Ward never knew what to say. Probably he had drunk the same vodka, could draw its crown and bear label from memory. He thought about his own drinking when she brought the old boyfriend up, its steady contemplative fog in the way that sometimes when he was a child he wished he could be on an airplane flying overhead. Not to get wherever it was going, but just to be on the way to someplace different for a while. But the feeling passed, and it passed quicker all the time.

He usually hoped that she thought he was just asleep but even so he’d always stroke her hair or hold her tighter when she talked. She never asked him to say anything. Her boyfriends were a popular subject. There had been three total since she turned

sixteen. The first was a sweetheart, a doe-eyed cutie with long, feathered blond hair. But he got shot outside a rally that was protesting the draft when he was just trying to buy a soda at the corner store. Her third boyfriend she said she barely remembered in the wake of her second. He was just some safe nobody nothing that she barely respected but knew wouldn't hurt her.

At other times she'd talk about her sisters and how they had been sold by her mother to companies that grew computers. Once a week she would see them. They always seemed happy and well-fed, together and making friends with other girls their age. Her mother used the money earned from her sisters to buy upgraded subscriptions to her pleasure cocoon. Being as such, most times Elaine saw her mother about once a week too. Ward and his family had never been rich enough to have one of those cocoon devices but he had seen one at a party once. The few people that tried it came out after thirty minutes looking like they were trying to walk off a hundred-year orgasm. He had been too drunk to try it himself at the time.

But mostly, her talk focused on her second boyfriend. She revealed the most on the night before they left Vici. They had fucked for hours, ramped up on energy drinks and candy from the nearby store.

“He died when he snorted some ground-up glass mixed in with his stash. It took a long time. I pointed the cops in the direction of his dealer. That guy swore his stuff was always clean—not that it mattered. He just didn't want a murder charge. I told the cops I loved my boyfriend and they believed me. They didn't ask to see the scars on my stomach.”

Ward never talked back. He felt as if he had been tied between a buoy and a concrete block in a sea that was full of sharks anyway. Of their own accord he felt his hands crawling up the sheets to her abdomen. They ran over the small bumps there, the ones that he had noticed before but failed to analyze.

“That was a good thing to do,” he said to her finally. “Sometimes I used to wish to be able to do things like that.”

“Aren’t you now?”

He stayed quiet for several minutes. She had given up so much of herself. Of what she wanted, what she expected, he only had an inkling.

“I had a little brother for a while,” he said at last, and the way Elaine started in his arms he supposed she had dozed off. “Eleven years, actually. Russell. Russ. Cute kid. Sort of chubby, angel faced. Hair like mine. We were one of the only families on the block with a working lawnmower, so he would go out and offer up his services. This little kid, undercutting everyone else’s prices and working for barely enough to pay for gas.

“One day he came back from working outside, crying. Not like bawling, but his eyes were red, y’know. Watery. Wouldn’t say what was wrong. Just that he wasn’t going to work Mr. Mason’s place anymore and locked himself in his room. I wanted to ask him more, was the only one home right then, but I had work too. This salvage place, the kind where we’d break down cars and old equipment from the war. Minimum wage. I left him to go make a hundred bucks that I think I eventually bought some movie with.

“Kids, you know. They’re fucking smart. Nobody ever gives them any credit. He knew exactly what had been done to him. The kind of publicity it’d get, the attention in a

small suburb. And he found some cords and strung himself up off our banister before anybody figured it out. I should have been there.”

The words, the admission, made his back tingle. There was something about vocalizing a thought that made it real.

“One night a month or so after Russ died I’m walking home, right? I see Mr. Mason out on the street, watering his lawn. Gets my attention, says it’s such a shame about Russ. And I know it’s him, know what he’d done. I thought it was before, called the cops on him but they wouldn’t come out with so many spanics to arrest. This slimy bald bastard, he’s standing on his lawn and measuring me and looking at me and I just know.” He sighed, and his voice died a little, whispering even softer though they were the only ones in the house. “And I didn’t do a goddamn thing about it. I thanked him for the condolences and then two weeks later I went to college. My parents never really got over it all. About a month after I left they filed for divorce.”

When Elaine spoke her voice was tired. “He’s probably dead now.”

Ward could not tell if she meant that as a reprimand or a means of comfort. He fell asleep without asking.

II

They passed through the Kansas state border coming up on 66 sometime in October. By that time they had picked up a vehicle, three of them traveling in a rust-

colored truck with the six others walking and divided evenly a mile out on either side of the road. By that time, in that area, the roads needed to be swept as thoroughly as possible. By that time the need to be subtle was fading.

Somewhere, somehow, the word had started to get out. It was not due to Yale's crew. He assured them of this over and over. He told them it had been somewhere in California, where a crew had taken a strange sort of mercy on one of its own and opted not to kill a crewman when he had his leg near-shot off by a meth-runner. They left him with a gun and a bullet, but he made it to a hospital, though no one knew how. There also had been a few Order helicopters crashed by Nor'easters nearby towns in Maine and also in Quebec. Rumors began to spread, but none of Yale's crew worried. Order necessitated a plan for every eventuality. They had been told this would happen. Knowledge was a plague of the worst kind. It evolved faster than any virus and yet stayed stagnant in its hosts; all of humankind just the stale colony of a Petri dish left out in the open air with no manner of transferring into or even comprehending the necessity of the lab around it.

Ward sat in the bed of the truck behind Carter and Elaine. The two in front talked occasionally but from his perch outside it only appeared to be about small things and Ward felt weirdly glad about that. He hadn't cared much to hear Carter talk lately, or see him talk with Elaine. His mind drifted to the flat, passing landscape. If he saw any movement out there then he would call out. The six traveling off the road on foot had walkie-talkies to communicate with the truck. They had a set number of miles to travel each day—those in the truck would arrive first, typically, and set up camp for the others. At night they would meet and switch shifts, so no group rode in the automobile for more

than a day at a time. They covered more ground this way, they were thorough; the Order pervades.

There was not all that much to see or hunt anymore in the state, but every now and then they would catch an armadillo or a rabbit. Bryan once shot a deer, bragging about it for over a week until Clancy picked off a dove with his rifle from a hundred feet away. They could not eat it, of course, the bullet practically exploding the bird, but it shut Bryan up and Clancy did not ever gloat. It was such a shot that Yale didn't even reprimand the pale man for wasting bullets, and this made Ward wonder if it was ever a waste to still someone's pride when Order required so little of it.

For the last few months Ward had felt himself fall into the routine, a kind of elimination trance. Oklahoma had been created for farmland and the crew found plenty of farmhouses along their path. Many of the houses existed hundreds of yards or even miles off the highway, but they all knew thoroughness was the key to humanity's clean slate. Sometimes Yale would send two or three of the crew to distract the landowners at the front of a place while the rest snuck in through the back. Sometimes they wouldn't even bother to be sneaky and opened fire with their rifles into the houses. The bullets of their guns went through wood easily. Many times, they staked out a house to make sure it had no children inside and then burned it down in the night, and then shot all those who fled from it. In those cases, some people spent so long trying to decide between being shot or being burnt that they suffocated from the smoke. This is how the crew went, farmstead to farmstead, ranch to ranch, town to town, cleaning blisters all the while. All these differences of method seemed more to provide variety for the crew's sake than anything else. Boredom, or more likely complacency, could not be allowed to cultivate on such a

long road. It seemed those besides Kansas and Yale did not know the exact length of the journey but it had been long so far and showed no signs of stopping. They could re-supply and rest at every cleaned town. Clancy and Bryan started to keep a tally of their own body count, besides Yale's total. Sue of course followed, apparently hating being kept out of anything Bryan was close to. Or, in Austin's case, hated keeping anyone Bryan was close to out of her.

Riding along, Ward remembered when Bryan and Sue had started to sleep together. It had been North of Oklahoma City in a town called Tonkawa. They had been eating lunch at a street corner in front of a stop sign and a telephone pole, and Ward was telling Austin how he had gone to the NASA headquarters in Houston before the government tore it down. Ward never did finish that story. Suddenly Sue, in the midst of a conversation with Bryan across the street, stormed towards Austin with a determined look on her face.

“Did that loudmouth really serve in New Mexico?” she asked when she got close.

Austin took a bite of the sandwich in his hand. “You mean the Trail guard stuff?” Sue's eyes widened. “Yeah, he did that.”

The Hispanic Trail had been finished by the time Ward was fifteen or sixteen, he couldn't remember. It took years and years to complete. Close as he was to it a lot of folks called it the Rastro for a while, until they stopped teaching Spanish in schools.

“What'd I tell you,” Bryan said, walking up behind Sue. “I'm a career soldier. Pay up.”

Sue looked around her. “Now?”

Bryan shrugged, smiling smugly. “We can find a place.”

Austin told Ward after they left that Bryan owed him one—his brother had served on the border for the last eight months of the Trail and never saw a pair of eyes with any spic behind them.

Bryan took a bravado in the sex with Sue just like he did with the tally he kept. Stranger than Bryan, though, was that the kill tally brought more emotion out of Clancy than anything prior. The pale man took a particular kind of silent, earnest glee adding notches to his belt, and then taking new belts from houses and adding notches to those. Eventually he followed Bryan's example and picked up a notebook and pen, dashing little tally marks on the pages as they went. Ward had seen the notebook not too long ago, a small spiral-ring with a hundred sheets. Just by looking at the ruffle of the pages, Ward could see without even opening it that Clancy had gotten about half-through it. Ward's first impulse had been to get a measure of his own record, but decided against it. There lived billions of people on the planet, and filling a book with groups of fives would only make it seem all the more hopeless that they would accomplish their goal. There must have been millions in the Order, though. The Order pervades. But, he didn't think about it all that much; it was too far outside of himself.

Ward did not speak to anyone about his distaste for the tally, but then he had been keeping a lot to himself lately, just as he did in the back of the truck with Carter and Elaine.

Death in the large, open spaces between cities and some towns seemed a common thing even without the Order's assistance. Some of the deaths needed no assistance from man, or at least none that was direct—there were bodies expired in the dust collapsed

from thirst, or exhaustion, or with wide open sores that looked like thick black patches after being clogged up by the flying soil. Some had died for whatever internal reasons that could not be discerned from the outside. Men, women, and children, usually by themselves, occasionally in pairs, never more than three. Freedom from the enclosed cities was just a burden by a different name.

Others died because of others on the road. Outside of the highwaymen, who mostly stuck to the roads themselves, some men like the huesos used half-wild dogs at their sides and rode on the countryside in the junk vehicles the highwaymen didn't want. Their second day after passing the Kansas-Oklahoma border, Ward, Carter, and Elaine came across a quartet of these huesos, bones draped around their bodies like ornaments on a Christmas tree, using big guns to terrorize a group of fifteen people. The house the two groups were outside of looked, from its fencing, like maybe it had once been a ranch. Immediately the three crewmembers used their radio and called their compatriots to join them.

By the time the six had arrived, the huesos had gathered the fifteen hostages in front of the house and blindfolded them and tied them up. Two of the bone-clad men held their captives at gunpoint, and the other two used the bats in their hand and tried to see who could kill the most in some number of minutes. A game to them. When they were done probably they would gather up whatever they could from the house and people, and maybe leave a girl or two alive to return with them to whatever cove or haven they made for themselves until they got bored enough to ride out again. The crew intervened after four had been killed, cutting down the two with guns with silenced bullets first. The bone

men holding the bats noticed in just enough time to get shot in the side of the torso instead of the front, as they turned to see their comrades fall.

The crew spent the rest of the day feeding and talking with the remaining eleven. Many of the survivors stood as relations to one another, cousins and brothers and a trio of sisters and one mother and son. They had been neighbors for several years and just wanted to be left alone. Kansas and Yale talked to them about the stars. About the futility of trying to stay alone in the middle of a land that would only continue to kill them in some way or another, by bats and huesos or by starvation and disease or by any other sort of method. The eleven let them speak, subdued for several hours, silenced from the deaths of the four that had once made them fifteen. But ultimately their quiet was a result of only that—the amazement of the sudden and brutal loss of life from the brutality that they did not know they inhabited. When they spoke, it was to say that they understood that the land was harsh, and to offer the crew money, and then food and board, if the nine would stay to protect them, to keep them safe.

Kansas and Yale had conferred, with Yale sighing a bit and making several references to his wrist, where a watch would be if he wore one. Yale told the time of the day by the position of the sun, looking through the dust, possessing a constant knowledge of the scheduling of all things relevant to his work. Kansas ultimately shrugged, and that night the remaining eleven became none and by morning they were buried in the basement of the house. Order requires utility, and neither the eleven nor those that harassed them possessed it.

In the state of Kansas the first real town they came across was Baxter Springs. The Order had begun radio and screen broadcasts, and in the bigger cities had begun to drop intricate metal objects from the sky that projected holograms bearing their truth. Less and less as the crew moved out of Oklahoma and further North did they arrive after the huge semis that the Order commanded. The trucks' utility was fading. The nine passed many of them on the road, going toward destinations that only the truck drivers and perhaps Kansas and Yale and other such leaders knew of. The trucks would be stripped and used for bigger purposes. Ward didn't ask what kinds of purposes when Yale explained this; he did not have to, it was all for the stars.

But even without the herald of the nine's coming, it seemed wholly unordinary that the townspeople of Baxter Falls welcomed them so readily. There were those radio broadcasts, and though Ward liked the advertisements with their catchy, military-beat putting out the Order's message, nonetheless even he could admit their tagline of, "We must find a future in the stars," sounded a bit ominous. The crew parked their old truck a couple of miles out of town for camp, like always. Some reconnaissance done by Clancy and Bryan revealed nearly two hundred people, most of the town's population, surrounding a tall, red brick building.

The crew all walked in together, heading towards the group of people surrounding the old-looking edifice that had windows facing every direction. The townspeople all stood behind cars or signs or mailboxes, utterly invested in the goings-on of that building but seemingly unwilling to commit themselves to watching completely in the open. Every now and then a shot fired out from one of the windows and there would be a collective

intake of breath, as if by sucking in air they could prevent a piece of lead from stopping their lives or the lives of those they cared about. Kansas wanted to check it out.

When the crew stopped behind a general store, out of the view of the big brick building, a tall oldish man with a grey horseshoe-shaped hairline and skin the color of mottled mushrooms came and talked with them. He studied their uniforms for several moments before speaking, crawling his hands across his unshaved chin.

“You are . . .” he looked uneasy. “You guys are in that thing, right? That star thing?”

Yale answered him. “We’re part of the Order, yes.”

“So you kill people, isn’t that right? Those who aren’t worthy and all of that?”

Yale nodded. “You could say that, sure.”

The man’s face broke into a nervous smile. “We really need your help, here. Your expertise, so to speak. Some bandits, they came through our town not just this last night, and took up every young woman they could find.”

“That doesn’t seem like highwaymen.”

“That’s why I didn’t say them. It’s bandits. Raiders. Those bone-wearing bastards. Bad men, any which way you name them. We don’t know why they took the girls, exactly, but we’re not so stupid that we couldn’t guess.”

“And you want us to take care of them for you.”

“It fits both our desires. I want the ladies of this town back. My daughter, you understand?” The man wiped his brow. He sweated like a cold soda can left out for too long. “You want bad people dead. You’d probably kill them anyway. Why not help us out in the process?”

Kansas's stony face opened up into a slight toothless smile, looking at the man.

"We're not pros," Yale said. "You should talk to the police."

"Sure," said the man. "We've been praying to God, too, for all the good it's done. No, no, we need real help, right now."

"All right," Yale said, after a moment of what looked like consideration. "We'd like some supplies for our trouble. Food, water, gas."

"That's fair, that's fair. Just please, hurry. They said they'd kill them by midnight if we didn't give them what money we had. They expected more than fifty thousand. Like we just got money laying around here like newspapers."

"We'll go after twilight, then. No sense in letting them know we're coming in."

Yale traveled to Baxter Springs' small town hall and grabbed the blueprint of the occupied building before making assignments. Clancy, Carter, and Bryan took up positions on the roofs of nearby buildings, while Kansas made a great show of asking where the power supply for the town was and accompanied the resident electrician to shut it down right before the sun set. She later revealed she found out he lived alone in an apartment with two parakeets, and soon after learning this she made sure he did not see them again. Ward did not believe there was any combination of owned objects or family that could make Kansas stop her duty and this was of course part of her allure.

Little more than an hour had passed since they entered the town. It was getting dark and the streetlamps had hummed on. The five that would enter the building—Austin, Elaine, Sue, Ward, and Yale—took up a position close against the building close to the entrance. Ward watched as the lights from the shops and lamps all around flickered out. A brown-skinned hueso with long, greasy black hair stuck his head out the window

and started to yell about the darkness. Yale signaled and the five all rushed inside, guns ready. From right inside the door, Ward heard one of the three sharpshooters fire on the building and a subsequent heavy, wet thump on the sidewalk.

Ward and the other four all turned on the lights attached to their rifles. The building they were inside was some kind of an office. Cubicles and chairs and desks and mostly that was all. A water cooler here, a copier there, everything with calendars on it. They moved silently through every room, the five of them in pairs, with the last one out rotating into a group every floor and putting someone else by themselves. They went quickly, searching up, down, around and came upon no one until the third floor.

The rotation left Ward by himself in the dark office. Every shadow seemed a threat. The first room had nothing in it. The same for the second. This only made him more nervous. They should have come across someone by now. He entered into a break room with an overturned water cooler and a smattering of team-building posters on the walls. A man with a sawed-off shotgun held the head of a girl. Ward fired on instinct, the shot barely disciplined. It hit the man in the chin and he fell like a pile of books. Blood went all across the girl. To the right was a scaly, red-skinned man carrying a crowbar. He and Ward looked for a moment at the blood-covered girl and the twitching dead man. Everything so strangely quiet. Ward remembered himself after a second and aimed at the scaly man, but he lunged at Ward with the bar in his hands. Ward's shot went off the walls and he had to block the crowbar with his rifle. The scaly man kept pounding at him, relentless. He raised the bar far above his head and Ward jammed the back end of the rifle into his throat. The man bent over, gasping, dropping the crowbar, clutching at his

throat. Ward shot him in the head, making a sound like a hammer on a wet pillow. He raised his finger to his lips at the girl, and motioned for her to stay put.

In the darkness he heard some yelling followed by a few other soft flutters of silenced gunfire. The crew met at the stairs and started their ascent again, hearing movement above them. They rotated again and Ward was partnered with Yale. They walked out of the stairwell and came to a corner office. Yale motioned for Ward to wait, and found a swivel chair behind a nearby desk. He made a few motions with his hands until Ward understood, and then picked up the chair like he was holding a battering ram. Ward kicked the door open and stood aside as Yale tossed the chair in. Loud shots rang out in the dark office and tore the chair to bits. Yale and Ward entered when the gunfire stopped, seeing two scraggly men scrambling to reload. They did not do it in time to save their lives from the crewmen, but Yale and Ward had not gotten inside quickly enough to save the two young women either. They sat in each other's arms next to a window with holes in their heads growing puddles on the floor.

The building had only five levels. Coming up the last flight of stairs, the crew all followed Yale's lead and turned off their flashlights, letting their eyes adjust to the darkness. Elaine got on one knee and picked the lock to the door, and while it was she who opened it, Yale stepped in first. He moved low, squatting and walking and then firing when a dark shape emerged from a doorway. In the dark it could have been a hostage or a raider, but the difference to the crew was that between a parasite and algae. The shape in the dark fell, and bullets from the raiders filled the hall.

Yale took a hit in the shoulder, crying out and slumping to the floor. Ward took cover against the wall. He could hear Yale moan in a manner that seemed almost

cowardly. Bullets crashed into the room, smashing the thin plaster of the walls. Ward grabbed Yale by his feet and dragged him out of the doorway and set him up on the stairs. Austin rushed to the leader, applying pressure to his shoulder. The rest of the crew waited for the firing to stop, sitting in the stairwell. When it did, Ward was out of position to either go in or shoot back. He watched Sue and Elaine fire, aiming careful shots. After a moment Elaine rushed in first with Sue right behind. Ward heard more shots and a few thuds and then nothing. He followed Sue and Elaine in, saw the collection of bodies on the floor. A few hostages, a few hostage-takers.

The crew begged off from the celebration thrown for the return of the young women. It was being held in a pizza parlor, and it seemed a bad idea to join the town for food and drink when the crew had already gained their trust. Kansas said it was because excessive fraternization with the prey was never a good idea, no sense in potentially betraying their intent. But Ward had to wonder if there was some deeper moral reasoning behind the crew's absence, some kind of wrongness in what would have been taking gifts of hospitality from what amounted to future victims. Not that he thought Kansas allowed that sort of feeling, but rather that she knew it might still bother members of the crew.

They were instead given free room and board at the town's motel. The daughter of the proprietor, the same horseshoe-haired old man who had met them at the front of the town, had been taken hostage. She had been one of the girls whom Ward helped directly. When the crew and the girls had come out of the building, Ward had seen the man holding his pretty blond-haired daughter and watching the disbelieving faces of the parents, boyfriends, and husbands of the four that had been murdered. That man would

not talk to those people again, even if the crew did not follow through with their duty. These people were damaged so severely from the same event that would have wounded him, it would be like an egg trying to find commonality with an omelet.

Ward's room, a small two-bedroom with a tiny bath and cream-colored plaster walls, was also occupied by Clancy. This sort of living arrangement had become more and more common the farther North they traveled. Another thing had happened in Tonkawa besides Sue and Bryan hooking up. Sometimes Ward wondered how much of what Elaine said to him there and how Sue went off with both Austin and Bryan at the same time had to do with each other. The Order had long believed in setting examples.

Elaine and he had just finished fucking in the shower of a small house with cast iron bars over the windows. Or at least Ward assumed that had been what they were doing. He stepped out first, and began to brush his teeth with the houseowner's brush and paste when she stepped out behind and pulled herself against him. Her hand ran across his abdomen, tickling it.

"I really think I'm in love with you," she said softly.

Hearing this sounded so natural from her mouth, like she had been practicing it for days, that Ward did not jump and pull away until she had started to assume he agreed, drawing herself even closer to him, her hand sinking to cradle and tug at his cock. As it was he had to maneuver out of her arms.

"What?" He said, white-coated saliva sloshing out of his mouth as the toothbrush he had taken dropped to the sink. "No. What? No."

Part of the beauty of the Order was it put to death ideas that Ward had never partaken in himself. His encompassment within it had gotten to the point where he didn't

even consider love possible. If the things the Order took away had only ever been potential, then there was no harm if they would never come to pass. If love was an idea that could only ever harm, then all the better if he had never let it or, more accurately, had it enter his mind. He didn't know what love was, it used to drive him to anger and to so many things that he didn't know, but the Order had taught him devotion. Elaine looked at him with a little hurt, but mostly understanding.

“I know this is hard,” she said. “But it doesn't change anything. We can keep it quiet. I know you feel it too.”

“I . . .” Ward struggled, shaking his head. “I need to go back to work.”

All day long Elaine stole glances at him. He made sure to work on the opposite end of the site from her but the grave was only so big. The crew had been making great time and Yale rewarded them by making mashed potatoes and meatloaf for a big dinner. By that time Elaine had started to purposefully ignore Ward, which wasn't really ignoring at all, and whenever he asked her to pass food she dumped it in front of him. That night he did not sleep with her in a town for the first time since they had begun to fuck. He wondered and wondered about her constantly until he could not even identify the feeling that swirled in his chest.

The following morning Kansas had pulled Elaine aside during their dig. Ward did not hear what they said, and in fact thought little of the conversation besides a strange sort of dissonance which did not let him think of anything except that there existed a choice between the two women. One that he did not want, one that he did not even think would be presented towards him, but it lingered in his mind all the same while he

shoveled into the dirt. He wanted Kansas and he knew he did, maybe even more than Elaine. But with Elaine it felt less complicated.

That evening when work had been expended for the day, Elaine went to Carter instead of Ward, and the two slept in someone's house together while Ward spent the night in a house across the street, trying to convince himself not to use the binoculars he had to look out the window. In the morning, when he woke on the couch in the basement—no windows there— Kansas stood over him.

“You two should be close,” she said. “But not so close as to drive a wedge between others.”

Ward yawned before answering. “Carter never looked jealous to me.”

“And now he never will. There is no strength to be had by hoarding any good thing.”

“Yeah?” Ward said. “Then who gets yours?”

Kansas raised an eyebrow. That was as much surprise as she had ever shown him. He was attracted to her, he knew that. But it was sort of like being attracted to a nun; he wanted her because he had never seen her want anyone. Elaine he wanted because she had been available. He was not sure entirely which attitude he preferred.

“What makes you think no one does?” she asked, before leaving him on the couch.

At the end of that day Elaine went to Clancy, but that he showed no interest was of little surprise and less interest for all that saw. Ward took the night with her instead, and spoke nothing of it until daybreak. They barely spoke at all. They fucked again, but it

was different somehow, besides doing it in a kitchen instead of a bedroom, like what had started to become usual. It was like he was getting sheathed instead of filling her up.

“Look,” he said, as she dressed. “I didn’t want to make you angry. You just surprised me.”

But she did not look angry, or even disappointed.

“It’s alright,” she said. “I was out of my head a bit. I . . . you know me, Ward. I’ve had so many stupid, fucked experiences with guys, that, when I finally met one that wasn’t completely wrong . . .” she sighed. “I misinterpreted.”

Ward stayed silent and was glad she interrupted him. Words could sometimes be like keys, capable of locking and unlocking a thousand doors with any given combination of them and good enough circumstances. Sometimes opening a previously unopened, untouched, unthought-of door in a man was no simple thing to close. She tossed his pants at him from off of the couch they had thrown them on.

“Building day,” she said. “Get up, lazy stuff.” She started out the door of the bedroom before turning back to him. “By the way, thanks for not shooting me.”

And then he suddenly wished he had. After that day, not much changed besides Carter getting his time in with her, or time within her. Ward knew her exclusiveness had passed. All that began to be different other than that was that Ward took to bedding with her while they traveled instead of just in town, as if hoarding as many good experiences as he could. Elaine didn’t mind. Sex, just the act of it, was a good thing to her. When Ward and she were together he would pretend that she didn’t sleep with Carter.

But, that day at the motel was Carter’s day and so Ward spent the night in the same room as Clancy in an attempt for company. The skinny man had found a wide-

brimmed hat in one of their earlier towns, and that combined with the crew traveling in trucks for the last little while had returned his skin from semi-peach back to the usual sickly pallor he held. While Ward sat and looked up at the ceiling, trying not to wonder of the goings-on next door, Clancy did push-ups on the floor. It occurred to Ward that he had not been without Elaine's company the night before a clean since she had started going to Carter.

"You always do that?" He asked Clancy.

"Usually," Clancy did not pause. "Not always."

"I mean before cleaning."

"Yes," he said, stopping to think a moment with his arms erect. "Gets my blood flowing."

"Like getting pumped up?"

"Right."

"You like being excited for it?"

He stopped completely, positioning himself on his knees and looking at Ward strangely. "You're not excited?"

"I don't know," Ward said. "I like what we do, but . . . I don't know. I never thought of the actual process as fun." He thought about it. "More like duty."

Clancy said nothing in response, breathing in and out and sweating slightly. Ward stared up into the space of the ceiling a moment before getting up. Talking with Clancy was a lot like trying to relate to a knife.

"I'm going for a walk," he said, without looking at Clancy.

Outside, he saw through the window of the small lobby of the motel the proprietor sitting at a tiny, circular orange table with a thick stick and a pocket knife in his hands. A bottle and a pile of shavings sat on the table in front of him, randomly stacked there by the way the blade ran off the rod of the stick. Curious, and interested in company, Ward walked inside to say hello.

“Not at the party?” Ward asked.

The man shook his head after several seconds passed with only the scraping sound of the whittling between them. “Too much noise. Too much dancing.”

Ward put his hand on the seat opposite the proprietor, asking the man without words if he could sit.

“Take a load off, neighbor,” said the man. “Name’s Joe. Want a drink?” He nudged his head in the direction of a brown bottle next to the pile of wood shavings.

“That whiskey?”

“It certainly is.”

“Then I won’t, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

He ran his blade down the stick in his hands three more times, and then set both down to take a drink from the bottle. He had the frown of a man who drank whiskey a lot, not the blanche or the grimace of the inexperienced. Ward watched him silently, knowing that drinking men liked to talk. Or at least they did when they had company. Joe cast a glare right back at him, taking a few more swigs with his eyes locked on Ward for every gulp.

“So I don’t suppose you know that,” Joe stopped, thinking. “Know this. Know . . . *that* . . . that my daughter is getting married.” Ward shook his head. “Yeah? Me neither till two hours ago. Says you guys rescued her right when she thought she was gonna go ahead and go die. Well, good timing, not to have her dead, but at that moment? That moment, man?” Joe slammed the bottle on the table, sending a current of air underneath the shavings and scattering them. “She promised to God, right then, no sooner! Promised to marry her fuck-up boyfriend so they wouldn’t be living in sin no more.” He half-rose out of his seat to lean forward and yell at Ward. “What the hell, man. That idiot had a drug lab in his basement once. What is *wrong* with you?”

“Maybe next time I save your daughter’s life you can give me a list of appropriate times to do it.”

The old man stared at him for a second, then broke out laughing. Ward continued to watch him as he guffawed and smiled.

“I guess I really can’t complain. She’ll probably divorce him anyway. Hopefully.”

Ward cocked his head at that, this immediate rationalization. It struck him that maybe a parent would try to find any way to continue to love a child that had brought disappointment. They would use religion and imagine an unalterable plan, they would ignore the child entirely and try not to think about what had created such pain.

“But, “ said the old man, “what brought y’all here? What are y’all even doing in Kansas, anyway? There that many evildoers up here?”

“Well,” Ward said, disbelief in his voice. “Apparently.”

Joe nodded, as if realizing his mistake. “Yeah, yeah, guess so. Guess I’m still used to when it was still good and nice up here. Could get away from America just by

being in the middle of it.” He took another swig from his bottle and peered across the table at Ward’s gun on his belt. “Hell of a set you must have, young as you are and going ‘round doing all this shit. Lotta courage.”

“Courage is just a name men put to completing tasks they wouldn’t dare themselves.”

In mid-swig of his bottle, Joe caught himself and slowly tilted his head back at Ward, opening one dark eye slowly.

“You call me a coward?”

Ward shrugged, and the man put his bottle down and began to chuckle softly, picking up his stick and knife before starting to whittle again.

“Daughter’s getting married,” Joe said, “New stepson’s a douche, and now you gonna call me a coward. Lot of indignity for a day.”

“Day’s not done.”

Joe slowed, and then stopped whittling.

“What did you say?”

Ward leaned forward on the table, clasping his fists over one another and staring at him intently. It was exciting, trying to make someone outside of the fold understand.

“I said courage is the name put for the way men do things that other men wouldn’t do themselves. It’s running into a wall of bullets. It’s snatching a child from a lion’s mouth. But I’m not courageous. Courage is the language of soldiers in battle, of men in adversity. But having a set, having balls, that’s nothing to do with courage.

“You love your daughter so very much,” Ward said. “Would you be mad if your death meant that someone else would get to see their daughter grow up? Even if it wasn’t

nearby? Would you do that for someone else? Would you be willing to do that?" His words and questions deliberate, thought-out. "Would you be willing to kill a thousand parents so that there might be a thousand million more in the future? Would you annihilate history just to save some for later on? Would you orphan a thousand children just so they could foster thousands of their own? That is not a name put to courage. That is not something you don't understand. That is something very simple to understand, you just don't have the will to do it yourself. That is a name put to strength. To resolve. That's what a set is."

There was a light in the office behind the booth, flickering every so often and casting strange shadows into the room. Joe looked at him and his face had become full of fear. Maybe understanding had not quite dawned in the canals of his mind but it showed in his eyes, and Ward felt satisfied for the first time all day.

"Why you telling me this?" he asked.

"I thought you should know what's going to happen here."

"Just what exactly is it that gonna be," Joe asked. "Or have you already told me?"

Ward looked at him for a moment and took his gun out of its holster. He laid it on to the table with his hand resting on it, just in case he needed it. In his imaginings, usually people tried to run.

"Every adult here is going to die. One by one, mostly. Some of this will be done by me."

The eyes of Joe stayed fixated on the gun on the table, and his words poured from his mouth nearly without form.

"W-where do teenagers fit?"

Ward remembered the man's daughter looked too old to take.

"We eye that, mostly. Those past a certain age wouldn't conform well."

"Conform? To . . ." The man looked aghast. "But, why? Why are you here? What did we do? Why now?"

"Because we're on a schedule, and so are you."

Joe stared at Ward for a minute before shaking his head mutely and then taking a last swig from his bottle and pounding it back onto the table where it sloshed around harmlessly.

"Let me see Jessica again. Just once more. Then do it. She's in my house with her fella. You can follow me all the way there."

"Jessica," Ward said. "That's your daughter?"

Joe nodded, and Ward shrugged and did the same. She had to live close to there, and if he hadn't come down there tonight, probably Joe would have shambled home drunk and said goodnight to his daughter. Maybe not a great father but a loving one. It would have been on Ward's own need to share himself that they never said goodbye. He would not relish being so cruel, did not want to abide it. Joe got up and quickly started to shamble towards the door. Ward followed him out, but far too close, and just as they came through the glass door Joe shoved it back on Ward as hard as he could, stunning him just enough to crack him across the jaw with a fist and knock him down.

Sight blurred, Ward shot his gun but at nothing in particular, just wanting to avoid a beating. Silenced, it wasn't loud, but the flash of it, even muffled, was enough to show to Joe he was pulling the trigger. When his vision ceased to haze and Ward got back on his feet, he saw Joe running in the distance to his left. He sprinted after the man, thinking

himself a fool and wanting to nip the problem in the bud before it became an incident. Joe ran away from the main part of the town, to a two-story house not far from an abandoned mom-and-pop video store.

The backdoor of the house Joe burst into was locked. Ward he kicked it open in time to see Joe pushing two young heads through the backdoor right across from him. The door shut just as Ward fired after them. There were screams. Joe ducked and rushed as Ward aimed at him. The changing of Joe's position meant he was clipped in the shoulder instead of the chest. The man kept charging, adrenaline maybe, and slammed Ward into the wall. Picture frames began to hail on the Ward's head. With the air knocked out of Ward, Joe tried punching him and bringing him down to the tiled floor. Ward slammed the gun in his hands down on the back of Joe's head, knocking him out. After rolling the limp body off of him, Ward stumbled towards the back door, still breathing hard, and searched through the darkness for any sign of the two that had gotten away. After a minute he gave up, and went back to Joe's body to drag it upstairs to his bed so he wouldn't have to lie to Clancy about how the man was in the position he was. Then Ward killed him, slit the throat of this person who knew what he was all about. He was fairly confident he could maneuver his way into cleaning this house, into getting upstairs first.

Night came and with it more tallies for Clancy's count. Yale had eventually made it down to the party during the early evening to spike the iced tea and water being served. Clancy and Ward got duty to finish off the unconscious before moving to houses. Ward walked from body to body on top of the tarp they had set up, slitting throats

quickly. Clancy worked just as fast, stabbing them in the heart as he went. Nothing they did woke up the townspeople. This finished off many potential threats, such as the pot-bellied, red-faced sheriff with the shotguns in his truck. The crew had quickly become celebrities to all in the town, and were welcomed into many houses, some with parties and some without. Trust was a very easy thing to gain just by temporarily saving a girl's life.

When the afternoon arrived for Ward, Yale came with it. The red-bearded man walked forward looking straight at Ward, who leant right next to the door of a small house with green siding and a white roof. The air was flat and clean and they all had their masks down.

“Clancy?” Yale asked.

“We found some kittens and their ma, and he wanted to be . . . thorough,” said Ward. “I said I’d be outside.”

There must have been something in his tone. Yale said, “You don’t approve?”

“I don’t see the point in it.”

“What about the point to Clancy?”

“Sir?”

“It’s important to him to do it. That’s what he is. Something wrenched into him when he was real young. Probably whatever happened to his parents. Raised in an orphanage until he was eighteen. Kicked out of lots of foster families. He’d been killing dogs and cats since age twelve. People on the block started to lock their animals in at night, and none were walked at the park right near the orphanage for years. Clancy wanted to move his game up.” Yale put his hands up, framing them. “Try to imagine a

boy who's made being a loner a convenient cover to mask his true urges. Then give him a group that gives him a community that values him, that needs him for what he really is."

"He finds meaning in the killing?"

"Sure. You do too, in a way. But for what it stands for, maybe not the act itself."

Ward put a hand against his face, rubbing his chin. Clancy, who lived for cleaning. Clancy who turned down Elaine.

"Can anyone do it like he does?"

Yale shrugged. "I suppose anybody can make themselves think or do whatever they like."

"But does he forget himself? I mean," Ward closed his eyes, trying to focus his thoughts. "Does he, y'know. Is the violence, the hurting, is it what gives him purpose?"

"You'd have to ask him."

Ward rolled his neck around, feeling the muscles crick. "But I guess he's a new sort of recruit, anyway?"

Yale laughed. "We're the first real wave, friend. We're all new at this."

By that night they had set out a plot for where they would barn the bodies. He and Carter crossed paths often but like so often as of late they did little besides exchange nods. Ward did not think he could talk with him without goading the man into talking about Elaine, and he did not want to talk about her, especially when she was all he thought about.

Ward and Elaine slept in a motel room. It had one bed, one bathroom, a barrel chair, and a painting of a tree on an island in the middle of the ocean. They did not say anything at all to one another. Ward undressed and she undressed and then he pushed her

onto the bed. He did not know where his head went exactly as they screwed but for some reason he could not quite decipher his fists decided to come down onto her. Around the arms and middle. And she took it—from this man she said she loved and wouldn't—though Ward could not have said why. Surely she could've fought him, possibly stopped him. Maybe Kansas told her not to. Maybe she had relegated herself to being his whore completely and thought of it as part of the profile. Maybe thinking of it like that let him do it.

The next day during the digging, Carter seemed to notice the bruises up and down Elaine's arms, and maybe the one on her shoulder. But he said nothing, and so neither did Ward. She said something about having to bust a locked door open by way of excuse.

It was two mornings later, when Elaine arrived at the construction site with a large brown bruise under her ear and a glassy, dazed look in her eyes, that Carter decided to speak to Ward. He took him by the arm at lunch and dragged him behind a cobblestone wall next to a park where maple trees had grown once, all dead now and shuddering in the heavy wind.

“What the hell is in your head that you're taking it out on us?” the black man asked him.

His eyes were fierce and angry, his whole demeanor fraught with the aura of a potential brawl.

“What are you talking about?” Ward asked.

Carter looked at him in a way that made him put his eyes to the ground. Ward felt guilty but could not have said why. What Ward had meant in particular was Carter's use of “us.” He did not know what went on between himself and Elaine had to do with the

man. But probably Carter meant it more as a term for the entire crew. Either way Carter evidently took the question to mean a denial of his actions. After a minute, Carter put his hand on his shoulder, a friendly gesture, though the vein on his neck pulsed wildly.

“Do you need me to say what you already know?” he asked. “Never squander potential. Order requires utility. The only love is the love of Order. The failure to serve Order is death.”

Ward nodded at each one, knowing the implication. He felt in a way he had taught Carter the implications.

“They will execute you for this,” Carter whispered quickly.

“Why haven’t you?”

“That what you want?” Carter laughed in disbelief. “You want someone to kill you? I’ll oblige you, you fucking prick.”

Ward did not say anything. He didn’t want Carter to kill him. He wouldn’t mind if Carter tried, though, if the man gave him the excuse to start shooting.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s what I thought. Nevermind why I don’t do it. You ain’t all bad, you’re just confused. You’re like a bull in a house next to a china shop, almost there but not quite. I can’t take a man down for almost being something, may as well kill myself if it comes to that. But if you break this girl, break her to where she was before she cared about Order, then she’s useless. If crew wants her, if someone that’s crew has feelings . . . it’s like a tapeworm, gobbling her up from the inside. And they can’t abide that. And neither will I.”

Ward sighed. The tension in the air made breathing hard. Why couldn't they just fight and be over with it. He wanted to hit Carter so badly, just because of where parts of him had been. What a strange thing to be angry about.

"You don't like it, stay the fuck away from her," Carter said. "Just don't get yourself killed."

A little before the halfway point to Chanute, the old truck's radiator burst. Yale, Kansas, and Clancy were in it. So far away from the last town, Yale said the best thing to do would be to just keep walking. With the Dustbowl grown and growing far past the territory they occupied now, the only life to be found was near the road, and so that's where the danger was. They spread out, keeping away from the road, the clear potential of the highwaymen with their fast cars and plentiful guns. Ward could not speak for the rest of the crew, but probably like him they kept a close eye on every horizon beyond the edges of the tall, sick yellow stalks of grass on the prairie.

A dust storm gathered overhead and without speaking they decided to move through the night. This was tiresome, but this was logical, since they had discovered months ago it was also better than sleeping in the dust. Doing that, you woke up coughing, sometimes all of it dust and sometimes with a little blood mixed in, and you had to rub your eyes for nearly half an hour before anything came clear.

Ward walked on the far East side of the road with Carter and Elaine. He could see how Elaine stepped in time with Carter and the two of them smiled or laughed every so often from their quiet conversation that he took no part in. He wasn't sure if he could take part even if he wanted to, or even if he wanted to. Ward did not believe in fate but he did

believe in ought and he could not escape the feeling that he had not had his feeling of oughtness satisfied for a long time. He wanted so much but he did not define it. He did not dare to, even though he could. It would be too embarrassing to admit, even to himself.

He was winding himself up intentionally, like a stubborn Jack-in-the-box, because it was better to claw and tear at everything he could than to face the void back inside the box. If anger was a weight on the heart then he would rather be crushed than sucked away. He focused on this, and almost walked past Elaine and Carter when they stopped. Carter pointed and Ward saw the camp of RVs up ahead. Elaine radioed the rest of the crew and they gathered up out of sight of the camp. Ward volunteered himself to go in, and Clancy stepped right behind him. Before his mind blinked out, for some reason, he thought about fucking Elaine.

After that, he did not remember much until Austin stood in front of him, shining a flashlight in his eyes. Ward had his rifle in his hands cradled like a babe, his breath coming in short and frequent through his nose. He did not know why he was breathing in such a manner but felt caught up in the rhythm.

“He’s coming ‘round,” Austin said.

“How do you know?” Ward heard Bryan’s voice. “He looks just the same.”

“Look at his eyes,” said Austin. “They’re not so glassy.”

Ward noticed Austin’s grip on his shoulders for the first time when the blond man loosened it. His breathing started to slow, to the point where he began to take in great big deep breaths through his mouth and hold them there for a few seconds before letting them go. Austin moved away from him, and Ward saw the rest of the crew standing around or behind him. Ward wanted to ask what happened, but did not especially want to hear all

their answers at once, and the looks they gave him seemed like such a question would receive a chorus of responses.

Instead he set his gun down against the RV they had backed him up against and shambled forward. Between all of their legs, on the ground, he could see the edges of a pool of blood. Every step he took came down on a foot full of the thin pool, and more than once he saw Elaine flinch forward, as if to try and catch him if he started to fall. He brushed past her and Carter both, looking at the carnage on the ground. A dozen bodies riddled with holes, their faces caved in. Examining them a little closer he saw long cuts along most of their ankles, and trails of broken grass behind some of them where they had fumbled getting up and then decided to try and drag themselves away. Messy. Too messy for a cleaning crew.

One body at the end nearly didn't have a torso from the lead trauma induced upon it. Ward remembered his rifle had felt a little light. He checked his belt for his knife, and instead found it sitting inside the neck of a woman with dark red hair. He then looked down at himself, covered in the life of these dead people. Ward found Clancy in the line of the crew and saw the pale man looked much the same as himself, though with a sort of hangdog look in his eyes, furtively casting looks at Yale every so often. Ward walked back to where he put down his gun and picked it up.

“Alright,” he said. “I’ll take point.”

Their first night after cleaning Chanute Elaine asked to talk to Ward outside of a high school he had had to burn down. The burnt smell mixed with the layers of dust in the air scalded his nostrils, but he liked it. It was something new.

“Most nights we don’t even sleep together, you know,” she said. “He just wants someone to talk to. He’s got a lot of sadness in him.”

Ward did know they didn’t fuck regularly. Not unless she didn’t feel like moaning for Carter like she did for him. Her voice had taken up whole houses, and not once crouching besides a wall or a door during the nights that the lonely feeling was the worst did he hear it.

“We all do.”

She nodded. “It’s just he usually wants to be . . .” she paused, as if realizing that by finishing that sentence she would encroach on Carter’s status as a man. “. . . he just wants someone to be with him.”

Ward had sometimes wondered if Carter liked being with Elaine because she was black too. But hearing that from her, he understood. Carter just wanted something soft and smooth to hold in the hard, fucked-upness of the world that had barreled him into the life he had. Sue didn’t exactly fit the bill. Ward felt dirty with the realization, like he had been caught reading a diary. But he pushed these feelings down and kept the frown on his face.

“So do I.”

“He’s your friend, your crewmate, you can’t share?”

Ward looked away from her glare, eyes drifting over to the still-smoking shell of a school doorway. On the walls inside there were some maps that had not curled up entirely. He guessed maybe history got taught there. Didn’t she know he couldn’t share? Weren’t there bruises on her to prove that? He felt bad about those marks. He had

resolved to stop that. That just meant not sleeping with her altogether. His entire array of options just a list of various degrees of bad feelings.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“I prefer you in the sack, if that’s your trouble.”

Her glare softened, and she just looked at him the way that he very much liked, where her eyes turned to liquid pools that could soak his entire being. He wanted to grab her and pin her against the burning husk of the school. But instead he just looked at her and then to the ground, brooding. The words to explain it to her—how she could not stop the old and new empty ache in his chest if her solutions did not apply only to him—either eluded him or could not risk the open air and the distance to her ears.

“This is not Order,” she said finally, when he would not answer.

“Neither was what you said.”

“And that’s exactly why I had to change. Carter understands that.”

“I understand you.”

She shook her head, sighing. “Ward . . .” The look in her eyes made him think that she was going to plea with him, but the look steeled up. “It is no hard thing to understand Order. And you can’t stay crew if you start splitting apart.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Do you remember everything you did today?”

“I don’t need to,” he said. “There’s enough evidence around.”

The town was a picture of what he’d done. They cared less about being so obvious as they went, but even so Ward had been extreme. He had flashes in his head here and there of being reckless. Not just reckless, sacrificing his own wellbeing, but

careless; shooting when he didn't have to, shooting targets close to crew members before his comrades could get out of the way.

“Okay,” she said, shrugging. “I just don't want you to feel like you've been driven off.”

“The Order drives,” he said. “I'm in the backseat with everyone else.”

She sighed, and they both turned and left at the same time, going in opposite directions. Ward didn't turn around but childishly hoped she did, to see him walk away from her. When Ward found Clancy he was sharpening his knife with the whetstone that Ward had let him borrow earlier, sitting next to a pile of tires in front of an outmoded service shop. Clancy lost his own stone in a dust storm a few months before when they were still in Oklahoma.

“Nice night,” Ward said.

Clancy looked up at him and made a non-committal sound. Every time he slid his knife across the stone in his hands it made a sharp, stony screech.

A solitary gunshot echoed through the town, followed by shouting and several more shots in the space of just a few seconds. Ward and Clancy looked at each other, surprised, and began to run to where it came from. Dust and smoke hung in the air, but there had not been much to the town to begin with and they found their way easily enough. Ward looked over at Clancy once or twice on the run and saw eagerness there, not apprehension, and realized that was what he felt himself. Shots fired meant something worth shooting at.

The gunfire had originated from a storm shelter beneath an empty rust-colored water tower, the tall kind that most towns had started using for spare scrap metal.

Chanute had been no different and as a result over a third of the tower's piped pillars had been requisitioned. When they got there, they saw Austin sitting on a rock, holding a limp body with half its head gone. Sue stood above him, eyes red and watery. It took Ward a moment to realize, from the uniform and the dark-blond hair of the corpse that wasn't covered in blood, that the body in Austin's arms was Bryan.

"He told him," Sue said. "We both did, a thousand times. Don't rush in so fast. Assume someone's inside, always. And he just ignored us like always with that dumb fucking grin on his face."

Austin said nothing, his pale blue eyes dusky, meditative. Ward was just as much Bryan's brother as Austin, and he wondered if they then shared the same empty chest. He couldn't get a read on Austin's mood. He could have been angry or sad, he could have been losing what grip he had on sanity.

The night after finishing the barn they held Bryan's ceremony in the open air of a dusty field right outside the town. It was as close as the Order would ever get to superstition. In the days prior Bryan's body along with all its former belongings had been left out in the open on a pyre constructed from the remains of the town. Wood from siding, sheds, pallets. Any of the crew that wanted or thought they would need his clothes, weapons, or contents of his pack were welcome to them, and by the time Bryan's flesh was set ablaze it was covered only in his civvies with his rifle and pistol laid across his chest, emptied of ammo. Austin had taken his tally scorebook earlier in the day, studying over it while the other members of the crew built the pyre. Yale said he didn't have to help. The wind blew hard and soon Bryan floated upwards and molded to the

wind, becoming a part of the dusty sky and, as Yale said, the night itself. It was as much as a promise as any of them were given, to be a part of the stars, or the night as far as the Earth was concerned. Not that they could see the stars anyway. Ward thought maybe none of them ever would.

In the morning they moved on through the dust, again using one old car, this time a four-doored sedan with Kansas and Clancy inside, and in the afternoon those two brought the other crew members in from their sweeps to search a church on the side of the road towards Garnett. It had tall white walls with negative-spaced crosses, and the sort of red shingles that Ward had seen in pictures of coastal Spanish cities. A collection of burnt-out cars and the rusted husks of big metal cargo containers that trucks would carry sat to either side of it. Still on a rotation, Yale, Ward, and Austin all stayed at a distance while the rest of the crew went in. Ward sat off to the side of the two, preferring to let them talk about what grief they may; still, being downwind, he heard some of it.

“That tally,” Austin said. “Fucking thing. It’s all I think about.”

Yale stayed quiet, letting him speak.

“It’s just . . .” the blonde man trailed off. “He was ahead. Of all of us. Ward pulled Clancy ahead for a bit, but in that town, that last fucking town, Bryan went back up. Even with Ward burning that goddamn building. Being with him, I was right behind. And now it seems like I can’t continue my duty without leaving Bryan in last.”

“It was just a counting of things, buddy,” Yale said. “That’s all.”

“I know, but . . . I mean, that’s what he liked. That competition. It’s why he rushed headlong into rooms. It was his thing. Understand? I can’t do it.” His body shook. “I can’t go past him.”

The red-bearded man did not speak for a time and just looked at Austin looking at the ground. Ward thought he seemed to be measuring him, as if a person could weigh another by how much gravity their voice had. Ward knew that among the crew he was the one that could probably offer more kinds of comfort, of modes of thinking, when it came to responsibility to dead brothers but he could not bring himself to interrupt their conversation or to even talk to Austin about it at all. He could maybe tell Austin about how after Russ died he drank himself into a stupor for as long as possible as much as possible because feeling nothing was so much better than feeling what he always did. He could tell him how the Order was what had helped. But he didn't approach. He just watched. Yale slung his rifle around his back and wiped one hand down his face, breathing in deep.

“One of the last towns in New Mexico we cleaned was a place called Ruidoso. You ever been to Ruidoso?”

Austin shook his head, looking confused.

“Didn't think you would had. Once upon a time it was a great little ski resort, Apache-run, but that was before the whole state got sectioned off to the spics. They ruined it like they did most everything in the state, but you can't blame them, exactly. Not the way that it got run. Just more blisters on sun burnt skin.”

He stopped for a second and Ward almost thought he wouldn't continue, and that was when he realized that he was really listening and not just overhearing.

“We had cornered this family into a cabin right next to the mountain. Backed right up against it, nowhere for them to go. Me and two others were ordered in. The family turned out to be all brothers, six of them. They had an armory with 'em. I took

four bullets in my side. The other two with me died. One went quick, the other, Parker, she got shot in the gut and so had to go quick too.”

Ward nodded. To Delay Order is to Invite Death.

“One or two in the crew thought our leader judged too quickly when it came to that. Conscience attacked them. I had many good friends there, and none of them died in a good way. There is no good way to die, death is the failure to serve Order, and that is why we do what we do.”

“I always thought you were hiding something.”

“Hiding?” Yale shook his head and coughed twice in the blowing dirt. “No kid. I don’t have any secrets. Just grief and commitment.”

Austin, head low, nodded, and Yale put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

Ward turned away and walked closer to the church, knowing someone had to watch the outside. After a minute he saw a skinny brown-skinned man hopping out of the back door of the church. No bullets seemed to be firing after him and so Ward decided to fix that. From his distance, he only got a glancing blow, a ricochet wound that hopped off the ground, a car door, and then into the man’s hip. Then his target disappeared behind one of the huge steel cargo boxes.

When the three men ran down and flanked the box, their prey called out.

“Don’t shoot, okay? Please!”

None of them answered. Ward had seen this lots in Oklahoma, where drive-by churches like this had boomed. People could get their salvation in less than ten seconds at low rates. This wasn’t a drive-by church like those, per se, but it did have the same collection of cars and cargo containers and other assorted road junk surrounding it. Ward

had never liked churches and usually jumped at the chance to clean one out. He readied his gun. Sometimes if they raised their hand at the right angle you could blow it clean off from the wrist. The three continued moving forward. Past the box there was just a pile of car doors next to a big piece of stone.

“I can give you more than just me, okay?” came the man’s voice. “You don’t want me. I’m a good guy. I’m a preacher.”

The crew all looked at each other and kept moving forward.

“I can give you who you really want! The bad guys! The ones you won’t find!”

Ward and Austin looked over at Yale. He held his gun up with one hand and put the other to his thick red beard, rubbing through it. Looking at Austin, he nodded his head over towards the church. Austin nodded and quietly ran back towards it.

“Come on out,” Yale said.

The preacher stuck his hands out from behind the stone first, palms open, and then inch by inch moved his body forward until his head was in view. He was black, and had jaundiced eyes offset by the small black islands in the middle of their yellow seas. His hair looked greasy, combed back in waves, the same peppery color as the mustache on his face.

“No shooting?”

“Depends on you, doesn’t it?” Yale said.

The man clung close to the stone as he revealed his full, skinny form, dressed in a dirty suit jacket over a grey undershirt and khaki pants. There was a small red stain on his side where the bullet had bounced up. The wound looked like it bothered him. Ward was glad. His head rotated from Ward to Yale and back. When he looked at Yale once more,

Ward stepped forward with his gun up and slammed it across the black man's head to knock him down. The man cried out. It was easier to talk to someone when they were low on the ground, improved the perspective of superiority. Probably Ward didn't need to angle his gun to make him bleed from his forehead but he felt like it and felt like doing it again. He didn't, though, but only because Yale was there.

The black man, squirreling backwards on the ground until he hit the stone behind him, wrapped his head in his arms. "Y'all is some bad men, ain't yah?"

They said nothing, and in a few moments Kansas arrived with the rest of the crew behind her. Ward kept his gun on the preacher, and all the rest looked at the man with their guns held casually while Yale and Kansas conferred quietly to the side. They both nodded before Yale spoke again.

"So where's the rest?"

"Oh no," the preacher said. "God gave me smarts. I tell you and I die."

"You don't tell us and you die."

He held up his oily, erector-set hands. "Hold on, now. I ain't saying I won't talk. I'm just saying not when there's so many of you, and not when there's guns around."

Yale cocked his head. "What are you asking for?"

"Nothing unreasonable, now, don't worry. You have one of your people come with me out a ways. Once we far away enough, I tell 'em. Then I run off and he come back and tell you. Or she," he shrugged, looking at Elaine and Sue. "I ain't particular."

Yale and Kansas looked at one another and began their whispering anew. Kansas cast several sidelong glances at Ward. The preacher seemed to catch onto it, cracking a

toothy smile at the silent young man. Ward glared at him, statue-like, and the preacher's smile faded. Eventually Yale spoke again.

“Ward, drop your weapons and go with him.” He turned to Sue. “Give him some rope. A length about thirty feet ought to do it.”

“Ought to do what?” The preacher asked.

Yale smiled at him. “Can't have you running off before it's time.”

Ward held his rifle and pistol in front of Carter, who just looked at them, and then to Austin, who grabbed them.

“The knife as well,” Kansas said. “I don't want you to stab him.”

Ward shrugged and lifted his knife out of its sheath around his waist, tossing it to her casually. Austin had his hands full. Sue began wrapping the preacher up, first his waist, and then connecting that to his arms behind his back, leaving around twenty feet of slack for Ward.

“It's a lil tight,” the man said. Sue didn't respond. He looked at Yale. “It's a lil tight, I said.”

Yale just raised his eyebrows, nodding, and turned back to the church. Ward picked up the rope and started walking North.

“Don't you want to know my name?” the preacher asked him, after a mile.

He breathed hard, trying to keep up with Ward's pace. Ward, in front of the man, held the ropes at about the five foot mark, leaving some walking room for his prisoner, but not so much that he could be comfortable with his hands behind his back.

“No.”

The whole situation bothered Ward. He didn't see why they just didn't string the man by his entrails and start asking questions. A person could live a long time with their intestines out of their body, so long as they were still connected. Longer if they didn't need to shit.

"I'm Philip. Phil Keats, servant of God. Said you was Ward, I hear that right?"

Ward didn't look at him, but he could tell Keats wanted him to. Maybe Keats was a gift, Ward thought. Someone to let out his rage on before the crew had to put him down. That would be soon, probably. The thought came to him suddenly, unwelcome, but also as a sort of comfort. Like a relaxed breeze.

"Say man," Keats said, "You got anything for this hip of mine? One of you fellas shot it pretty good, I think. Hurts to dickens."

He tugged on the rope in his hands, and Keats stumbled a bit.

"Hey now," the preacher said. "No need for that. Though I suppose I'm preaching to the wrong choir when it comes to that. No need for any of this, any of y'all's goings-on. Whole world going to the Devil's hands, and the most organized group just wants to kill most everybody."

Ward remained silent, which Keats apparently took as indication to keep talking as they walked through the yellow field. It had been untended for a while, and thick-stemmed multicolored weeds grew everywhere. Rocks and plastic bags littered the ground.

"Crying shame, it is. Don't see the point in it. Helped people all my life. Raised two kids and saw them die in the war, worked as a social worker before that. Helping children find good homes. Became a priest, helped folks find salvation."

“There is no salvation to be had with the soul,” Ward said automatically.

Keats harrumphed. “Depends on the soul,” he said. “Even if I didn’t bring folks to Heaven, I brought ‘em peace. God gives purpose to a man. Makes him whole.”

“Not all men,” Ward said.

“Only if they stubborn,” Keats said. “Or just empty, natural like. Shame to see those sorts of folk. Eats me up inside, knowing they can’t be helped. That’s all I care to do, is help.”

“Sure helped those folks in your church.”

“Huh,” Keats said. “Ain’t my flock. My flock took flight, mostly. Ones that stayed got pushed out by them that came. Some even murdered. Not a gang, just . . . strange folk, from all over. Traveled as one, but every one of them different. Size, sex, race. Never seen the like. You traveled, I bet. You seen something like that?”

Ward had not but he had heard tales from Yale. Their leader was the only one that accessed their radio regularly. Roving bands that had abandoned towns and cities in droves and found safety in numbers. Fleeing from Order or disease or any other danger that city life brought. Their numbers could amount in the dozens or the thousands. The bigger ones were like massive, mobile refugee camps. They did not accept outsiders easily and crews would have a difficult time infiltrating their numbers to bring them down. The Order had started to think of them logistically as large cities, and held off on their elimination until the time was right, just like with any other urban area.

“Could be.”

“They don’t like new people. I only stayed living ‘cause I could run the garden. Feeding ‘em. About three dozen, all told. I ain’t have enough food for all of them for long, but they never figured that out.”

“So where are they?”

“Heh,” Keats laughed softly. “Not yet. No, no. Want some good distance between yours and me. Better chance that way.”

“Funny thing for a priest to believe in chance.”

Most things about faith puzzled Ward. It did not make sense, for example, to pray so much to change God’s plan when that plan was ostensibly so important. Russell hadn’t died right away after the hanging. He waited until the hospital. Their mother had been there, had been praying in a little room with blue chairs. These questions stayed with him for a long time, long enough for the Order to cultivate them.

Keats shrugged. “My life’s in God’s hands, true enough. But his palms are mighty wide, and I’m like to fall into the lines there if I ain’t careful.”

Ward scoffed. “Either your life is set out before you or it’s not. If there’s both, it’s a contradiction.”

“God’s sort of funny that way.”

They were about fifty yards from a brown fence hung together with chicken wire and nails. It went for about a hundred feet before crashing into the ground under the bleak weight of its surroundings. Ward stopped walking, holding the rope and looking at Keats harshly.

“No,” he said, “No, he’s not funny. He’s the most viral of beings. If you knew a person that really acted like God, you’d punch him in the mouth for being such a frivolous, possessive, whimsically cruel bastard.”

Ward knew the truth about religion. It made a mother tell her son he could forget his brother via the greatest love of all; as if that would be any kind of love at all. It made her call that son and pester him when she didn’t really care about him, when she couldn’t. His father never let him know when he was dying, that always nicked at Ward, and he always thought him and his father were close. But Ward’s father was too honest to say that he still loved his son. His mother couldn’t be any better, and for her to lie, to use God as a way to hide the truth, that nicked at him worse.

“Don’t assume you know what I’d do,” Keats said, “just ‘cause you know some dollar-store argument about faith.”

“Don’t assume I know you? Isn’t the point of being a priest so that people can make assumptions about you? About your goodwill towards others and all? And yet here you are, ready to sell out some outsiders just because they did you wrong. So you can live.”

Keats stayed silent.

“All of it. All of you,” Ward said, shaking his head slowly. “All religion does is destroy life.”

“If you’re talking about war, about crusades, that was always more political than-”

“I’m talking about *life*.” Ward grabbed him by the collar, could smell his old breath. “So you took some men away from dark paths. Wonderful. What’d you turn them towards instead?”

“Faith. A greater—”

Ward punched him in the side of the head, right above the ear. Keats stumbled, lost his balance and fell to the ground. The grass cracked beneath him as he rolled in it.

Faith was not what Ward saw stem from any man of God. It was complacency. He could not calm himself nor stop his thoughts from barreling through his mind, like a geyser sat underneath a rock for too long. Man had destroyed himself from the inside out, and good men that could have stopped it decided not to because they would rather live a heaven-insured life for the Lord instead of insuring the Earth’s health for their children. They caved themselves up in their homes, pressed their insecurities onto their children, and never had the courage to explore what might be best for the world because of some strange notion of morality.

Ward’s whole body shook as he bent over and picked Keats up by the front of his ragged shirt, practically gnawing at his face. “All of this, and they’ve done all of this because *God* has a *plan* and he works in *mysterious ways*.”

The priest managed to look sad and scared at the same time, caught up in the fierceness of Ward’s gaze. “I don’t know what’s in you, son, but—“

“And now we have to cleanse this entire place. Cleanse it of the complacent, the wicked, the ignorant, the wrong. You have forgotten your past. Judgment of all for the sins of the many.”

Ward held him at a distance and punched him in the nose, breaking it.

“You gonna kill me,” Keats coughed. “Lord help me. Lord help you all.”

Ward tossed him to the ground, and stepped on his ankles. He didn't think breaking them was necessary, so he didn't. But he would do the rest of the work, the real work.

“I would almost be sorry,” he said, “but I have to do this.”

There was no water nearby and Ward did not have much to spare in his canteens, so Keats' blood stayed on his hands while he continued back South to the church. He could remember how his hands were stained; that hadn't happened lately. Before long he started to see smoke on the horizon, and surprised himself by realizing that he had been expecting to see a fire. He would have done the same thing, not knowing where a specific group of people was that he wanted to kill inside a building. He had done the same thing. Nobody in this stage of things even noticed one more burning building on the side of the road. It was getting dark, and the closer he got to the burnt out remains the more the smoke blocked out the faded sun. He found himself resenting the red grit on his hands. A reminder of transgression. He didn't want blood for blood's sake, not really, not for the sake of anything but Order.

Kansas sat in the back of the husk of an old, white van, her legs hanging off the edge of it. Her hands sat on her lap, occupied with nothing, her entire demeanor devoted to silently waiting for his return. On the ground below her he saw his pack and his weapons next to it. She cocked her head at his approach, examining him as if he were a painting in a museum.

“Welcome back,” she said, when he came within talking distance. “I had been wondering if you’d show at all.”

Ward almost protested, to say that he had only been gone for a few hours. But he got the feeling, like he usually did with Kansas, that she was talking about something else. In the background he could hear the papery crunch of the flame as it ripped away the church. The majority of the blaze had already happened, but the frame still kept afire in the windless climate of the early evening. He rubbed the back of his neck, looking at her boots, her formless body beneath the cloak she wore.

“Well,” he said. “Here I am. Where’s everyone else?”

“Headed to Garnett,” she said.

“I would’ve passed them, I thought.”

“They went a bit out of their way.”

“You’re that scared of me?” He shifted his gaze up to her face.

Her lips came up in a smile. “You needed time to yourself. To find yourself again.”

“Who says I have?”

“That blood on your hands.”

“That’s nothing new.”

She handed him a canteen full of water, and he washed his hands clean while she moved her legs inside the van, positioning herself horizontal across the back of it. There was room enough for him to sit down next to her. She looked at him, almost expectantly, before speaking.

“Violence,” she began, “has an inertia, like any other force, any other emotion. It has to be started, accelerated, and checked. Your belief was shaken, thanks to Elaine, and in the hole created by the absence of conviction violence grew and grew. It would have continued until you went after us, or us after you.”

“Or me after myself.”

“What would risking the wrath of crew be other than suicide?”

Ward shook his head. “You’re acting like you don’t want us violent.”

“The Order wants you committed. For those like us, with a higher calling, that requires killing. And killers. But not a lack of control.”

She looked at Ward expectantly but he did not know what to say. Her head tilted, like she was examining the title of a book in a store.

“You want meaning,” she said. “This is expected. Understandable. It is why you joined us in the first place. But do you know what meaning is?”

“If I knew that it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“I do not mean its shape or form. I am talking about its purpose.”

Ward moved his palm against his chin. He watched her hands as they rested on her lap, the thumbs bouncing off one another idly. Her eyes never leaving him.

“I guess it’s an approach to the truth,” he said, and she raised an eyebrow. “Or the other way around, I mean. It’s the truth of things applied.”

“And so in this sense reason would be the application of meaning. Without a grasp of either I suppose it would be quite easy to start burning schools and massacring trailers.”

“I guess so.”

“But to search for meaning is a hopeless act.” She leaned forward. “Even within the Order. For the Order is not the embodiment of meaning or holding it in hiding someplace, it is exactly what it advertises. A way to organize things. This is how it must be. Simply because we have the ability to search for meaning does not mean we will find it, nor does it necessitate or presuppose the existence of meaning at all. Simply because we can reason does not mean reason itself will be the end result or even that is the result of anything. To reason is to discover the lack of reason in life.” She let him think about this for a moment, repositioning her hands so they rested on the van, holding up her weight. “And as for life, if there is no meaning and no reason to be found then it is a fragile, fickle, finite drudge the need be tolerated if only to discover a shade of the truth. For despite all of our desire the truth is not knowable or foreseeable or livable because it is more than us in every way. Our existence in any case is an untruth, a lie to make us believe that there can be meaning, reason as a part of it. A lie to make us believe in other lies.”

She was quiet for a time, watching Ward, waiting for a reply.

“Then what’s left?”

“Order, as I said. It is not within us to make sense of this life. The wanting to do so has caused more disorder than anything else. But it, life, can be controlled.”

Ward put his fingers to the bridge of his nose. He had a flash of him and Russ mocking their father for always doing the same motion at dinner, and his heart felt wavy.

“Why not say something before sending me off with the priest.”

“You needed righteousness, not a lecture.”

“That’s not all I need.”

The response came so automatically that Ward felt almost violated by his honesty. Kansas smiled at him again, and held out her hand. He took it after a few seconds and felt her pulling him into the van slowly. He felt like he was slipping through a brick wall, and the feeling compounded when she kept her hand around his, staring at him with pale, blue-specked eyes.

“She’ll sleep with you, will she not?”

“She’ll sleep with anyone.”

Kansas nodded. He became acutely aware of her breath, the quiet rhythm of it, the scent of the same kind of jerky that he had eaten himself on the way there.

“Do you know how many men I’ve laid with since joining the Order?”

The thought itself was strange because to Ward, Kansas *was* the Order. She took his silence as an indication to continue though Ward almost wanted her not to.

“None,” she said, her hand still in his, rising upwards onto her warm body.

“Would you like to be the first?”

Ward had to bite down to stop from answering right away.

“You’d fuck me for the Order?”

“What are you, but an extension of its will? I will make love to you because you are the Order.”

She unbuttoned her cloak and began to do the same to the tough suit of the uniform she wore. Ward watched and devoted some time to reassuring himself that the sound of gunfire he heard was just his heart pounding against his ribcage.

“The only love is the love of Order,” he said dumbly.

“You see?” She said, leaning into him. “You are ours, after all.”

When it was finished Ward laid in the van with his head full of good thoughts. Kansas usually tied her hair back, but it had come undone from their movements, and his hands soaked in its matted, almost greasy feeling. He could not run his fingers through it without pulling at knots, and so just massaged it against her shoulders while she pressed her tired body against his. It was dirty and hot and so was he and so was everything about the two of them and that had to have been part of the appeal. He tried to soak in every detail—the way their only light came from the dozing fires of the church, the soft quiet of the air, the dried leather matting of the van their bodies pressed upon. She had wrapped her arms around him, her legs intertwining and hooking around one of his, and every so often she would moan softly and rub her face into his chest. He laid his chin on the top of her head, unwilling to compel himself to sleep.

“You’re sweet,” he said quietly. “I wouldn’t have thought you as sweet.”

The entire time she had been on top. She had kept her pace slow, which he wouldn’t ever profess to liking, but the act became something more than itself for him. It was enough that they did it. She could determine the way if that’s what kept her doing it.

“What?” she asked, as if waking from a dream.

“I thought you were asleep.” he said. “Sorry.”

“No, what did you say?”

Ward shrugged, and held her a bit tighter, like her hearing it would change what it meant.

“Just that you’re sweet. Tender.”

She shifted her head so that it looked up at him a bit. “Do you like that?”

“Sure.”

“Good.”

He began to slumber then, wrapping his legs further around hers. And yet as he fell into sleep, he could not help but feel her body inexorably coming apart from his, bit by bit. Not in the way of chance lovers, trying to sneak off into the morning light without waking her new partner, but rather as a kind of realization. The sense that their lovemaking had somehow pulled a hood over her head for a while, one that she slowly and excruciatingly found would not come off as she had thought, in one clean jerk.

When Ward woke, she was getting dressed. He watched for a moment, admiring her as she pulled her leather uniform over her muscled, compact form before seeing the sun well above the horizon.

“It’s late,” he said, getting up. “You should have woken me.”

She smiled at him, but only with her lips. The rest of her face was inscrutable. “I wanted you to be rested. You have to catch up with the crew.”

Still groggy, Ward took a moment before catching her wording.

“Only me?”

She wrapped her cloak around her form, and once more her body was a mystery to him.

“I have other responsibilities,” she said. “Some of the highest importance to Order. First, I had to make sure of you. In doing that . . . I mean, now I have other paths to attend to.”

Ward got out of the van, still naked, moving towards her. He stopped when she backed away.

“Will you be coming back to the crew?”

“Maybe.” She picked up her pack and threw it on her shoulder. “It’s possible.”

She paused. “It’s November, isn’t it?”

Ward found his watch in his things and looked. “Yeah. Just into it, the second.”

“Then, maybe around. . .” Her eyes went to the side, considering something. “The second? I think it’s been five years to the day that they picked me up.”

He looked at her strangely.

“I was in Topeka. Nearly . . .” she held up a hand in the light, “. . . lost my arm from an infection because I couldn’t get in a hospital. A stupid thing. Fell into a bottle. They found me passed out behind a grocery store.”

Ward didn’t know what to say to that. To any of it. It was the most she had ever given up of herself. Instead he just asked what he wanted to know.

“How long?”

She finally just shook her head, slightly but rapidly. “As long as I need.”

“That’s not a guarantee.”

“It wasn’t meant to be one.” She waved slightly, without raising her arm. “The sooner our work is finished, the sooner we . . . I will see you and the crew. Goodbye, Ward.”

“I’ll want to see you again.”

“What you want—” she stopped, took a breath. “Goodbye, Ward.”

“For now,” he said.

She smiled, her eyes in it this time. “For now.”

He watched her all the way to the horizon, until her figure sank into the gray and did not appear again. There was nothing to do besides getting dressed and on his way, so that's what he did. By mid-morning he had started, his belly full of dried fruit and hard bread. He wanted to be back with the crew, she had made him want that, but he did not feel a desire to hurry. There was a great wall of inevitable, impossible-to-discern emotion upon his next conversations with some of them. Yale would have lots of hard questions, most likely, but Ward dreaded more interacting with Carter and Elaine. He knew so much about Carter now it was hard to look at him the way he once had, as a stupid kid in front of a man with a uniform on. Elaine he would apologize to, if he thought it would do any good. It was a terrible thing, having your faith shaken. Maybe one of the most terrible in the world. Ward wondered how many terrible things a man could have happen inside of him before he came apart. But even if he apologized to Elaine, she wouldn't hear it, he knew.

Shortly before evening he saw a prairie dog pop its head out of the earth. Ward had not shot a small target in a while but he had not lost his edge. He had no real use for its fur, but the meat made a decent addition to his dinner of jerky and water. Lots of thoughts ran through his mind. He thought about how long it would take for him to get back with the crew. He thought about his mother being so sad when he wouldn't go to church with her. He thought about Kansas, of course.

She left so soon after. He couldn't say if it was better than it was with Elaine. But then, he knew it was, in a way. Kansas wouldn't be sleeping with Carter, with anyone he knew. He would have questioned the quality of his efforts for her, but if she had been faking then Ward didn't know what real pleasure looked like, sounded like, felt like

coursing through the muscles of a woman beneath him. Maybe it was something about Kansas that she couldn't enjoy enjoying herself. But Kansas never faked anything, not when it came to the Order. He wondered if that had something to do with why what they did felt like more than just fucking. That it had pieced some part of him together—not that she was capable of sex with him, but that he was deserving of her doing it with him. This woman who had faced so much and would face so much more.

The following morning, shortly after heading towards Garnett, he saw a dog caught in a foothold trap by the side of the road. Lost in his thoughts on Kansas's absence, he almost did not notice the animal until it gave out a desperate, solitary whine. He stopped when he first saw it, watching it struggle, trying to pull the trap along but falling over from the awkward weight every few seconds. Anyone with even a little biological sympathy could have been lured in by the drawn-out suffering. Older traps of the kind on the dog would have held teeth on the jaws, but the edges of this one were flat. A strangely humane addition in a world so barely fit for wildlife; the greater mercy would have been to kill it on the spot. But Ward watched instead. It did not seem right.

He walked past the dog, trying to ignore its whines, and after two miles he went to the right of the road and began to work back, keeping a wide berth. He was losing time but that was not so bad. He had no rush to be subject to the crew's judgments. There was a slight rise above the area of the trap and Ward crouched down and moved along it, looking down towards the dog. He saw it, a darkish mass against yellow of the field, and about fifty feet away from it he saw what he suspected.

There was a heavy-set man sitting down in the grass, holding a shotgun. He had a denim vest on his torso and a large, patchy black beard. Staying low, Ward maneuvered around the man; watched as he took out a dropper from one of his vest's pockets and emptied them into his eyes. Ward held his rifle at the ready. No reason to take any chances.

When he got close enough to the man so that he knew he could not miss, Ward shot him in the back of the head. Then Ward shot him again. The dog was hurt for no reason, Kansas had left him, the world died day by day and this man would pay for all of it. Ward shot him until the rifle's clip emptied; the rhythm of it a type of staccato, shooting him until bits hung off the man, until his ruined flesh buried any inklings of who he might have been. After a moment he felt bad. How easy it was to relapse, to give in to this violence that he wanted no part of.

Ward picked up the man's shotgun and inspected it. The breech-loading kind. He unloaded it and felt the weight of the shell. It felt off, and so he cracked the shell open—birdshot. He supposed threatening someone with such an unlethal ammunition was an ambrosia addict's idea of a good plan. Ward tossed the gun and the shells to the ground and made his way towards the dog.

It was a strangely handsome creature, with thick black fur that had occasional white spots around its thighs, back, head, and nose. It had blue eyes, the icy pale kind that dogs would sometimes have, the kind that Ward always liked seeing in animals. The dog snarled at his approach at first, but in its belabored state Ward maneuvered around it easily, even with the pack on his back. When he leant down and grabbed the trap, the dog struggled at first, tugging at its own leg to the point where Ward had to wonder if it even

had feeling in the limb any longer. When he started to pull the trap off of the dog it stopped struggling, quickly hopping out when the mouth got wide enough. It ran and limped to put a dozen or so feet between itself and Ward before turning back and looking at the still-kneeling man.

Ward had not even come close to a dog since his last one got eaten. He got back on the road and back on his way.

After about an hour of continuing to walk towards the crew, the dog reappeared. It stayed at a distance in the grass, and Ward only saw its shape because the road sat so high off the ground. It did not growl, or bare its teeth, but when Ward stopped to let it catch up, the dog stayed where it was. He could see from the state of its fur and gaunt of its frame that it had not been eating well lately, if at all.

Ward watched it watching him as he went down the road, the both of them limping some. He sat down for dinner in the early evening next to an old trailer by the road. The trailer had wooden paneling and flooring that he stomped through to burn, in order to keep himself warm and to let him see where the dog would come from. He took out a hunk of jerky from his pack, placing a short strip of it over the metal frame of the trailer, and sat down opposite of the meat on the other side of the fire, his back resting against his pack. Ward had never thought of himself as a patient man and so he felt surprised by how little he managed to move in the two hours that it took for the dog to show itself within the light created by the fire. Starving animals could be very desperate, but the dog had all the characteristics of abuse—the lowered head, the tense back and tail, the shifty step—and Ward knew those kinds of animals as skittish and wary of sudden

movement. The world the way it was, even just the country being the way it was, a domesticated animal wouldn't have a chance on its own. It would need someone to help it survive, caught as it was between the deceit of both worlds it had inhabited. All it had been shown was the apathetic cruelty of domestication, the desolation of freedom.

It chomped down the jerky easily, barely chewing. It looked cautiously at Ward when he pulled out another, much larger bite and held it out.

“Come on, pup,” Ward said. “You can have it.”

The soothing nature of his tone seemed altogether foreign to Ward. He had forgotten that his vocal chords could make words into soft appealing sounds. The dog hunkered forward, dropping its shoulders, now checking its paws, now looking at Ward, all movements staggered.

“That's it,” Ward said, keeping with the soft voice. “You can have it, but you have to take it from me yourself.”

He raised his other hand, palm-up and slow, letting the dog see the nothing in it. In its pale eyes he saw a hesitation trained by cruel people and the ugliness of its surroundings, but eventually hunger took over and the dog sunk its teeth into the meat. Ward did not let go of the piece, not at first, smiling as he and the dog entered a brief game of tug-of-war. He let the meat go without attempting to pet the animal, though the way the dog's fur led a trail of white spots on its nose up into and around its eye made that hard for some reason.

The dog trotted away, the big piece of meat in its mouth, and sat down on the other side of the fire to gnaw at it and wear it down until it became edible. It stayed within the light, and the heat, and Ward did not offer it any more food.

The rest of the crew had quite a head start on him, even if he knew they were headed to Garnett, and he had to be responsible with resources. While he drifted to sleep he thought of Kansas, and then wished he hadn't. All he could do about her was want her and wanting never put anyone to sleep.

When he woke at dawn, he saw the dog still by the fading fire, and walked over towards it. When he came within a couple of feet, it snapped its teeth up, growling at Ward before actually registering who was there. Then it huffed twice, and sauntered off to the other side of the trailer before pissing on the wooden frame. Ward felt the need and did the same, before grabbing a biscuit for his breakfast and a small piece of jerky for the dog. He slipped on his pack and picked up his rifle in one hand, eating as he walked. When the dog started to follow, he held the jerky out and let the animal snatch it from him.

By mid-afternoon the dog walked next to Ward as he came close to Garnett. The day was warm, but not so warm that it was uncomfortable, and dusty, but not so much that visibility was low. He had found out the animal was male. For some reason Ward felt distantly disappointed, like he had received news of a death of an unknown cousin. It would have been nice to care for a female. But all the same, it was good to attribute a gender, to establish some greater sense of identity for the dog. Ward wondered about names.

His last dog he had almost named Sparky, because of a joke he liked telling at the time about dogs with brass balls. But instead he had gone with Bandit. It sounded tough and real to Ward, a strong name that could grow into a great protector. Instead it became

a druggie's lunch, but that's how life went. He did not know what he wanted to name this dog but he felt an intense desire to do so and the Order had never given out mandates against such a procedure, or against such a pursuit that would necessitate it.

Ward walked into the town from the East. He could see highways from the Northeast and South melding downwards from large ramps into the same road he walked on. The town was small, but not so small to be without a number of closed-down restaurant chains and depot stores besides the highway. There was a large collection of houses just beyond the highway behind wire-fences with barbed wire at the top. Most of the fencing had boards behind it for support, for defense. Ward had nearly passed the point of intersection of the big highways with the small town roads when, from the Northeastern side, a large cargo truck with a green tarp over its back rumbled down.

Ward had not done his duty in too long a time. He dropped to a knee instantly and began to fire. He shot out three of the back tires of the six-wheeled truck. The truck skidded and smoked to a halt. Ward hopped over the concrete barricade on the side of the highway and hugged the ground, wiggling out of his pack. The dog was nowhere around. Probably scared by the noise.

On the top flap of his pack there was a flare gun and a small collection of ammo for it. He pulled it out and fired it upwards. He was giving away his position, but that was the point. It cast a deep red glare against the ground, lighting up the dust in the air around the burning chemicals. Exhaling, he stuck his head up to see who he had attacked. He saw uniforms, maybe five of them, and ducked back down again. Machine and assault gun fire rattled off and smashed the concrete around him. Sharp bits flew all about. They wore the standard green fatigues. Green was the standard since the wars on the southern

continent. Nations always used their enemies to decide how to dress themselves. He wondered if the men had been part of the National Guard, trying to help out in the area, or actual regulars on a patrol of some kind, and how much of a difference between the two even existed if they had been traveling across the country the way that it was.

Ward looked around, checking for faults in his position. There was a ramp overhead; that would help him if they got close enough to try a grenade; his own flare shot had narrowly negotiated the narrow crack towards the sky. But he was just the one person, and the machine gun kept him pinned. It fired too much and too fast for him to move. It wouldn't take them long to decide to start flanking. The guns did not stop firing. It was all very loud. He did not know something could be that loud for so long and his heart beat fast and he wished he had not been quite so overzealous. To his right there was nothing but grass and more concrete barricade, and to his left there was the downward slope of the ramp running into the ground. If he retreated, he risked them flanking him completely and being caught out in the open.

Abandoning his pack, Ward shuffled quickly on his belly to the left towards the declining end of the ramp. He stood up when the concrete gave him enough cover to do so. He looked out and saw that they had not moved parallel to his old position on the other side of the barricade. They would, though. That would be smart. He inched along the ramp, sitting on its corner when he heard a whump of plastic, flesh, and metal right on the other side of the corner. Heavy breathing, someone flush with adrenaline. Holding his rifle in one hand, Ward pulled out his handgun and pushed it against the body of the newly arrived soldier, firing immediately. Four times. Then he knelt down and spun out

of the corner, finding nothing but the quivering body of the man he had just shot in the chest and belly.

Assault rifle fire, the kind of buzzsaw sounds that his own gun made, could be heard from beyond the ramp. The machine gun fire became more staggered, and then it stopped altogether. He heard the soldiers yelling, frightened, one loud voice telling them to form up and take a position behind the truck. Ward continued next to the ramp, and saw the three uniformed men remaining pressed up against the back of their automobile, the machine gun abandoned. The buzzsaw shots rang out again and one of the soldier's knees exploded in blood, sending the man into unprotected pavement. When his fellow bent down to drag him back behind the truck, he got shot in the head. Probably Clancy's work. The last man appeared to be breathing hard, his hand on his crew cut head with the other cradling his rifle. Ward lined his shot up, and that was when the pair of hands from inside the loose flap of the truck wrapped around the soldier's neck.

The hands were bound, and used the rope between each wrist to grind and tug against the soldier's throat, while small feet appeared on his shoulders, the skinny body inside pushing and pulling both. Ward lowered his gun and began walking forward, when sudden gunfire scattered at the ground beneath him. A ricochet bounced up and hit him across his side. He dove back behind the ramp.

"Friendly!" He cried. "Crew!"

He heard the hoarse cry of someone, maybe Yale, yell for a ceasefire. Ward popped his head out carefully, and saw the six brown uniformed figures approaching from different directions in a semi-circle around from the truck. His hip hurt and he saw blood swelling into a tear in the uniform there. It hurt but he would live. Pressing his

hand against the wound, he moved forward, rifle held out in one hand, going slow until he was sure the six would not fire at him. Then he walked over to the back of the truck where the dead soldier's body was still being strangled, flipped up the tarp, and saw more than a dozen women sitting there in bonds. He recognized the girl strangling the soldier, had saved her life once already.

“It was slow going,” Yale said, sitting next to Ward on a small stone wall surrounding a playground. “Being just the six of us. I was looking forward to having you two back here again.”

Ward looked at the red-bearded man, who looked back at him with a kind of mourning in his eyes, and set down the firearm in his hands, putting it next to a large pile that had accumulated next to him. It was all new—the women in the truck had been sitting on quite a load of arms. Rifles, pistols, explosives—it all had to be checked for utilization. Ward had asked to do it. It was solitary work. Ward had his shirt off, having wrapped gauze around his waist like a belt to stifle the bleeding that the ricocheted bullet had started. It had bounced off his hip bone, and Austin had found the shard, when he examined the wound, buried in the fabric of Ward's uniform. When Austin had been digging around in his flesh it made him vomit a bit, but only the little bit of water and rations he had taken in for the day. The pain was one thing, cold metal needling and searching through his flesh for more, but just the presence of the bullet fragment made him queasy. That something could just enter him from hundreds of feet away on the say-so of someone he'd never meet. For doing so much killing he felt he still had a lot to get used to in battle.

“She said she had other duties to take care of,” he explained. “She didn’t tell me what they were.”

Yale nodded. “Did you ask what they were?”

“I guess . . .” Ward shook his head. “I took her at her word.”

Yale took a deep breath and exhaled. “She told me she was going to take care of you. I didn’t know exactly what she meant but I knew she would do what was best for the crew.”

Ward noticed that Yale’s hand rested on the gun at his hip, coiled around it like a viper on a rock.

“I didn’t kill her, Yale.”

“I’d like to believe you, kid.” The red-haired man sighed. “That would do me a lot of good.”

“But you don’t.”

“Don’t know, is more like it.”

“I wouldn’t kill her. I didn’t do it then and I wouldn’t do it ever. She means too much to me. And the crew.”

“So you’re thinking about the crew, now?”

“I never stopped.”

The direction of that thinking might have changed back and forth a few times, though Ward didn’t mention that. In that way, he supposed, nobody could ever really stop thinking about anything once they started.

“There is a S-O-P for this, you know.”

“I know.”

It occurred to Ward that Kansas knew too. That the protocol would be just to shoot him. But the crew should have done that to him ages ago by all rights. He didn't think she wanted him dead, which meant . . . Ward wasn't sure. What did she know about how Yale would act?

“Bryan dying, you going off as you did, Kansas gone. I don't like it when things fall apart, Ward,” Yale said. “Especially when they could've been put back together. Order requires utility. All this set us back further than I wanted.”

Yale breathed in deep, breathed out deep. Tense, still.

“She slept with me,” Ward said suddenly. “I mean, we slept together.”

He didn't know why he said it. But it seemed like the only thing Yale might believe.

Yale looked at him, surprised. Then he laughed. “You think a lot with your dick, don't you?”

“I don't think so. I don't think it has anything to do with that.”

“I guess you wouldn't.” Yale laughed again, and he shook his head. “You're so quiet sometimes, I forget you're still a kid, even in all of this. Younger than all of us by at least four years. I bet you don't even know how young you are.”

“I'd like to think that doesn't have much to do with it.”

“I'm sure you would.” Yale removed his hand from his gun to rub his beard. “We've got a lot of ground to gain back with you here.”

Ward nodded. “I'm fine with that. I'll do my best.”

Yale smiled his toothy smile, the kind he gave when he was pleased. “I know you will.”

He left Ward alone, walking off to the middle of the playground, where Sue and Elaine were talking with the women in front of a seesaw. They mostly sat on top of the boxes full of bullets and guns that Ward had not yet checked, though some took seats on the tired, yellow grass on the ground. Preaching was not the strong suit of any in the crew, but they had been indoctrinated like any other member of the Order. There were fourteen women in all, most every one of them pretty. Or at least they had been, before getting their noses broken or their eyes blackened or being raped so much that you couldn't tell if they had a mind anymore. Their wrists had turned into a collection of large, red welts, though they no longer had cuffs or rope on them. Ward had no interest in finding out what they looked like beneath the rags they wore as clothes. Especially not when he had seen the one from Baxter Springs.

When they had come out of the truck, most shied away from him. The one who didn't was the girl that had strangled the soldier and went after Ward's eyes. Jessica. That was what the Baxter Springs motel owner, Joe, had called her. The one who got away with her boyfriend or fiancé or however it worked out, or at least got away for a while. Ward had to headbutt her, knocking her out, and caught the other in a headlock until the rest of the crew arrived and calmed the crowd down. Yale had him stay away from the girls after that. He made them uneasy, and Jessica now laid in a blanket behind all the others. He wondered if she recognized him. If she needed to since she knew the uniform now and what it meant, because of him.

Ward watched Elaine talking with them, seeing a sort of intangible pity and empathy on her face that made his insides squirm with shame. He would talk to her. And Carter. Tell them he was all right now, that his head was on straight. Maybe he would

talk to them separately, but it could be better if it was at the same time. A decision he'd have to make soon. The black man watched Elaine too, sitting next to Austin on the ground in front of some monkey bars nearby the seesaw, but occasionally his gaze drifted over to Ward. But did he really have to speak with them about anything? Ward realized he only thought that because he had been thinking outside of an Orderly mindset. They wouldn't have feelings on the matter, or at least none they'd admit.

Going back to cleaning and checking the weapons from the box he had been given to examine, Ward saw the dog from his travels on the street outside the playground.

"Hey there, boy," he said, leaning over the wall.

The dog barked up at him, his tongue dangling out of his mouth to the side. He stood up on his hind legs, letting Ward scratch him around his ears and throat. It panted happily, and whined when Ward brought himself back up to grab a piece of jerky from his pack.

Something shiny moving through the air around the crew and the women caught his eye. He turned and saw the girl, sandy-haired Jessica, a thick black knot coming out of her forehead, hunched over and walking forward slowly into the middle of the crowd that had been formed. Yale understood first.

"Grenade!" he shouted.

The red-bearded man rushed the girl, hoping perhaps to tackle her and fall on it. Austin rushed in right after him, ostensibly determined to not let Yale die. Sue and Elaine looked as though they barely registered what happened. There were a thousand intricate movements happening at once, so many of them not even visible, chemicals signaling across brains to start adrenaline, to flex muscles, to bring up precious or maybe just

prominent memories. Each of these contained in a person, and then in a playground, and more than that all of them captured forever in Ward's mind and then everything he knew exploded. Ward fell backwards off the wall he sat on, pushed by the force of the rippling air, hitting his head hard on the ground before going unconscious.

The playground burned in pieces all around Ward, the women in as many pieces as the equipment. He could not distinguish between Yale and Austin's bodies, but the general shape of what remained let him know that they had both been caught full in the blast. None of the boxes of guns and ammo remained in one piece, and bullet holes riddled the ground and slides and swings from where they had been set off. There was nothing to be seen of Elaine or Sue and he assumed the worst. That was his job, wasn't it, to assume the worst. That was the whole damn idea. Everything smelled burnt and rotten. He heard moans coming in from different directions through the rubble, and decided to check on the one on his right first.

The dog had woke him up on the other side of the wall, licking the blood running down his face. Ward had pushed him away gently, feeling the gash on his own head. It felt long, but not deep, and his vision and his legs had remained steady as he searched through the smoke and dust-filled haze of flaming wreckage. The dog kept its distance, looking scared of future explosions or any other possible source of loud noise.

He found Clancy sitting down on top of a broken slide, breathing fast and staring dumbly at the large pipe jutting up through his thigh. He had been hit up and down his arms and in his side, though it was hard to see what from in the smoke, even from only three feet away. Ward had seen a lot of blood spilled and he saw a lot then and he knew

that Clancy was already dead. When he raised his pistol to his crewmate's head, the pale man nodded and smiled at him.

“You have to see them for me,” Clancy said.

“See what?”

“The stars. One of us has to. We've earned it.”

Ward did not know how to answer that.

“I'm going to shoot you now,” he said instead.

“Anything that cannot thrive deserves death.”

Ward repeated the tenet and shot Clancy through the head.

With all the grass and wood and metal burning around him, it was not silent, but Ward could hear little besides the gunshot echoing in his head. None of the women around seemed anywhere close to alive. All at ground zero, all in pieces. He heard the other person moaning again, and moaned inside when he deduced who it was. It would have been so much easier if he had already died. Then Ward could have lived out the rest of his days in simple regret of not apologizing for deviating how he did, for becoming so violent. Now he actually had to admit to his failures, to his responsibilities. He would have to prove himself to a man that had already thought him proven. Carter had his faith in Ward found unworthy, and there was nothing in the world that could equal the hardness of regaining.

The black man still sat in front of the monkey bars, though he had his hands over his midsection, all covered in red. He looked up at Ward, rolling his eyes to the sky when he saw him.

“Had to shoot that fucking truck, didn’t you.” His voice did not sound angry, just tired.

Ward shrugged and nodded. He knelt down next to the man and pulled Carter’s weak arms away from his stomach, and then pulled him forward until he lay supine on the ground. He opened up the torn tough fabric over Carter’s chest, and when the injured man tried to look at his exposed torso, Ward pushed his head back down. Looking at the wound wouldn’t help things. A wet black piece of shrapnel surrounded by blood magma-like in its thickness dominated the sight of his midsection. Ward pulled out some bandage materials from his pack, and then his knife out of its sheath and held it by the blade, holding the handle in front of Carter’s face.

“Bite, unless you don’t like that tongue of yours.”

Carter complied. Ward began to remove the thick piece of shrapnel from Carter’s belly. It was slippery work and Ward was not skilled enough to be gentle. Carter pounded the ground several times, and once slammed his fist into the metal base of the monkey bars so hard that Ward was sure he had broken a knuckle. When it was out completely Ward pressed one hand on the wound and began to bandage it. Carter passed out somewhere during the process, and stayed unconscious when Ward picked him up in his arms and carried him to the town pharmacy with the dog trotting behind.

Later that day, Ward gathered what remained of the crew’s packs and emptied them all out, deciding what he would need from the pile created. Much of it was burnt and torn. He picked up the extra rations they had, because even if he would be traveling from town to town, he’d have to help Carter every step of the way and that would require

more fuel. Not to mention Carter would be healing and so would need just as much as Ward if not more. Their guns he left but the ammo was always useful. Ward was of a same size as Yale and took his spare uniform, as Ward's regular still had a hole around the hip and he never had learned how to sew.

The most important item he pulled from Yale's pack was the leader's collection of maps. There was a radio but it was broken. Many of the maps had been charred or burnt completely, but on what remained he saw what towns had been cleaned already, the scheduled dates for cleaning, the path his own crew was supposed to take. These weren't explicitly stated, of course, but looking at the map of Oklahoma and the different numbers written over the locations it was easy to discern. Drawn lines ran up and down and across the map's surface, all of them emanating from hubs in different places. Lubbock, Kansas City, St. Louis. Their crew's line had been purple. Ward found it strange, almost insulting, that he had never known their color. A person should know their designation. If there were other purple lines then they did not operate in the Midwest. He wondered if the color designation was just a simple way to differentiate, or if there existed real reasons behind them. He doubted it was complicated, such a thing was unlike Order.

Kansas would have been able to say. Thinking of her brought the first real glad feeling Ward had felt about her not being with them. She would have been the one to preach, would have been right in the middle of things. He already had so much blood on his hands, he could not have handled hers. Even so Ward could not stop the thought that if he knew she were definitely dead, then he wouldn't have to worry about how she felt.

Ward wanted to wait in the town until Carter began to get better, but this proved difficult. On a daily basis Carter's condition refused to improve. The skin around the wound in his stomach yellowed and rotted even with Ward changing the bandages daily. It took until him until the third day there before he gathered up enough wood for a pyre—his hip pained him, and he needed rest from the wound, from so many wounds. There was no way to think that it wasn't his fault. That night he and Carter watched their crewmates join the sky. The smell was awful but so was everything Ward had a part in. Why not enjoy the symmetry.

"Why you helping me so damn much?" Carter asked him, on the way back. Ward pushed him in a wheelbarrow. "I don't want you to."

"Not me," Ward said, "or not anybody?"

"You heard me. You sure acted enough like you wanted to be by yourself. Now we're all dead, and you're fine, and the world's a little worse off. Go away."

Ward stayed, and spent a lot of time during the day wandering the town with the dog at his side, making sure no bodies were visible from the streets. Carter slept most the day, every day. There were dead bodies in most every house. The stink was nearly tangible when he walked into many domiciles. There was no way to build the barn by himself. He'd have to remember that when he reported.

Ward had decided to name his new companion Rebel. It was a good name for a pet, a better one for a dog. There was something profane in Ward's mind about giving a dog a human name, some level of personification that an animal could not and would not live up to. Dogs were pinnacles of friendliness, loyalty, respect—to give them the name of an animal as base and foul as a human being was to tarnish their image.

In one empty, broken shop he found a big basket full of multi-colored, multi-sized foam balls, and he took out one about the size of his fist and tried to play fetch with Rebel. It didn't work, mostly because "fetch" for Rebel meant pouncing on the ball that Ward had thrown and then sitting down and chewing. The dog's idea of a good time was to wait until Ward tried to get the ball back, and then run away with it, encouraging a long game of chase that ate up several hours when Ward could not stand to be near Carter and the festering smell he created.

Rebel had a way of perking up just one ear when Ward talked to him. Ward had nothing much to say outside of the tenets of the Order, not wanting to recount his own past and not believing that Rebel would have any interest in the long list of killing he had done. It was a lot to put up with. All around him was a lot to put up with. Ward could not stand the thoughts that Carter's presence provided, could hardly stand anything. He could stand so little that sometimes he could do nothing but sit down and put his face in his hands. It was a comfort, in a way, to know this was how he was supposed to feel. It was nice to be able to do something right even if nothing was gained from it. In the long dust of the day he taught Rebel to bark after each tenet was spoken aloud. The dog caught on to things quick.

The day after the pyre was burnt he entered the pharmacy through the back door, and saw Carter sitting up against the drawer beneath the sink, rubbing the inside of his bandage against the black grime of the pipes there. A few minutes later Ward had him on the other side of the room, back on the mattress he had laid out for him.

"How long have you been doing that?"

"Past few days, since we got here."

Ward frowned and thought.

“If I gave you a gun with one bullet in it,” Ward said, “who would you shoot?”

“Maybe that dog. It keeps sniffing me.” He looked at the young man before him.

“Why you get a dog anyway? Who said you get a dog?”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. I’ll kill that fucking dog.”

Ward slapped him. Carter smiled lazily—the kind of empty, predatory smile that Ward had seen on rapists and murderers—before spitting a red, black-blotched loogie on the ground.

“We have a lot of work left to do. Why are you trying to skirt it?”

“Why are you keeping me alive if I’m skirting it?” Carter asked. “To delay Order is to invite death.”

Ward did not have an answer for that.

“We need to go to Wichita,” he said instead.

“I’m done. I worked for the law, and the law didn’t help. I worked for Order, and it killed everyone I liked. Except for her that you killed.”

“I didn’t kill anybody.” Except he had. Got the whole crew killed. He wanted to tell Carter but the man hated Ward enough as it was. “Wichita, I said. There’s a base there. We’ll regroup.”

“You go where you like. I won’t be healed to try.”

They continued to stare at each other. As if somewhere in the eyes of a person there was some kind of answer or revelation that would lineate the falling bits of themselves.

“I’m gonna go find a car,” Ward said, standing up. “One with a big, open backseat.”

“Give me the gun. I changed my mind.”

“Get ready to travel. Tomorrow morning, we’ll leave.”

“I’ll shoot you. Give me that gun.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Ward said again. “Don’t put that bandage back on.”

Ward left him in the dark and went back into the town.

Sometime while they were still walking in Oklahoma, Clancy said his first real sentences to any of them. Ward thought about this at night, trying to sleep. He recalled; they had been walking in the remains of a dust storm.

“I hate this dirt,” Bryan had said, maybe overcome with the need to say something in the silence of the march, anything at all.

Walking was as tedious as the day was long sometimes. Maybe Bryan wanted company or maybe not but mostly it seemed talking was a product of wanting to hear something besides the blowing of the wind.

“Not a fan myself,” said Clancy, right behind and to the side of him.

No one stopped but everybody looked and slowed down.

“That right?” Bryan asked him. “Clancy don’t like something besides peas.”

He said this loudly, nudging Austin with his elbow. Ward thought Clancy wouldn’t say anything at all. His face withdrew, but then he cleared his throat.

“Gets in the way, that’s all. I’d like to see the stars.”

“Bullshit,” Bryan said, drawing the word out. “You like the stars like I like a blister’s dick in my ass.”

Yale stopped and turned, looking harsh in the small givings of the day. “Ease up.”

“What?” Bryan said. “You expect me to believe pale rider over there gives a shit about anything but killing?”

They had all stopped now. Yale tilted his head and looked at Clancy and then at Bryan.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself.”

It was about as close as Yale ever got to an order outside of combat.

“How about it then, Clance?” Bryan asked. “What do you like about the stars?”

Clancy looked at him and took a breath, fiddling with the side of his wide-brimmed hat. “Do you know what a star is, Bryan?”

“Tiny point of light. Our future. Big hot things.”

“That is correct. They are enormous balls of fusion and fire running on energy that is inexhaustible for all points and purposes when it comes to beings as finite as us. Just by burning, just by being, they have the mass to spin the planets, to warp time and space, to keep us attached to the soil we walk on right now. They never think, or believe, or question, or feel, and yet everything we have or do or enjoy is because of these cosmic emotionless machines.

“I like the stars very much, Bryan. They are the only thing that makes me feel something that isn’t wrapped in death. They are different.”

Bryan’s face had opened up, its carved antagonism giving way to friendly embarrassment.

“Oh,” he said. “Shit, uh, Clancy, look, I’m sorry . . .”

“Forget it.”

Bryan stepped close to him and squeezed his shoulder.

“Fuck no,” he said. “That’s exactly what I’m not gonna do.”

Clancy’s mouth twitched before he nodded and kept walking. In the next town they went to, a place called Fairview, they started the tally. Ward had burned their scorebooks with the rest of their bodies without even bothering to check what the final score was.

Two days after Carter and outside the town of Garnett he saw them. He had been wandering without any real conscious direction, though he went South by Southwest, mostly just following Rebel from one apparently curious-smelling shrub to another. At some point he discarded the bandage around his waist and every so often he would fiddle with the fleshy scab that remained. It did not hurt so bad. Carrying his pack and his guns and his knife, he slept and woke and kept moving and following the dog. And then came upon the mass.

A sprawling block of people half a mile wide, brown and black and dirty and tired shuffling across the plain. Many had purpled eyes. Only a few had enough belongings to warrant carrying a bag or a pack or even a sack. He considered changing clothes, but he had been walking for two days straight in the same garb he buried Carter in—Order regulation pants and a sleeveless black undershirt. He was lucky the dust didn’t storm because he didn’t have a presence of mind to put his mask and goggles on. His tough shirt was in his pack. The weight of the assault rifle in his hands kept him tired but alert.

He had been avoiding the roads due to the gangs and highwaymen and such for Rebel's sake, probably the same reason that the masses were for their own sake.

Rebel followed him and kept him eating and drinking, if only because watching the dog do it reminded him that he ought to do the same. Sometimes he forgot, though, even while watching the dog rip at dried meat, even with hunger ripping at his stomach. At those times, the way he felt, it did not make sense to eat. He did not remember making the decision to walk and wondered why he had. There were plenty of cars in Garnett. Ward leaned on the dog's companionship at all times. Rebel was always there, ready to be petted, ready to lick, ready to roughhouse and whine in his funny deep voice. The dog slept with him under the stars and Ward made sure not to turn over on top of him.

Ward saw the mass before they saw him but it only took a few minutes before the entire column seemed abuzz with activity. At first this focus confused Ward, but then he got close enough to see the differences between him and them. He had everything at a well level—well-fed, well-supplied, well-armed, well-dressed. And perhaps it was that last item, not just that he was dressed for the elements but the nature of his dress, that caused the mass the most alarm. The brown and black of the Order could be seen easily on his pants, and though he didn't wear the shirt it would not take a wealth of imagination to see such things hiding in the pack on his back. Their faces were many and varied and of different shades from the heavy dust but all existed as of a kind. All of them existed as the subset of a race that knew living in any one place meant death, a pattern of people sewn together by exile.

When he met their lines they parted for him and Rebel both, giving them a wide berth as he walked with his rifle held in a ready position. They talked ceaselessly, as if they weren't just five feet away from him.

"It's his pants, look at the pants, they've all got those pants—"

"But that gun! I'd recognize it on the moon, I would, that's military grade stuff. That's for them—"

"—star-lovers, or whatever they're called. No one really knows 'cept them, I expect. Once I saw one over ten foot —"

"You can't kill 'em, of course. And they travel in packs. Ten or twenty of the bastards at a time. He can't be one of them, it don't make no sense."

"-and what's he doing with a dog? They don't like animals. Was you there in Junction City? They just piled the damn cats to the rooftops. Didn't make no sense. What's a cat gonna do in space? How's it gonna get in the way? But them bastards—"

"Just leave him alone. Leave him alone. You talk to him and it's bad business. We don't need him. If he's one of them, he's bad, if he's not, then he killed one, and that's bad too. We survive on mobility. Just—"

"Creepy looking fucker, ain't he? That beard and all. I wonder what he's seen. What kind of world he's been in. Look at them eyes. They seen too—"

"So how did you do it?"

Ward broke from the trance of eavesdropping, as a young brown-haired woman with clear blue eyes addressed him, walking beside him with a short Hispanic man to her side. He had an ugly, ragged scar running across his forehead, just beyond the ridge of his brow, and it clouded every expression he made.

“Sorry?”

“You know. How’d you kill one of them?” she asked.

Her companion piped up. “And get away with it without the rest knowing.”

The girl was almost flirtatious with him. Ward couldn’t remember the last time a girl had pushed her hair back while she spoke to him. He smiled grimly. The rest of the Mass either went to the side or to the back. It made Ward uneasy to have so many behind him but at the same time none of them looked as if they would chance attacking a man with a rifle in his hands.

“How do you know I’m not one of them?”

She laughed. “If you were, there’d be more. And we’d all be dead, except for the kids. They’d be eaten.”

“They don’t eat children, Becky,” the man said. “And we don’t have none around anyway.”

“You don’t know, Nick!” she protested, glaring at him. “Rob Tucker says he saw it!”

“Rob Tucker would say he saw an apple tree in bloom if he thought it’d make people listen to him.” Nick looked at Ward. “Tell her. They don’t eat children, right?”

“Sure,” Ward said. “I don’t know.”

He supposed he didn’t have any certainty on the subject. But brevity seemed the better route than explaining the long reasons behind his lack of knowledge.

“You sneak up on one?” Becky asked. “I bet you did. You look quiet.”

“Leave him the hell alone, already,” Nick said. “Of course he snuck up on one. Look at him. He couldn’t take a whole squad of those fuckers by himself.”

More people fell in line behind Nick and Becky, asking them the questions the two asked Ward. As he continued walking to the West they followed him, though none asked where he was going. After half an hour of looking straight ahead and walking, trying to ignore the buzz behind him, Ward craned his head around and saw nearly the whole mass of people following him. They had been headed North. He was going East, more or less, and they followed. He almost asked why, but then did not. His uniform carried a lot of weight, not all of it to protect him from bullets. Some of them were armed, but the weapons looked ill-kept, old, and probably without much ammunition. He had good guns and supplies, and looked as if he would shoot any threat placed before him.

One night after a dig in Oklahoma Austin found a deck of cards inside a house. He looked for someone to play with and Ward pretended to doze. Ward would think about this, why he pretended, what reason he had.

Sue was the only one awake and not busy and so he sat down with her. This was before they started sleeping together regular.

“I don’t even know how to play cards,” Austin said. “I just thought it would be something to do, maybe.”

“Sure,” Sue said.

“Isn’t that odd? I’m a grown man, I don’t even know one game of cards.”

“Well there’s a lot of them to know.”

“I don’t think that helps me not even knowing one.” Austin smiled.

“I only know one,” Sue said. “I think I knew more when I was younger, but card games go away quicker than anything. Quicker than even grocery lists.”

“Maybe,” Austin said. “Which one do you know?”

“Poker. Five card draw. We can’t play it.”

“Why not?”

“We got nothing to gamble with. It’s a gambling game.”

“Could play without gambling.”

She shook her head. “Tried that before. You know, before all this. It just doesn’t work. You take the time to learn the game, and then we’d go back and forth a few hands, and then we’d both lose interest.”

“Could pass the time, at least.”

Sue shook her head. After a moment she grabbed the deck of cards from Austin. “Before this I worked in a government office. Stamped and signed papers for audits, retrievals, that sort of thing. That passed the time. We don’t. Not anymore.”

She tossed the cards to the ground. Austin sighed and nodded, leaning back. Ward knew all sorts of card games. Solitaire. Free Cell. War. Go Fish, Crazy Eights, Egyptian Ratscrew, five kinds of Poker, Hearts, Spades, Bridge, Bullshit. All good fun. Kinds you could play without gambling, kinds you could play to just enjoy someone’s company. But he kept quiet. He pretended to doze, and after a while he didn’t pretend anymore.

On the second night Ward had decided to sleep on top of his pack with Rebel under his arms. He wanted neither to be stolen and divided among the mass. He learned this lesson on his first night with them. That night he had found a tree and refused to

allow anyone to sleep beyond it, putting himself at the head of the their long, wide column. Twice men had come in the night, to try and steal the unhelpfully snapping and snarling dog, muttering something about fresh meat, and twice Ward had stabbed a man to death. He made the deaths quick, for whatever reason. No one would touch his dog besides him. The dog depended on him, and nothing or no one that depended on him would die anymore. If the men had friends or family then their dead bodies served as warnings. Anyway he doubted they had any source of real companionship outside just being in the mass. Ward saw that those with compatriots usually got food somehow, even if it wasn't enough to satiate them.

But there were not many trees on the plain, and so that second night after a long, tired day of walking through dusty plains he had to sleep on top of his belongings. Rebel slept on his feet. Ward had food still, and plenty, but ate it covertly. There was no sense or future in sharing with the mass. Maybe a dozen had collapsed from starvation in the last two days. A dozen more from sickness. When they fell, their bodies collapsed with a kind of comfort. As if with nothing else left at least they could do one thing right. Ward saw this; he understood. Disease ran rampant in the raggedly clothed mass, and many had open, oozing sores all across their skin from some kind of pox. They shivered while they walked in the light, they twitched when they laid down to rest. Ward let no one talk to him while breathing in his direction. He wanted to be rid of them all. Anything that cannot thrive deserves death.

He had started to doze when a man dressed in a cut-out tarp with a league of cysts running down the side of his crooked face approached. A sharpened piece of pole in his hand. Looking as a king of boiled, hating apparition in the floating dirt. The cyst man

grunted and rushed at Ward. Ward shot up immediately, but with Rebel on his body his balance went strange and he tripped back down on the ground. The man kept coming at Ward with his weapon carried high, ready to swing down and start some bleeding. Rebel hopped up and bit the man's shank-wielding arm, dragging him down close to the ground. The attacker's cysts molded into a half-toothy frown, and he punched at Ward with his free hand. The dog remained latched on while Ward punched the man back. Another punch to his terrible face, and then again as hard as he could. He took the man's shank out of his hands and stabbed him up and into his gut, setting his bowels loose. The smell of shit filled the air like a bad joke, refusing to dissipate. The man looked surprised for a bit, and then Ward could not distinguish his expression any longer through the disfiguration of his face. Eventually his unintelligible expression froze.

Now he had killed three of the mass. He could not imagine their total numbers but he knew just waiting for them to try and kill him before he killed them was not the most efficient way to eliminate the lot. He did not know if the cyst-covered man had wanted the dog, or Ward's supplies. Perhaps both, perhaps neither, perhaps the man simply did not like the Order and had suspicions of Ward's loyalties. Ward did not focus on it too much. Order requires utility. The man would have died soon regardless. Almost he knelt to stab the man again but decided to check on Rebel instead. The dog panted happily, licking the man's spilt blood from his teeth and coat, staying close to his master.

Ward had cleaned his hands on the limp, stale grass and was just laying down to rest when Becky approached him, casually stepping over the dead body and around the bloodshed. Ward supposed these sorts of things happened often.

“So I can't help but notice that we're headed West,” she said.

“I am,” Ward said, scratching behind Rebel’s ears. He liked that.

She put a hand through her hair. “Got a destination in mind?”

Ward considered before answering whether she needed to know. “Wichita.”

Becky blanched. “Wichita? That place is ghosted, man. I’ve heard a dozen people say so. No one’s there anymore.”

“You sure about that?”

She opened her mouth, as if to argue, then smiled. “You know something, huh?”

Ward felt that the less he said on that subject, the better. “So how long have you been traveling with Nick?”

“Oh, that guy?”

She exhaled, thinking. She seemed put off by the question, maybe because it was the first personal inquiry that she had ever heard Ward make. Maybe that was the same reason she answered in the way that she did. She seemed like she had been waiting for Ward to ask her something. Anything.

“Maybe a few months. Enough to get to know his story.”

“It a good one?”

“Nobody’s got good stories anymore, man. You should hear how he got that scar on his head.”

Ward did not really want to know about that. The less he knew the better, really. But whatever kept her talking, kept her from prying.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, to hear him tell it, he used to live with his brother in Okie, taking care of his mom, you know? Back during the secession. His mom was real, real sick. Fucking TB

or something, I'm not sure. They couldn't afford any doctor, but she hacked and coughed blood all the time."

She sighed, and stayed silent for such a time that Ward almost thought she wouldn't continue. She had the kind of strange, accidental smile that people get when they know what they're going to say is disturbing.

"So one night he hears this plane go over his house, the first one in a long time, and he goes outside and it's flashing bright yellow, and something drops out of it with a bright red light. And he like knows right away, it's one of them aid boxes, with food and medicine for the needy. Used to see 'em all the time on TV, remember? From Europe or something, supporters of the cause. So he rushes out there, trying to get it, except he can't see shit, right? Can't see a thing except that box's light. And once he gets there, someone else is grabbing the box, trying to drag it away. And he says he just goes crazy, trying to get this box for his mom. He tackles the motherfucker, beats the shit out of him. This guy cracks Nick's skull open with a rock, that's how he got the scar, and then Nick takes the rock and does the same to the other guy. Kills him."

"Must have been a big rock."

"No shit, right?" Becky shook her head. "That's not even the worst part. So he's all bloody and tired, right? And he drags it back home, and inside, you know what the fuck was inside it? Nothing. Fucking empty. Fucking psychological warfare from our own fucking home government."

"I'd heard about things like that."

"Yeah, me too. I just never knew someone it happened to. I lived in the city. But like, that's not even the absolute worst part. Turns out his brother goes missing, Nick's

got no idea where he is. He has to stitch his own fucking head up ‘cause of his mom being bedridden. And in a few days, a neighbor comes by and tells him they found his bro beaten to death in the field behind his house.”

A little after the story Ward told Becky he wanted to go to sleep. Ward had more than what he could handle of his own brother’s death on his hands, and could not even think of the weight that direct action would carry. He couldn’t say why it was that all the deaths that mattered to him came from him indirectly. But they did all come from him—direct, indirect, that was just a way to facilitate blame. A manner of disguising. He wondered what disguises Nick used. Ward knew that in his work he was doing humanity a favor. But he didn’t know if he liked the idea of doing a person one by killing them. It seemed contrary, really, to the whole idea of Order.

Ward hardly ever heard Yale talk about his first crew but a few days before they crossed over into the state of Kansas, Elaine got the redheaded man to open up a bit. Ward was driving the old truck. It had a long, wide seat they all sat on, Elaine in the middle and Yale on the far right.

“So you had a crew before us, right?” she asked Yale.

“I worked with some others, that’s right.”

“Do you miss working with them, ever?”

Yale took his time before answering. Rubbed his hand over his shaved head. “Ah, they were a good lot. Sometimes. I don’t know. I think missing them would be sticking in the past. That’s not Order. I mean I’m human, I get lonely for them from time to time, but

I don't wallow in it. Wallowing is the failure to thrive. It's too easy to get stuck in emotions like that."

Elaine shifted in her seat. "You never get tempted?"

"Course I do. But temptation, shit." He looked out the window. "You just have to get used to that. That never goes away. It feeds on itself."

"I'm not sure I get you."

"Temptation . . ." Yale shrugged, waving his hand a bit. "In the end all it really is in actuality is just the excitement of more temptation. It's like any emotion. They're all mirrors of themselves. Fear is the terror of more fear. Loneliness is the fear of more loneliness. Happiness is the expectation of more happiness. They all work like that. They have to. Emotions wouldn't work if we thought they were fleeting."

"I guess so."

"That's why we need Order. Put things in the right light. Give us some foundations. A person run by emotion is mercurial. But with Order to guide us, we are stable. Needed. Making good."

Elaine smiled. "I wasn't asking for a sermon. I just kind of wanted to know about you."

"Knowing me is knowing Order, kiddo. It's all I got, all I want."

Ward did not step in, did not ask anything. Did not question what might happen to Yale if someone Order went away. He himself could not imagine such a thing, what the consequences might end up being. Even at the time he thought he should have asked, but it would have been embarrassing. Too big of an admittance, even to someone who was crew. Even to someone whose job it was to answer that kind of question.

He remembered Elaine changed the subject to the weather, or something similar. She was good with finding subjects to talk about. She was good with a lot and now she was dead.

Rebel got sick somewhere along the way to Wichita. He liked to be alone and unwatched when he pooped, which Ward thought was strange for a dog, but it was how he knew immediately when something was wrong. In the middle of the morning, as they closed in on the city, the dog shat all over all the ground, in a wide, arcing spray while he was just walking along. The dog looked ashamed, like he had been caught at something. Concerned, Ward examined it, checking for blood. He found none, but when Rebel continued to diarrhea all his meals, Ward found it troubling. Persons behind him in the mass complained about the mess but he had not asked them to follow him so close, or at all. He held the dog at night and talked to it so that it would stop trembling in the warm air.

It was possible the Order would not even let him keep the animal, let alone have some kind of facilities or supplies to help it. Ward was not sure if the man Rebel helped him kill was diseased or not. Cysts and sores could be gotten from all manner of causes, and he was no expert or even that knowledgeable. The dog hadn't drawn too much blood, but then when it came to blood it never took too much to do damage. Maybe simply by helping to murder a person just trying to survive, the dog had forfeited the right to live peacefully. Watching Rebel suffer he felt for the first time the severity of the lack of Austin's presence, opening up the path to wanting the rest of the crew, to wanting seven lifetimes less of responsibility.

He dreaded the dead body of another comrade. The idea of it clawed at his heart after Carter. It was all his fault. They were dead and he was the one who was responsible. There were other ways to think about it, of course. He could think that it was just the one girl's fault. Jessica, wasn't that her name? He could think it was the fault of the Order, for putting them there. He could think it was the fault of the world. He could think and think and the only thing that thinking would give him was more thinking to counteract it and that would always be the way because that's all that thinking gave.

He wanted so much for Elaine to be alive. Carter too. Yale and Austin and Clancy and Sue and all the wanting in the world wouldn't give him anything except more wanting. He knew that much. The only thing that want ever did for a man was to make him want the more. And the knowing of that didn't give a man anything except to know that he shouldn't want as much. Ward thought sometimes he could remember a time when things were simple. But really he knew he didn't. He just remembered a time when things hadn't seemed complicated because he just couldn't comprehend them as such. Not that he was a dumb child. Just that he didn't know the scope of the world.

Ward had tried being so careful with Carter, making sure there was nothing around his crewmate that he could use on himself. Once Carter was healthy again, Ward knew the man would have regained his fervor. But there had been some potentially lethal things Ward never really thought about, the kind of items that were so commonplace that you never even considered how their component pieces could hurt someone. Windows, for instance. A stapler thrown through one left a lot of broken pieces to cut wrists with. That kind of transparency to the danger of items was probably why Carter took so long to do it. Probably. Maybe. Ward had heard once that suicide wasn't a choice, it was the

natural progression of action when pain overcame a person's ability to cope with it. He knew he never should have left Carter alone by himself, but Ward couldn't stand to sit in that room with the man. When Carter slept Ward moped about his state. When Carter woke the two would argue.

Carter squandered his own potential. Ward buried him, and made him part of the ruined Earth, never to see the stars. He did it in the late afternoon, right after coming in from playing in the dust with Rebel. The hole he dug out was not all that deep but probably deep enough. It would get covered over like everything else, it would eventually be ignored completely. Ward did not know what would happen to his own body. Whether he would be with grounded with Carter, or burnt up with Elaine. Even if he fell down on the Earth from sickness or exhaustion or dehydration like so many of the mass he would be buried by the dust eventually. So it was now one or the other. It always had been, he just hadn't known it.

The mass continued to follow him and did not seem surprised or even alarmed when they first saw the tall barbed-wire fences surrounding the camp. Ward thought he was probably more shocked than they—he had been expecting a bunker. The camp took up a good deal of space, the space of at least three football fields filled with long white tents that no one seemed to occupy. In fact, the only people that Ward could see at the camp were the guards on the towers attached to every corner of the triple-layers of mesh fencing. The guards wore faded white uniforms with diagonal red stripes running across their chests. Ward did not recognize the outfit. If they were Order, he would have thought they'd have opened fire by now. His original plan had been to maybe break away from the mass, run towards the Order bunker and open fire on the people behind him.

Something along those lines. Not very well thought out but since when had planning been his strong suit. The closest Ward ever came to good planning was damage control. But looking at the camp, the guards did not seem to be Order—they didn't even have their guns raised.

With the mass behind him, he approached the camp. There were two long, shiny towers on either side of the camp's entrance. The door of the one on the right opened, and a tall cylindrical man with white hair and bright green eyes came out and raised his hands up in a greeting manner. His eyes scanned the crowd, looking around. When his gaze fell on Ward it shifted almost imperceptibly. The mass was all quiet.

“Welcome,” he said, smiling slightly. “Welcome to you all,” he said louder. “Please come inside. We are a haven for those like you, organized by the government itself. We are dedicated to putting things back together, to providing for the basic needs of people. People like you. There is food, and beds for the lot of you, and there a lot of guns here to make sure that no one gets hurt. Please enter and receive the safety and peace of mind you so richly deserve for your suffering.”

He spoke like a preacher, not a government representative, and the mass being so hungry and tired seemed to lap up his words. A loud collection of murmurs ran up through the folks until the vibration of them together sounded almost like a nest of giant wasps. The white-haired man came forward and grabbed Ward by the arm.

“I'd like to talk to you in my office, if you wouldn't mind.”

Becky, right behind Ward, grabbed the man's arm in return. “Hey, don't do nothing to this guy. He's not one of them, he's one of you fellas. He led us straight here.”

“I’m sure he did.” The white-haired man smiled. “He’ll be quite safe, I assure you.”

He slid his arm free from the girl’s grasp and escorted Ward inside the bottom of the tower he had originally come out from. On the way Ward heard men with megaphones instructing the mass to split up between those with sickness or ailments and those without, starting a quarantine. The small office Ward entered was almost bereft of decoration, though the desk had a foot-high pile of papers on it. Rebel followed Ward inside, and sat on his haunches next to him when Ward took a seat across from the man.

“I am Manchester,” the man said. “Is that your dog?”

Ward scratched Rebel’s ears. “I suppose it is.”

“Strange thing for one of you to have a dog, isn’t it?”

“How do you mean?” he asked, frowning slightly.

“Well, I’m assuming you’re part of a cleaning crew. Or were.”

Ward opened his mouth, but hesitated before he spoke, not knowing how much to say to the man. Manchester smiled at his reticence.

“Caution in speaking is a wonderful trait, but I assure you, it is not needed here. The dog is fine so long as it does not interfere with your duties. We pursue nothing here but the best interests of the Order.”

“Why didn’t you open fire, then?”

Manchester shook his head. “That would have scattered the lot of them, and then we’d have to spend all the time to hunt them down after you’ve been so resourceful as to lead them right to us. Those crowds are an unexpected and unintended side effect of what

we've been trying to accomplish. Or maybe of what the world has created. But the Order adapts."

"So this is some kind of a death camp?"

"In so many words. We've no use for their labor." He shrugged. "But, I wasn't lying. They will have food and beds. We hoped to lure in many that way. Instead you brought us one of the biggest crowds in the state. Big enough to work as a suitable test subject on their own. We've seen you coming for about two days now, so we're quite prepared. If they're well-fed, then they will sleep all the lighter. As soon as night falls, we leave."

"So it's . . . what, lock them in? Starve them?"

"An intriguing idea," Manchester said. "One that was considered. But it would take far too long. Swift and precise, always. The Order cannot afford less." Ward said nothing in response, though it seemed the older man wanted him to for a moment. "No. There's a bunker nearby that we will relocate to. The camp will be eliminated."

Later that evening Ward sat at the cot they had given him in the bunker a mile and a half away from the camp, petting Rebel while he watched the activity around him. Men and women bustled and rustled about, searching through their trunks in between running from one end of the long, wide room to the other, preparing their packs. Their provisions were less than Ward's had been and their packs thusly smaller as well. They expected regular re-equipping. Their uniforms were all blue with white buttons running down the chest, marking their task as that of a different sort than Ward's. Rooms and rooms full of these men and women. Every ten minutes or so someone new would come in the room

from a different duty of some kind, and a soldier that was already inside would point Ward out on the sly—or at least, what they thought was on the sly. Ward saw it all, even stroking Rebel’s head.

He tried to lose himself in his surroundings, in petting his dog. Later tonight the mass would die. They depended on him and followed him for stupid, selfish reasons and now they would die. And he was okay with that. He was. They were blisters. He pet his dog and he was okay with all of that.

Earlier in the afternoon he asked to meet with a doctor. Ward walked into the clinic and saw the same dark-spectacled man that had put him back together. Kaufman. They looked at each other for a minute, the doctor apparently not recognizing Ward and waiting for him to say something.

“I need something for the dog,” Ward said, nodding his head at Rebel, who had slumped to the floor when his master stopped walking.

“Do you?” Kaufman asked.

“He won’t stop shitting everywhere.”

The doctor frowned slightly. “Thanks for bringing him by, I suppose.” He turned to the cabinet behind him and began searching through rows of orange cylinders. Ward decided to say something.

“Did you just transfer here?”

“Months ago,” Kaufman said absently. When he turned around it was with a container of pills in his hand. “Have I treated you?”

“You pieced my body back together in Texas.”

“Oh,” Kaufman said, considering him, and then, “Oh, yes. The ribs and such. How are they?”

“Working fine.”

“That’s good to hear. Organ rejection occurs quite often, even today. But Order pervades, even inside of us.”

“I guess so.”

Kaufman handed him the pills. “One half in the morning, the other at night. I’m not a veterinarian, and that’s not really dog medicine, so you’re taking your chances. But, I don’t think there should be complications.”

Ward looked at the bottle in his hand, the polysyllabic name of the medicine.

“Well, thanks.”

“I remember . . .” Kaufman began, “I remember your liver was barely still together. Your kidneys shot. Are you still an alcoholic?”

“Well I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Commitment,” he said, leaning back on a counter, “has never ended craving.”

“I don’t really think about it.” Ward thought about their last conversation, it seemed decades ago. “Maybe it was the new parts, like you said.”

Kaufman laughed and shook his head, taking off his glasses to rub his brow. The revelation of his tiny, bright blue eyes might as well have melted the man.

“I doubt it,” he said. “I was joking when I said that. Your body recycles itself every seven years, brand new, and our minds remain the same.”

“How could you tell if they didn’t?”

The doctor smiled and put his glasses back on, switching from comforting to sinister in an instant.

“Addictions do not go away. The idea of curing them is a myth. You can stop the habit, I suppose, but the need? The need does not leave. It roots itself to you, and there’s no digging it out. Through memory, it becomes a part of the shape of you.”

Ward rolled that over in his head but he didn’t know what to say about it.

“Thanks again,” he said after a moment, shaking the bottle of pills.

That was hours ago. Rebel wagged his long tail in front of Ward as they sat in the bunker, happily dusting the floor with his tongue lollled to one side. Ward had poked the pill earlier that afternoon inside a small piece of cheese, and afterwards the dog had been treated to some raw meat. Thinking about his visit with the doctor, he considered how he really did not want a drink. He just wanted to be working. Strange that a guarantee of failure could just fade from a person like that.

Many of the soldiers interned at the bunker had not seen a domesticated animal in some time, outside of being a target to shoot, and several stooped over to pet Rebel as they hustled around. Ward showed those that stopped for more than a minute or two how the dog would respond if a tenet was spoken, and they all marveled at his responsiveness. Ward watched Rebel closely, and saw that even with his animal brain the dog registered that he had kept food down for longer than a few hours. It pleased him. Ward could not remember the last time he had saved a life. He could not remember if he ever had, really. The girl Jessica and the rest from Baxter Springs didn’t count, surely. The whole purpose of the Order was to save human life, and Ward knew that was his purpose. But to save a

life, a life all by itself; that was as different an animal from saving a race as he was to Rebel.

He looked at all the men and women around him, watching him strangely, most with a kind of apprehensive curiosity on their faces. The ones that didn't looked almost scared. Many of the people looking at Ward looked to be older than himself—one woman that had enough lines on her face to have once upon a time had at least three children once upon a time gazed at him as if he were some kind of celebrity eating dinner at a restaurant. A boy with downy hair and a bad mustache snaked glances at him while packing a collection of clothes and utensils into a pack. All of these people in awe of the things Ward had done, because of what he had done and yet also regardless of what he had done—just simply because of the reputation they associated with his job. Today a life had been saved because of him and still they thought highly of how he lived. A dog's life, but a life all the same. A life that would serve Ward would serve the Order. But while Rebel was a good dog, he didn't choose Ward. He would choose anybody that would feed him. It didn't take some great test of logic to know that. Ward remembered Kansas finding him, lying in a pool of mud beaten near-to-death and drunk.

These thoughts ran his mind for a while as he let his feet take him around the facility in a walk to no place in particular. The bunker had the same outline as the one in Texas. Order pervades, requires utility. He entered a room and encountered a cavernous hangar of sorts, full of heavy, thick metal pods. The air thick and cool and wet like a blanket left in the snow. Thousands, enough for an army, or a following. Children filled them, orphans all, if it was possible to be orphaned from doom. Adults as well, but not quite as many. All of them apparently asleep, in some kind of stasis. Plenty of empty

Pods to go around. Room for so many more rural people, urban people, orphaned people, people with dead brothers. At least for one.

Outside, the sun had begun its slide down the horizon, and the temperature, though turning cool, did not affect Ward in his stout brown uniform. It was about a mile and a half to the camp and only two hours till the drop, so Ward ran as fast as he could. Rebel he had left at the bunker to rest and recover, and by the time the crewman had gotten to the camp the night was fully dark. He walked all around the fences, the guards having already abandoned their posts earlier in the day. There were dummies up to give their image, but Ward knew better. He shouted against every foot of the fence that he stepped in front of, searching.

Nothing specific, just, "Hey! Come here!"

Over and over he did this. Eventually someone came.

"Is that our fearless leader?" asked a female voice. "I thought they'd done you in for sure."

When she stepped into the light posted over the fence, he saw it to be Becky. She was smiling and holding a sandwich and a bottle. Swaying slightly, unsteady. Drunk.

"Go get Nick."

"For what?"

"Just get him."

"But what are you doing out there? Where'd you go to? You ain't gonna tell me?"

She looked almost disappointed.

"I said get him. It's important."

She looked like she wanted to say or maybe even ask something, but she bit into her sandwich and shrugged and did as she was told. When she came back into the light under the fence a few minutes later Nick was following behind her, a bottle in his hand too. Ward's gaze rested on the long scar on Nick's face. He considered the organs in his body that weren't his, the ribs and liver and such, and the lack of marks he had from them and he wondered if it was better to have scars. To have reminders of a wrong direction, a physical indication of the badness in you, a landmark to the death of a sibling.

"What's this about?" he asked.

"Give us a minute," Ward said to Becky.

She rolled her eyes and started walking away. Ward watched her until she left the light and then looked square at Nick.

"I heard about your brother."

Nick's face narrowed, and he did the kind of shrug that made a person look as if they were blown back.

"That right?"

"I heard you killed him."

"Yeah? Fuck you."

"I'm not here to blame you. It wasn't your fault."

Nick's face twisted up into a sneer. "Fuck you mean it wasn't my fault? My hands were red, weren't they?"

"It's a symptom of something bigger," Ward said, his voice getting urgent. "Of what humans have done to themselves and what the world has been allowed to become."

"What are you talking about?"

Ward shut his eyes and thought back to being half-alive and riding around in Lubbock, tried to bring up thoughts of Kansas and her words that did not make his heart dash.

“What do you think about the stars?” he said finally.

“Oh shit.” Nick’s jaw dropped, and his eyes widened. “You’re fucking one of them all along.”

Ward pressed on. He just needed to convince him. “Your brother need not have died in vain. The loss of his life is a symptom of a disease, but by recognizing the symptom we can fight the sickness full on.”

“They’ll all fucking them, ain’t they. This is some kinda concentrating camp.”

Ward let out a short breath. “It’s a target. I’m offering you a way out of the way of what’s coming.”

Nick looked at him, up and down, and spat on the ground. Kansas would have been able to do this, why couldn’t he do this.

“Listen to me,” Ward said, persistent, clinging the fence. Nick stayed silent. “We have ruined this world. Even if I let you go you’d be dead in a year from disease, starvation, or any of the other million things we let get out of control. You can fix it. You can make it so no one kills their brothers again.”

“Fuck you,” Nick said finally, after several seconds. “You killed a million people.”

“Not by myself. But I will help kill millions more to save whatever I can. I think you have that same capacity.”

“Fuck you, I said.” Nick turned around. “I’ll take my chances.”

Nick walked away and Ward drew his pistol and shot him in the back three times. It would not do if he started a panic. The silenced barrel made the only sounds heard the squashed-grape thuds of the bullets striking into Nick's flesh. That done, Ward let out a long, slow breath as he looked at the dead body. He let the empty feeling in his lungs sit for a moment; it was not so bad. It was not as though letting down someone's brother was anything new. Then he started running back to the bunker.

The blast came around midnight. Even with a dozen meters of earth above the bunker, the furniture inside of it shook. It shouldn't have been a surprise, the weapon was originally made to penetrate to enemies hiding underground. Rebel went back and forth between barking and whining and Ward put his hands to the dog's shoulders and rubbed there to try and calm him down.

Ward had been told that two hundred and eighty five miles above the earth, a satellite had released a tungsten rod the size of a telephone pole. Traveling at orbital velocities, it created enough force on impact to vaporize not only everyone in the camp, but also all traces of the camp itself. Unless someone was looking for it, the poles were near impossible to detect in-flight.

Ward supposed the Order could drop the rods on everybody if they really wanted. But there were reasons that he could think of why they wouldn't. Maybe they did not have control over enough of the weapons yet, or maybe they did not want those with nuclear capabilities knowing that they had them. He ultimately suspected the real answer was maybe a mixture of that and the fact that the Order wanted their clean sweep to be as thorough as possible. Bombs and the like were well and good, but you needed soldiers to

make sure everyone was really dead. To check every building and shelter and cellar and attic. And besides they could not have nuclear weapons risk contaminating those who were chosen to leave. And he knew the Order, even when it received nuclear capabilities, wouldn't actually use them. The planet may have been in the toilet anyway, but putting a brick on the flusher went against everything the Order stood for.

His pack laid prepared at the side of his cot, Rebel's head laying against it on the ground. He kept the dog close and petted him often, glad for his health. He slept. When he woke up the dog was there, laying right by him. As Ward started to get dressed a woman in a blue uniform told him he needed to come with her to Manchester's office. Ward finished getting dressed, gave Rebel his medicine, and then followed the woman.

Manchester's office in the bunker was just as cold as the previous one but not nearly as bare. It was covered in maps of the Midwest, diagrams of weapons, spreadsheets and legal pads with numerous calculations on them, all sorts of assorted sheets on the walls, the floor, the counter tops. To Ward it looked as if some kind of paper bomb had exploded in the middle of the office. He took a moment to absorb it all.

"Ah, yes," Manchester said, looking at the young man's reaction. "Many of our institutions these days of course prefer the electronic method, but even with the handhelds I've found I just cannot get the right grip on something unless I have it in paper."

"I guess we all have our peculiarities."

"That we do," he said, looking deliberately at Rebel, at Ward's side. "The Order allows them, provided we continue to perform our function at the level it requires and rid the world of its aberrations."

“Order requires utility,” Ward said. Most of the time when talking to superiors he felt it simpler to say what they wanted to hear, and superiors in the Order always liked hearing the tenets.

“Exactly. And you, given your many months of experience, would provide the most utility for us by helping a new crew out of Kansas City.”

“A new crew?”

“That’s right. You will be going to meet them as soon as possible. When you get there, you will be heading North and West. There’s a lot of open space there that we weren’t able to pin down with walking crews because it’s just so damn big. But with things as they are now, of course, cars would be no problem. Or bikes, if that’s what you prefer.”

Ward did not know what to say. He wondered how many crew had to die before splitting them up, if this was the same way that one got handed to Yale.

“I would suggest, however,” Manchester continued, “that you at least have them walk for a week or two together, or regularly switch vehicles. You know how important building fellowship is.”

“You mean I’ll be leading them?”

“Why certainly. You performed excellently in your duties and have been given high ratings by your prior ranking member.”

“Yale’s dead.”

“He wasn’t the ranking member.”

Ward took a second to think about that.

“Do you know where she is now?” he asked the older man.

“I’m afraid I can’t say, though I’m sure she is performing her duty to the upmost of her ability.”

They spoke little more, and Ward’s head wasn’t in it. After the meeting, Ward asked around to anyone in authority that he could find but none could tell him where she had gone or even where she had been. Ward spent a lot of time wondering about all the different implications of, “I can’t say.” His thoughts went to her often, to the smell of her lips, the feel of her hair against his skin. Ultimately he knew the Order had not been in too much contact with Kansas, that most likely she had simply sent them reports, that she had not told anyone about his transgressions — if the Order knew Ward’s past, his shaky loyalty, he probably would have been kept in the camp and pulverized with the rest. He guessed she trusted him. He guessed she was the only one in the world who really knew him and still trusted him. That sure was something.

A crew of his own. He could hardly believe such a thing would be allowed to go on. It had been sixteen months or near that since he had been beaten near to death by the man that would become his comrade-in-arms, the man he had buried, and though he had seen and done much he did not know how that qualified him to lead. If anything he had just proven his ability to get people killed. He had not been able to convince a condemned man to stay alive, how would he teach a crew to kill? The thought of his presence wasn’t even enough to keep his brother from stringing himself up.

The Order would help. Every tenet had an anecdote that he could share. A story he could relate it to. He did not think his leadership qualities would be comparable to Yale’s, as far as style went. Even on a day that he felt amiable Ward would not ever match the open, friendly big-brotherness that Yale had exuded. It would have been better

if he could. Crew work be could tiresome, dismal stuff. Yale's cheer kept them focusing on together, but seriousness was Ward's constant. A person that led others either needed to be feared or loved to have others follow him blindly. Looking at Rebel, he did not think if he was capable of inspiring either emotion. But the real responsibility with a crew was keeping them alive. Yale knew this. Ward could keep things alive—he had kept himself alive, even though he didn't deserve it. He kept Rebel alive.

There was a road to Kansas City from Wichita, one that ripped through the belly of Texas and went up to the lakes in Minnesota, but Ward did not want to take it. A road, even across several states, even across a whole country, was a single thing. A ridge on the skin on the earth filled with all the memories of every tire that had ever run over its surface. If Ward stepped on I-35, he'd be as good as stepping back in Texas, and he couldn't go back there. To where his mother had by now been killed in her sleep. Where he'd had his last drink. His last hug with his father. His last memory of his brother. He had purpose now but he did not know if it could compete with the past and the best way he had found to deal with that problem was avoidance. He took the back roads instead, riding on a bike. He took his time; he wanted Rebel to be able to keep up. Working his legs on the bike took his mind off Kansas for a while, and he felt bad about this. What did it mean if he didn't want to think about a woman, this woman who had let him inside of her? Wasn't that something, to be inside of a woman, didn't that have to be significant?

Every few dozen miles or so he and Rebel would come across some remnant of the new roaming tangential civilizations that existed. The path of him and the dog must have traveled across the same trail that a mass had made in the past. Sometimes you

could not help but cross a road. He saw plenty of bodies rotting in the sun. Ones with open sores across their faces and necks, ones with flesh that had become bloated around their lymph nodes, ones that had blood caking their lips and chins. There were more ways to die than ever, each new one worse than the last. The swiftness of Order was a mercy for the world.

Rebel had started to get jumpy in his good health, running in front of Ward and then charging him with a hop and a mock-attack to his side as he rode and whenever they stopped to eat a meal. Ward thought vaguely of cuffing the animal but in truth he did not want to dissuade Rebel from roughhousing. It was nice to play. Instead he pushed the dog down, which only inspired more play-fierceness. Besides, he could not hurt the animal, not really. Who cared about Nick when it was the dog that needed him. Nick would have just gone away anyway. At morning, noon, and evening Ward fed on brittle cheese and hard bread, and fed Rebel off of a small sack of dog food that one of the patrolling Order soldiers had picked up from Wichita for him. Ward had not asked for it, and the soldier, a blue-eyed young man of maybe twenty-two years, said that he just wanted to see the dog smile. Ward let him pet the dog and watch in strange anticipation as Rebel sat back on his haunches and wag his tail, his dog tongue lolling out to one side as he panted.

Bits of grass here and there struggled to cling to the windy land but they fought against the tide of the world, the spinning axis of civilization's spoils. Whenever Ward passed a new road at an intersection he saw no kinds of traffic. From being at the bunker he found that little by little the Order had established control over the arteries into every major city, doing so by simply eliminating every safe haven along the way. Police strongholds, while powerful, could not hold off against the full-scale Order assaults that

were used to field-test the blue and white regulars. Ward heard that when the Federal government finally decided to make a move on the Order they abruptly found that they had no idea where the “star cult” was based, where it were headed, and were not even able to establish where it had been without extensive ground-research teams that would probably end up just as eliminated as anyone else that crossed the Order’s path. Satellite images could have told the government something, maybe, but they did not know where to start looking, and most incriminating evidence was hidden from overhead view. They could see the barns, to a certainty, but all that proved in the end was that the Order had been there. Nothing of their presence elsewhere, nothing of their specific plans. Any attempt to identify those involved would involve breaking needed defense forces away from cities and towns that needed or just wanted protection for whatever stood beyond their borders. For the other evidence of the Order’s acts, Ward supposed the rods from god proved that the Order could hack satellites. And that was just in North America—the Order’s aspirations were global and that was how it operated. The Order pervades.

On one dark, windless afternoon, his third day traveling, Ward came across a Highway Patrol enclave. From a distance, using binoculars, Ward saw that it had been cleaned out of materials and of man, but not by the Order. The building burned, with scorched bodies posted to the brick walls via chains and crude scrap metal harpoons. Badges drawn onto the walls in blood watched over the torn remains. He had not known that the highwaymen had gotten so daring. The Patrol’s headquarters, like most others of its kind, was built like a fortress, with thick brick razor-wire topped walls, and heavy machine guns posted in every corner. Ward did not want to search through it for survivors. It was such a well-fortified place that the gangs would not have likely given it

up for good, and if he found a decently armed force he would not have been able to match them.

As he looked at the enclave Rebel began to trot towards it. Ward ran after him in the short dead grass, and Rebel sped up, perhaps thinking they were playing. The dog was faster than him, but liked to stop here and there and let Ward catch up, taunting. He barked, wagging his tail, and Ward felt panic creeping up his back. They were too close to the enclave to be making noise. Rebel began to zig-zag, and Ward was able to catch up a bit. The dog stopped, and Ward tackled it into the ground, starting a circus of pained yelps and growls. Rebel bit him but Ward held on, his uniform protecting him from the dog's teeth. Ward held him down on the ground, his hands locked around Rebel's waist. He waited. He looked around as best he could while keeping the animal down. He waited more. Rebel seemed to begin to understand that this would take a while. He waited for fifteen minutes and nothing happened, no one came. Ward held the dog by his scruff and half-led, half-dragged him back to the bike, where he put a fifty-foot length of rope around his neck and tied him to the handlebars.

They moved on. The incident just reminded Ward that Rebel had to be looked after. The dog had been trained only to follow Ward, to sit when petted, not much else. Ward knew the dog did not know how to sic—he had tried it against one or two of the folks in the mass—and the only thing he was good for in a firefight was running away. Anytime Ward fired his gun after a prairie dog or a rabbit during a rest stop Rebel would cower and run off, sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for an hour. The dog delayed Ward as an instrument of Order. He wondered how much use the dog really was to the Order. Mostly Ward had found that Rebel was just of use to him. Whatever crew he was

assigned would just have to live with that. He'd keep the dog alive so long as he was able. If that meant keeping him on a leash until he could train him properly, then that's what it meant.

Ward did not know much about Kansas City, the way that it had been. Before the Order he had not even traveled further North than Lubbock, let alone to another state. From studying history he only knew small bits and pieces, like that the city had been big in cattle driving, or that supporters of slavery crossed from the Missouri side to the Kansas one in order to vote and make their self-destructive practice legal a little more than two hundred years ago. That the Missouri side had voted with the secessionists when Ward was young. The bunker he needed to go to was North past the river, on the Missouri side.

What he could see now in the mid-morning light was a suburb of the city, broken and empty. Cars lining the streets and the sidewalks and all over the parking lots. Buildings with wide-open spaces where doors and windows used to be. As he navigated through it Rebel started to diarrhea again and this time with blood. The red-black matter splashed on the pavement and the rope tied to the bike and against Ward. Rebel wheezed and panted and this too occasionally brought blood out of his body from his long mouth. Worried, Ward untied the rope around his neck and took to carrying him until he found a rusty shopping cart outside of a mini-mart to push the dog around in. His biggest worry was that he did not know how to help the dog. The medicine he gave to Rebel just as regular as the doctor had instructed.

The suburb had been cleaned out, by the Order and before that just by the times, but Ward knew that the city had not been. He was able to hear the population shut up inside their fences and walls, even if he had not been told they were still there. Rebel whined and shat and dry-heaved uncontrollably while Ward pushed him along, and licked Ward's face as he pushed. Ward did not have the heart to stop him even though the licks were flecked with red and maybe disease. Dust hung over everything in the street, casting a dark pallor on all the items beneath the day. It made it difficult for both of them to breathe; Ward blamed the dust for the quickness of his breath, the tightness in his chest. He stopped finally in front of a library, leaving the dog alone outside in the parking lot only long enough to break into the building and steal enough books for the night. They fed the fire he made one by one and kept the two of them warm beneath the unseen stars.

Night fell and Ward held Rebel in his arms by the fire and did all he could to impart via osmosis his ability to keep living. Sometimes it seemed he had nothing else. The dog could not die. Not until Kansas City proper; not until the bunker. Ward could not imagine being alone again. Loneliness was a fall without a bottom, one in which each passing second was an addition to the growing pile of evidence for why no one would ever want to be at his side. Why no one could survive such a task. The only thing keeping him from that hole was about forty pounds of hair, meat, and unconditionality, and without that Ward did not know what could be done. Ward did not sleep that whole night, singing softly to Rebel, singing songs with words and those without words, whatever tune came to mind that he could add some sort of vocalization to. At some point he ran out of things to hum and sing and just repeated the tenets, feeling in the dog's shallow chest his weak attempts at responding. Barely a yip. When morning came the dog did not have

strength to stand or the ability to even keep in the water he so desperately needed. He would lap some up from the dull metal bowl Ward had for him and then the dog would retch it up. It looked like melted bubblegum on the ground.

Under the dull morning sun, Rebel looked at Ward with all the hurt that could possibly exist in something that could not help but tear itself apart; Ward looked at him and saw the hurt of the world itself. He rocked and petted Rebel and constantly whispered to the dog how he was a good boy, the best boy, how he was going to be just fine. And when he finally stopped breathing Ward tried CPR for an hour, beating the dog's dead chest, blowing hard into his nose. He tried as hard as he could, harder than he needed. He tried and tried because he already knew how hard he'd be forgetting later. Trying with the dog would be the focus, the excuse, a hairy musty lifeless smell to wash out of his mouth with a good bottle of hard something. Finally he gave up with a wracking, now-constant shudder and sob. He did not cry but he did not know how because he tried for minutes and minutes.

For the whole day Ward sat by Rebel's body. When he began to build a pyre for him it was to feel something other than the sinkhole in his chest. It took him two hours, grabbing the smallest books he could find in the library, children's books, the structure three times the size it needed to be. As if somehow by making the pyre bigger than required the dog would refuse the sky on the sake of utility and spring back to life. The process distracted Ward somewhat, but mostly any attempt at distraction was like trying to slow down a train with tinfoil. He lowered Rebel carefully onto the stack, not wanting anything to slide or scatter. It lit easily and the dog burned for maybe two minutes before

Ward's eyes betrayed his body's desire and watered uncontrollably. Now all he had was himself.

In the night he saw the lights still on in the city nearby. Ward could not see himself feeling better but he could feel different and so that's what he set out to do.

III

Ward woke in a manner that he had not had in a while. Abruptly called back from drunken oblivion, he focused entirely on one sensation, a sensation he had not even the cognitive wherewithal to define. At first it comforted him while he dozed, but then it kept him awake, stopped him from drifting off due to an subconscious effort to know what exactly it was.

Opening his eyes presented to him a chaotic mess of bodies and glass and blood scattered all around an organized plethora of items. He sat, slumped, against a counter of a shop somewhere, three dead men sprawled out across the store in front of him. All three wore brown and black leather, as he did. One leant over the half-shattered window at the front of the store, his body probably impaled on the broken glass there. Another slumped across a shelf filled with multi-colored bottles, some of which had broken open on the ground in various muddy-shaded puddles. The last one lay at a strange angle at his feet. All of them had more holes in their body than what would have been necessary to kill them. One of Ward's arms sat across his own lap, his pistol resting there and the smell of

recent use floating up off it and intermingling with the stench of blood and shit and alcohol. The other arm was at his side, being held by a girl, and this was the strange sensation that woke Ward up.

He did not remember coming to the store, did not remember killing the men as he knew he must have. His head felt dull and his eyes tired and his body as a whole ached with the pain of dehydration. What he did remember started weeks and weeks before, consisting of wandering through the streets of Kansas City for a day or two, going from one liquor store to another and getting his fill. At first he had the presence of mind to keep his uniform off but found that with it on the people in cities stayed away from him, which he preferred. Xenophobia extended to any non-native, non-regular portion of the population, and when a cop tried to talk to him shots had been fired. If people died he could not have said because he did not stay long enough to check the bodies. Probably he had killed, though. Killing and drinking were not easy things but these were the things he knew he could do. He drove from there to the South and East with a trunk full of liquor until crashing the car into a ditch. Then he emptied his pack of all supplies and with the bottles in the trunk he filled it again. He drank and walked and drank.

Coming to Concordia his only sober thought was to check doctor's offices. The town's small population had not been cleaned at the time of his arrival but that didn't last for long, apparently. Rummaging through their books in the night, looking for the long, medical name that matched the one on the bottle given to him for Rebel. It must have been poison if taken by the wrong animal. There was no other explanation for his dog's death. The Order wanted his friend gone so he would have nothing but them. Wasn't that it. Wasn't that the way things were done.

Ward looked at the child holding onto his hand, maybe nine or ten years old. She was a skinny blonde thing with a dirty face that was dominated by her green eyes. Dust-covered denim shorts, red sneakers, and a faded t-shirt with a bear on it were her only clothing. She had a ball-peen hammer shoved through the strap of her shorts, and this Ward looked at for a long time, wondering what would make the child choose that, of all possible items, as her weapon of choice in the circumstances that she had been thrust inside of. In the fogginess of his mind he stopped caring soon enough. Ward stood up, holding his gun in one hand and being held on to by the girl with his other.

“Let go,” he said.

The girl just looked at him. Ward tugged his own hand toward his body and the girl just jerked forward and followed the hand. Ward pulled it off finger by finger and the girl just replaced it with the other hand right away, higher up on the wrist. He grabbed both arms and turned them until they were at the point of their torque and the girl emitted a high gasp of pain. When he let go she grabbed him again. Twisting, shaking, bending, and even lifting did not help Ward’s cause at all and sighing he looked at the gun in his other hand. He had never killed a child before. Not once, not even on accident. He put it to the girl’s head.

“Let go, I said.”

The girl shook her head vigorously, looking right up at Ward. It was hard to believe, the kid had balls before they would have even dropped if she had been a boy. Ward put the gun in its holster on his belt, and then walked with the girl pliered to his hand. In front of him there sat a large collection of glass and plastic bottles on shelves

made from pine. He grabbed a big musky-colored bottle with triple digits on the sticker on the front of it; it would have been expensive not so long ago.

He held it up and just almost drank it. When it was shattered, Ward could clearly and briefly see the girl's determined face in the hundreds of reflections as they flew through the air, hosted by small bits of glass. Liquid sloshed down to the floor and splashed on both their legs. In Ward's hands he still had the neck of the bottle and enough sharp corners attached to it to make it dangerous. He pulled the girl up and put one edge of the glass right in her eye. It didn't matter what a person thought of how eager you were to kill them, putting a sharp object next to their eye made them squirm. The girl did, too, but only with her feet, where like a liar she forgot to retain control.

“Do that again,” said Ward, “And I'm going to cut something off.”

Ward dropped the girl to the ground but she held on tight. He threw the broken bottle away. Willing not to care at least until he got something to drink, Ward picked up another glass bottle, wanting the good stuff, and almost had taken a drink before the girl used her hammer and shattered that one too. Again the liquid came down and splashed all around their legs, sloshing the broken glass on the ground further out on waves of alcohol. The smell of it stung his nostrils, and rage rose up inside him, not just that the girl had done it but that now he would have to obey a promise he shouldn't have made. He stared at the girl for a moment, who stared right back at him, defiant, shifting her feet slightly but only to better look him in the eye. Ward shrugged. The weight of one more memory couldn't possibly be that more than he could drink off.

He grabbed the girl's hand and laid it down across the store's counter. He raised up the broken glass and took aim.

“I don’t want you to,” the girl said.

Ward looked at her, confused, thinking that went without saying. The girl’s voice was quiet and reserved, not at all like someone pleading for the livelihood of one of their limbs.

“Want me to what?”

The girl just looked at the puddle of clear liquor on the floor, shuffling her feet in the wet glass.

“Don’t want me to drink, is that it?”

The girl nodded, looking down at the floor.

“How old are you?”

The girl said nothing.

“You look maybe ten. Are you ten?”

He again received no response, like the girl thought that the more information she withheld from Ward would guarantee his curiosity, and therefore would want to keep her alive at least in one way. She had red circles around her wrists, the kind being tied up with coarse rope gave a person. Lots of broken glass laid on the floor, not just from the bottles broken but also from the large amount put there by the bodies that he had felled. Glass that could cut flesh, could cut rope. A scene of her began in his head, crawling and inching all night while he was passed out.

“Why are you holding me?”

The girl said nothing, but her head went up slightly, her dark eyes focusing on the bodies on the floor. Ward looked with her, and realized only then that there were three of them. He had known it before, remembered counting the number, but tired and hungover

and angry it hadn't made much of a difference. But more than just three went to a crew. The body of one clearly hung over the glass window halfway into the street, clearly visible from anywhere outside.

Ward recalled through a mist of drunken memory that he had killed two others in the town before this. He could not place when, but it must have been within the past day or so. An Asian man and a white woman that had looked something like Sue. He saw them when he had walked under a streetlamp, him in the light and them in the dark, he saw what he needed to, he saw the guns in their hands. He did not even think that they might have stayed their hands due to his uniform. He remembered shooting them high, the woman in the neck and the man through the small space between the nose and the mouth. Then shooting again and again and again. There was something about causing a definite difference in the world, regardless of how many holes he made. Everything after that and after was a mishmash of blackness and drinking and back to blackness and then back again. Memories of days or weeks or months that only lasted a few fast-forwarded seconds. Five of the Order dead by his hand. He supposed there was no easy or soon going back beneath the drunken shroud of Rebel's death so long as he tried to stay alive and he wasn't sure if he cared or not.

Twenty minutes of running through the town later and the girl still held on to Ward. He tried to avoid major streets, resting only long enough on corners to make sure that there were no crew coming down the road toward his position. Ward remembered seeing the welcome sign to Concordia and how it had a population of five thousand. Big enough for its own police force and to require more than one crew to clean it out. That

meant he might have time but it also meant there would be more than just the standard nine total to worry about. The streets mostly were clean and the shops all still standing and in good condition, though Ward remembered from stumbling into a grocery store that they did not have much produce. Hard to come by in any respect, right on the edge of the dustbowl as they were.

Ward did not know in what drunken rage or stupor he had gotten rid of his pack—though the thought of it brought brief images of an oven or maybe a wide mailbox—but along with it he had tossed his rifle somewhere. All he had left was his pistol and a few clips for it tucked in his pants, plus his knife. It let him move faster, but without supplies or a reliable means of obtaining and carrying them, moving faster probably just meant hurrying up and dying.

The girl breathed hard next to him as she held on, but seemed used to sprinting in distances. Ward had done his absolute best to shake her, done everything short of violence, and so it seemed more and more that raising his hand against the girl was the only option that would cure him of the small fingers wrapped around his wrist. The only other alternative he could think of was tying her up and stuffing her into a closet, but that would have been as good as killing her, almost. Maybe he could tie her and leave her for the Order, but what if they did not find her? What if she starved? In any case he did not think the girl would want to follow him had she known that not even a condemned man would choose his side, if she knew he couldn't even managed to keep a dog alive. He did not want to go as far as tying her up and leaving her to chance, though he did not know why. Perhaps it was because the Order had never done anything so cruel—at most a child would have been held at gunpoint and then tied up. Emotional trauma, perhaps, but down

the line they would see the right of it. Never squander potential. There was no intentional cruelty, or at least, none that was officially sanctioned. No teasing a child while they shot parents. No molestation. Just tie them up and then ignore them until they got picked up to go the stars.

The stars. Ward stopped in his sprint down an alley suddenly. The stars, and what Clancy had asked him to do. A man who had saved his life more than once, a man he had all but killed and then went ahead and did it. The alley was typical of the kind of any town, with an ocean-green dumpster beneath the balcony of the apartment complex he stood across. Trash littered the ground like cars in a parking lot, in neatly disorganized little rows, discarded items stripped of usefulness. He leaned back against the nearby brick wall and slumped down, breathing heavily. There was no way to keep what was owed to Clancy without the Order. But more than that, the Order had made his actions correct, and in the void left by them he was nothing more than a slaughterhouse that fed no one. If their cause suddenly was not his, then it would have never been. The Order was for life or it was not.

He pulled his gun out of its holster and the girl stood back. Ward cocked it and held it to his head, closing his eyes and thinking hard, searching himself for some rationalization of his life. He remembered his father telling him once that life was a kind of story that all of us everyone everywhere had to live through. That everyone had to be able to tell their own stories every day, constantly revising to make themselves interested in the next day. This was right after Russ died.

But in the case of those who could not tell or believe or maintain interest in their own stories it was not so bad. It was not so shameful a thing to take one's life. People

called it quitting or taking the easy way out but in life there is only one way out and regardless the method via which arrival at that door comes it is always the same door. Death is the easy way out because death is the simplest thing there is. It is the ceasing of all possible movement, the ultimate definition of rest. Carter must have known this, must have wanted the absence of complication. Death is the absence of the untamed chaos that roams about the world and everyone's lives and it is nothing at all when it comes to life. And Russ must have understood as well. Death would not touch a boy except to end what ailed him.

Ward pressed against the brick wall in the alley, rapping his knuckles on the ground. If a person were to have a life, a normal life, someone dying in bed in old age, he could see it as a progression of complications—conception, birth, school, work, disappointment, struggle—until their body began to quit via no accord of their own. His body would quit him regardless of what type of man he ended up being. Written in the stars or to be more humble perhaps only everyone's selves there is a contract that has etched out their mortality. To quit life is not to quit at all but to see what it is and decide not to refuse to be slow about it. Kansas would say that any person, alive, was little more than an interruption in the conversation of the cosmos and while some interruptions last longer than others they cannot alone nor all collectively ever battle for the place of the conversation itself. He would never see Kansas again if he killed himself; the country as big as it was, he would never see her anyway. Ward felt the gun against his head, the metal warm, and it was strangely comforting to press himself against something that he knew could press back with such force.

The girl tugged at his hand frantically, and Ward opened his eyes. She pointed across the alley, and Ward saw the two crew members that had just rounded the corner. He could make out nothing of them outside the fact that they wore the black and brown uniform and they were women. Without thinking, he shot in their direction, forcing them to cover before sprinting in the opposite direction. The crew members shot at him, their bullets singing and bouncing against the brick from one end of the alley to the other. Ward pumped his arms up and down as he ran, and the girl held on, her steps lengthened and almost like a gallop with her hand attached to Ward's.

At every intersection he changed direction, moving haphazardly but inexorably North and East for no other reason than that was the route he spontaneously chose. The buildings and alleys like long walls of the world. In the middle of the city he felt almost safe as he moved, but once they got into the open there would be trouble. There was no real telling whether he had already killed the marksman of the group, every crew had at least one, but Ward did not want to bank on it. He did not want at all to bank on outrunning bullets. Only minutes before he had been ready to end his life himself, but nothing disgusted him more than letting a life end without being certain it had to. He hustled into a nearby door. Inside was a bakery, the chairs and tables all stacked in a corner, the cash register overturned and stuck inside the big, open oven. There were stairs that led to the basement on the other side of a doorway right beyond the kitchen.

In the basement Ward squatted low and tugged the girl down to the ground when she did not stay low as well. No sense in giving away their position if someone came looking, regardless of how much he'd appreciate having someone rid him of the child. He rapped the girl's head with his pistol, getting her attention. The child winced and

frowned at Ward, who put a finger to his lips. She shrugged and slumped against the wall, sitting down when Ward sat down himself.

He stared at the girl. “You got a name? My name’s Ward.”

The girl said nothing.

“I’m going to call you Dummy if you don’t give me a name.”

The girl stayed silent.

“Dummy it is.”

They waited for eight hours, Ward realizing an hour and a half in that he was still hungover and wanted a nap. There was a sink there with running water and he used it to rehydrate himself before drifting off, the girl doing the same. The basement was warm and he felt comfortable pressed against its brick corner, falling asleep easily there.

When he woke the first thing he saw was the girl sitting down asleep, dozing forward on her bent knees with one hand still clutching his. Dim, distant moonlight shone in through the floorboards of the porch overhead, and it seemed a little before dawn. Her arm laid lazily on top of his. Trusting perhaps. He picked it up and quietly dropped it on to her lap and walked up out of the basement in the near-darkness of the day. He was no one to take responsibility for a girl.

He walked for two hours by himself, staying close to Highway 70. He had been thinking the crew or crews in Concordia were the worst of his problems. Probably he should have at least taken the time to get behind one of the bare, grassy hills that surrounded the highway. But then when it came to probably should have, Ward knew he

had a list longer than he probably should examine if he didn't want to collapse under the weight of his past.

A loose parade of trees and stumps covered much of the sides of the roads, mostly more stumps than trees. There were intermittent, isolated patches of barely enough pines and oaks to be called copses. Nuclear plants failed when people did, oil went away, people used all they could for fuel, and hoarded it. This included trees. There had been fuel riots in St. Louis and Cincinnati when Ward was sixteen.

Coming over the top of one hill he saw the highwaymen cresting the top of another less than a mile ahead. There was a deep decline between the two rises, and though the ground on either side of the highway was uneven it was more plains than hills, more grass than rock. Ward ran to the right, pumping his legs and arms in fluid, mechanical motions and aiming for a short grassy mound that might provide him with some cover. He slid over the ground, making himself wide and low. The highwaymen caught on to him anyway. In multicolored cars and bikes they swooped down on his position like wheeled valkyries, a group of six or it could have been seven with badges tattooed to their faces and holding chains and knives and pipes and a shotgun.

The three on bikes dismounted when the road ran out. The terrain too risky to drive on, too many holes and bumps. They shouted at each other and whooped in the air and flanked Ward on every side except for the one that he had started moving. He ran down the small hill until it sloped back up again. He shuffled up to the rise and pulled his gun out, stopped, turned, and dropped to a knee. They were still at a distance, close enough so that he could only make out the color of their skin—streaky, dirty brown and black—and the weapons that they held. Still, they walked tall, easy to spot, easy to aim

at. He fired his weapon four times. The one he hit twice in the chest had a long black pipe, and the other that he clipped in the shoulder held a chain and a knife. The highwaymen scattered like bad confetti. Ward thought firing his weapon as he did would slow them down, and so he turned and began to run again. He could hear the booming of the shotgun behind him, saw the explosion of dust and grass as the pellets slammed against the ground beside him as he ran. Something hard and heavy hit him in the back and sent him sprawling to the ground to get a mouth full of earth. He could feel his skin had opened on his forehead and dirt spread all around and in the wound. He turned over to look for who had run up on him, but there was no one. He saw crowbar a few feet away on the ground.

He started to get up again but the highwaymen came on him quick. Two of them, approaching like wrenches to a nut. As if he and they existed for a dance of disassembly. Ward still had his pistol and when they came close he put a bullet in the one with the shotgun. It might have gone on to kill him or it might not have; it was hard to tell with gut shots because so much of the time survival just depended on the man. Sitting up on one hand with his other holding the pistol and sweeping the area round him, Ward searched the grass around him for the other man, the one with the chain. Too late Ward heard the man from behind. He turned and saw for an instant the chain swinging overhead before it came down and then everything went dark.

The noise from being dragged on a sled behind the gang that had ambushed him shook Ward's head and body and made him come to, his hands chained above his head. His head throbbed and in the cloudiness of the pain he wondered if it was the same chain

that had knocked him out, if somehow it was a regulation of theirs to restrain someone by the weapon used to detain them, and he was glad he felled the man with the shotgun because he did not know how one could be tied up with such a device. His sled was tied to a bike. The vibration of the road made it even harder to concentrate on what went on around him. The road was sparse and dirty. The highwaymen stopped a few times in the town. Once or twice the highwaymen exchanged fire with someone Ward couldn't see. He could do nothing but attempt to cringe and squirm, but even that he could barely attempt. It all hurt. At one point the highwaymen added another sled that rode beside him in the form of an dark brown woman in a crew uniform, tied there with electrical cords. Her face looked a mess, all blood and hair.

He watched the early afternoon Missouri landscape dragging out behind him as they rolled on. The land mostly a confederation of stalks and stumps of uninteresting shades of yellowish green and brown. The sun burnt orange overhead and cast the dust hanging against the sky a similar color. Going downhill on the sleds behind the bikes was the worst. Ward had to hope, every time, that the biker would remember to speed up at the bottom so Ward wouldn't have his face tired off. The biker did remember, and every time, but Ward still felt like they were having fun with him, and probably they were. The woman wearing a crew uniform riding beside him on the road in the other sled died after only an hour of riding. There was a hole in her leg and a huge bloody dent in her forehead. She kept mouthing something at him, but with his concussed state combined with the noise of the bikes he heard next to nothing. This bothered him, and over and over again during the ride he kept wondering what she might have been trying to say. What revelation came to her at death's door. Strange to think that the luxury to think

upon and then impart such wisdom had been allowed to a life that probably never gave such a luxury itself. But then, Ward had not heard her. As if fate should it exist enjoyed using irony to iron out the lives it weaved.

His thoughts lingered on the woman, her wide, dead brown eyes staring at him for a long time before the bikers finally pulled onto a small airport runway off the side of the highway. The setting sun baked in the iron skillet of the sky, sheathed in brown clouds of dust that ran from horizon to horizon, and as the highwaymen rode into the gates Ward could see the barbed-wired fence of the airport vibrating. The fence was fortified in most of its spots by rows of cars turned on their side, and instead of a gate they had a giant propeller engine pointed towards the outside, attached to a semi-truck for movement. Ward assumed that the propeller still spun, such an item wouldn't be a very good defense if it didn't. With the shortage of gas, maybe it wasn't a good defense regardless.

Only inside the barbed wire fence did Ward get his first glimpse of the girl Dummy. Tied on a sled much the same as him, helpless and vulnerable on the thick board. She had been moving ahead of him. She had a big red mark on the right side of her forehead that had probably showed up as a result of a fist or a boot. He watched her, waiting for her eyes to open, but they did not. He watched and watched, and as he did the highwaymen unattached him from the bike they carried him on and dragged him to the far corner of the runway, where he was shoved into a cell made from two halves of a wing and some pieces from a wire mesh gate. He began to get up, feeling slightly unsteady, but better. His head clearing. The scrap metal pieces of the cell had been strapped together by plastic ties, the kind a person could use to restrain someone or wrap wires around one another. Ward did not have his knife. It, like his handgun, had been

stripped off him. He vaguely hoped the highwaymen thought of him as helpless but his uniform would go a long way contradicting that. There had been quite a lot of effort put into eliminating any idea of helplessness on the Order's part.

Dummy got tossed into the cell next to his, and the sudden, rough shock of the concrete seemed to snap her from the daze she had been wading in. Ward watched, sitting down, as she began to stir and move. Beyond her in the other cells he could not see too many folks, one skinny man with bright red hair and flushed, chubby cheeks, and a pregnant Hispanic cradling her belly and speaking Spanish to no one in particular much more rapidly than Ward's own fractured knowledge of the language could comprehend.

More towards the middle of the runway Ward watched as the highwaymen ran back and forth, setting up concrete blocks at precise lengths away from one another. They used measuring tape. He did not understand the purpose of it until he saw them pick up portions of wings and sheet metal and then put thick rolls of paper towels, bowls of wax fruit, and even a few vases out on them. Pleasantries of homes. All together the constructed tables formed what looked to be something of a triangle from Ward's point of view.

A hocked loogie landed halfway up his chest, and broke him from his observation of the highwaymen. He saw Dummy standing on the other side of the mesh, looking at him and wiping her mouth. He flicked most of it off into the chain link, leaving a wet trail down his uniform.

"I never offered you a thing," he said.

There was a look in her eyes that he could not quite place, like she wanted to say something but had not learned enough of language or morality to give it proper

vocalization. And maybe knowing she would fail with words, she stayed silent and spat at him again, this time hitting his feet, and then turned to the back corner of her cell. He did not know what the highwaymen would do to her but he could take a guess. Their policy was to kill everyone they found on the road, at least eventually. They did not make exceptions; they were a successful group. What they did beforehand to the people they took was more of a mystery but it probably wouldn't go well for the girl.

He looked at her as she had her back turned to him. He thought at first she was just shutting him out, but as he watched he saw her examining the structure of her containment. Looking for a way out. He examined his own cell, searching for weaknesses. Ward looked at the chain-link wall and the wing ceiling, considering. The main strength seemed to be the wing's weight. In the corner, a chunk of the steel seemed to be coming out a bit. A triangle of it, almost. Ward put himself close to the edge, examining. It would cut straight through a man's hand if he grabbed it bare. He shoved his arm into his sleeve a little, and wrapped the tough fabric of the uniform onto the metal. Pulling, and pulling harder, Ward made progress with the triangle minute by minute, though it was slow-going. It ripped down like sap coming off asphalt.

Behind him he could hear the not-too-distant bustling of men coming and going on the runway. He would turn his head halfway back every so often and see badge-faced men carrying different objects like chairs and boxes. Their rumbling grew and grew, and Ward could tell, as he yanked and tried to wrench the chunk of metal free, they had all gathered at the table created for them. Someone loud started to speak. The metal had only threads left on, and he was seconds away, and then he had it.

Ward had been tugging at the piece with all his weight, and it and he both clattered to the ground when the wing finally gave. Slumped as he was, he didn't see the pair of highwaymen approaching him, one with a shotgun and the other just with size. Ward had only just managed to get on his knees and put his fingers around the metal chunk when they opened the gate to his cell. His whole body tightened up and he dove to Dummy's side of the cage as they went for his legs. They tugged on his feet and he gripped the mesh hard. He pumped his legs like pistons, hitting chests and arms but they pulled him out anyway. The kicking covered the metal piece falling from his hands through the mesh. They kicked him in the guy and he stopped squirming entirely, searching for breath.

The two men dragged him towards the set-up table, and then once Ward was able to see faces looking down at him, they turned to the side and led him all the way to the front of the seated crowd. There the bigger man sat on his spine, hog-tied him, and strung him up to a crooked pole behind the head of the table. Ward got his breath back and tried to shake but could not, really. He swung helpless in the air and found himself more or less face-to-face with a sunbaked, chubby-faced man with a claw of blond hair on his head. The someone loud who had been speaking. Swinging, Ward looked around; there looked to be no real shelter at the airstrip, outside of places to sleep, and most of the food they brought in was probably scavenged from highway gas stations. Probably the loud man got the best of it. Probably he was some kind of leader. He had the piggy, beady eyes of someone who knew exactly what he had to gain.

“As I have been saying,” the man said, “I don't know what the citizens say about us. We cannot know, that is the nature of our business. But we can imagine, can't we?”

Tyrants. Monsters. But though our law is harsh, it keeps people safe. When everyone knows the Chief owns the roads, they will stay off them and lock up their towns tight. Then nothing will get in. Nothing like this,” he pointed at Ward. “This is why we do what we do. Their so-called order. They are nothing but machines made flesh, and from them untold slaughter has been loosed upon the land. *Our* land. We are bastions of US law, and we must end all who wear this uniform.”

A cheer came up from the crowd and Ward felt an intense wave of disappointment but could not place its direction. He continued to swing, suspended by the ropes, and though they had not gagged him he did not say anything in his defense.

“Wherever we meet them, we must fight. Wherever we fight, we must prevail. God and this country are on our side, gentlemen. This is a small fight,” he said, pointing at Ward, “one we have fought a few times before. But that makes it no less important. Walters’ life was important. Brooks sits in the infirmary and most likely will die by next morning. And what of Parker? O’Malley? Henderson?”

He went on naming name after name and Ward got the idea that he was to be blamed for every death the Order had caused this branch of highwaymen. It made him strangely pleased to hear the man talk for nearly ten minutes, listing names. Eventually he stopped.

“This orderly dies at dawn, via firing squad,” said the blond man. “He spends tonight hanging here, open to any punishment . . .” he paused, considering. “Any *non-lethal* punishment that you might be thinking of. We are the law, gentlemen, and we will do this by the letter, and we will show their order what lawmen can do.” This was said as if it were a problem in the past. “He dies at dawn, no later, and absolutely no sooner.”

More cheers went up as the blond man sat down in front of Ward and began to eat the unpackaged assortment that made up his dinner. The men around him joined in, but their gazes would every so often fixate on Ward. Not all of them, and not all the time, but these were men that looked at anything the way they had to look at landscape. They searched it for weaknesses, for flaws, for mistakes in the lines that would tell them where a threat might lay. Ward felt bare and found the only thing that could make the swinging sensation in his stomach settle was letting his eyes rest on the darkness beneath him.

The meal passed, and was not loud or quiet but simply normal. Men carried on conversations and every so often someone would laugh or shout or whisper to the person next to them. Ward had envisioned these men as animals that had forsaken their sense of control. Yet they ate on tables they prepared themselves and propped him up as the symbol of all evil in their eyes. He remembered eating dinner with his family when it was still a family instead of just some people that had known each other for too long. Russ would always sit on Ward's right, next to the backdoor, their father would sit across from Ward, Mom to the left. They had never discussed seating arrangements, but somehow they all just knew to do it, knew not to screw with the familiarity of it. What made a family a family was just a collection of familiarities.

Hanging from the pole, Ward overheard the nearest conversations but did not see the point in paying attention to them. When the chubby, red-faced leader quit eating he stood up and slugged Ward in the face with a left. Ward's face pulsed with pain as he spun helplessly on his rope, watching the rest of the highwaymen get up, wondering if any of the dirty, tired faces he saw would be hitting him by the time he spun back around. They did. When all of the highwaymen had finished passing by Ward he had changed

directions twelve times and he thought that he might have a concussion. He might have a couple. His breaths came ragged and hard and through his mouth, his lips feeling torn and tasting metallic. He didn't know how much time had passed since getting strung up, but it hadn't been more than an hour. For the first time that night Ward considered that he didn't necessarily have to be conscious or have a discernable face to be executed.

But then they left him alone. Some of the highwaymen tore down the table they had set up, leaving Ward with nothing nearby him in the middle of the runway. Light shaded the darkness around him, coming in from the propane lamps set up next to their jerry-built shelters all about the runway. He saw some play cards, some sitting and talking. Men with a break in their dutiful lives. When he stopped spinning he still swung, feeling dizzy. At the far end of the runway there was a small structure with the light on inside. Ward could not tell if it was electric or not from his distance, but he doubted it. He couldn't hear a generator, and was surprised that they had lights at all. At some point they must have raided some place with a heavy reliance on propane.

Two younger highwaymen walked past him suddenly and turned around Ward's heart did flips. One of the men was young with black hair and a tiny mustache and the other was some kind of Filipino or islander and looked, while not old, well-salted and particularly accustomed to the environments of the world. Both of them with skin the color of walnuts. The younger one held a dirt-crusted cup with half of a high school mascot on it, filled with a thick crimson liquid. Ward thought the worst, and when the islander nodded at the younger man, his muscles bunched up. The islander caught Ward's squirming head by the hair in his thick, dirty hand and pinched the crewman's nose with the other, and the cup was shoved against his lips. When it did not have the clear salty

twang of blood he let the liquid come, though the thickness of it made it hard to swallow and even harder to chug as they forced him to. It tasted like artificial cherry, and ran down his chest in thick streams as it overflowed from his mouth. When it was done, Ward's mouth swam with the nauseating miasma of menthol, to the point where he felt like his whole body was infected with it. He coughed and spat at the ground trying to cleanse his mouth and by the time he felt done the two highwaymen had left.

After an hour passed he puked onto the ground beneath him. It stank of menthol and looked like blood. Vomiting must have been some kind of a signal, because as soon as he did, several of the highwaymen started to show up to watch him. Ward tried counting them, but in the darkness he could not make out all of their number. And there seemed to be more and less all the time, he could count ten once and then twenty, neither seeing nor hearing anyone leave, just looking at their faces swirling in and out of the dark. No one moved him, at least he felt no one move him, and yet he spun. His perception swirled in impossible directions, seeing the crowd from the top, the bottom, from sides he had never existed in the space of. The ground bubbled up and meshed together like enormous pads of volcanic carpet, building into blackened crimson masses that sounded off like the bizarre garblings of a radio station. He closed his eyes and found he could see straight through the lids, straight through to the infinite expanse of stars above his head that pulsed and bumped off each other with all the energy of a motor piston.

The sky opened and Ward could not take anymore and he opened his eyes, only to see that the ground had opened instead. God came out, or the shade of him, and asked

Ward what he thought of creation. And the only response formed was that Ward was just this swinging thing, this floatation device in the field of space that would be popped by the sheer heat coming from the furnace of hatred that was the stars above him. They pored into his soul and found nothing worth keeping and Ward blinked in and out of arguments for his existence, half-forming the sentences before losing their grasp in the rhythm of the bleeding air around him. Ward did not know if he was dead or alive and found he could not care less. Death was the failure to serve Order, he remembered the tenet. Order, order, order, the word rushed through his head like a river slamming a boulder against a dam. Order requires utility, utility which makes all things useful and the darkness soaked up his mind and stripped its usefulness until he could not distinguish himself from the stars that would never be quiet and the darkness which would not stop. And there was nothing so much that was real except for him being crushed into the words of his existence that had made him up and spit him out and his head would never stop barreling away into the sky, and some part of him begged to be saved. And nothing would save him, the stars laughed at him. They had taken his body and left him with his soul, and there was no salvation there.

Time did not slow or stop but ceased to be a factor. He felt like his brain was powered by a strobe light. There was no understanding such a thing as time when his thoughts could only board his consciousness one at a time and ran light years around his brain. The ground beneath him looked dark and scary, a quaking gelatinous open maw that would swallow him up just like it had every ancestor and every relative and every thing that had ever led to him being the way that he was. He begged to be burned. Shouted it nonstop for a time, but as the faces in the darkness regained their voices he

could tell they only mocked him for asking. He could not make out what they said, could not repeat it to any exact model of a sentence, but the tone was all a person needed.

His thoughts slowed on occasion and all he felt was alone. All he was was alone, and it was his fault. He did not know so much guilt could fit inside a man—and clearly it couldn't, because it had taken control of everything he saw. He saw Elaine and then Kansas and the rest of the crew and he loved all of them. He could not make out their faces but he knew it was them. They flitted into his vision and glided towards him, like they ran on a track, and then melted back into the dark. He tried to look for Elaine again to tell her it was all his fault but she would not come. He looked for Kansas, for Yale; he looked for any of them. But there was nothing to hold him or help and he belonged to nothing but himself. He somehow was able to remind himself that he was about to die and could not decide what that would change or mean.

At some point he could hear a change in the tone of the voices he heard. They shouted something about Colombia, something about an arrival, something about fighting. He knew they all connected but drawing the strands together was like trying to make rope from salt. They shouted at him, and then amongst each other, and then he did not hear them any longer except for the thunder sound of their exit.

The time came when his body could not keep up with his mind any longer and he slept suspended from the post. He woke when his head cracked down to the runway, snapping his consciousness like a rubber-band. Beyond the pain in his head he could feel hands working at his bonds. There was no light yet in the camp except for what little moonlight had broken through the dust overhead. When he turned over he saw Dummy

above him, metal chunk in hand, the one he gave her. The darkness around her swirled and danced but regardless he grabbed her fingers and stood up.

She grabbed his hand in return and led him in his cloudy-headed state back in the direction of the cells. Ward looked around, the mishmash camp bereft of any life that might have announced the two of them walking as they pleased. If there was not enough light on an item or structure then his drug-addled mind would make up the rest, adding tendrils, waves, hallways, caverns to the incomplete shapes. He shook his head to send the images away but they crept back again and again. All the highwaymen's cars and bikes had left as well. The other cells had been opened, though Ward did not see any of their inhabitants around except for the one who had stayed. The pregnant Hispanic, Dummy right in front of her. Ward wanted to shake his head, but the girl grabbed the Hispanic's hand and clasped it to the one of Ward's hand, the hand that Dummy didn't already hold. Then, he did shake his head and put the woman's hand on Dummy's instead. They followed him along like children at Sunday school. He stopped once to pick up a L-shaped tire iron with one hand off the runway, and then kept moving.

Ward had been dehydrated before but the revolt that his body had started against itself was something else entirely. If his skeleton busted out of his skin he would have taken it as a matter of course. Ward could not put a name to whatever drug the highwaymen had put inside of him but it felt like it attacked his every cell, his core. He had never felt so apart from himself; he had never felt so much as a part of himself. It was as if his mind could not help but wander from all the pain. That he had been beaten did not help at all. His head pulsed and it was hard to walk straight sometimes. He and the

woman and the girl traveled South and East in the fringes of the Dustbowl, heading towards the Ozarks. The weather was hot, if dustless, and they did not carry any water.

Ward thought about how they did not have any water.

A woman, a girl, a baby, himself. He wanted a drink, an excuse to fall away. Instead they kept walking in the greening, rolling grass and Ward looked for a stream or a spout or anything at all. The further they walked the more often he saw trees but Dummy still held onto his hand. Around midday she tugged at it and pointed up.

Ward had not seen a purely blue sky since he moved to college. Since before the Order. He wondered if Dummy ever had. There it was. The color of labels for bottled drinks, stretching out and as big as the world. He stopped, looking up, then nodded once and kept walking. When night came and they sat on the rolling plains at the base of a hill they still had not found any water. There would be some in the mountains. Rivers and streams and pools. The water might or might not be clean but at least his throat would no longer be dry, his body no longer wracked with so many spasms of pain and discomfort. His sides hurt incessantly, like his kidneys were trying to claw out of him.

He told Dummy to gather wood in case they wanted a fire; they would not want a fire, but she did not look ready to sleep yet. Generally Dummy did as told. Ward would tell her to get this or to do that and she followed through if she understood or waited if she didn't. Mostly they did not need to speak though and so mostly they did not speak at all. She held on to him and he walked and that was what it was. She would let go only if he was sitting down, if he looked like he rested. Ward couldn't think of anything to ask her. He'd only end up being guilty, in her eyes. Questions beget questions. Ones about

life, family, the past. She looked at him enough and he did not want blame to come with the package.

Before they slept he tried talking with the Hispanic. Her thin, swollen frame was capped with dark hair that fell in tangled curls around her head and dark eyes that seemed out of sorts, out of place.

“Hey,” he said. “How close are you?”

She looked at him, not comprehending.

“Your baby. Tú . . .” he struggled. “Tú pequeño. Cuántos meses tiene?”

“Ocho,” she said, her mouth scrunching up a bit. “Más o menos.”

Ward swore and looked away. He didn’t know that much about pregnancy. At what week a woman needed to start laying down more and walking less. She did not tell him her name and he did not ask and this did not seem to bother anyone. They all tried to get some sleep.

The next day around noon they came onto a town called California that had two new-looking barns at either side of the road leading into it. The dust had returned, spreading lightly over them, but more than that a dull, heavy tension hung on top of the three as they walked down the road. When they arrived in front of a grocery store the Hispanic woman cried out and galloped in. Ward walked after her with Dummy holding his hand. The Hispanic had a distilled gallon in her hands and was pouring it over herself as the two walked inside. It flattened her shirt against her body and Ward looked away from her saturated, engorged breasts. Beyond her sat several more shelves of water and Ward and Dummy both grabbed some and drank and soaked and made a wet mess of the floor. Ward saw when the girl smiled, there and gone like a breeze.

From the pharmacy section he found some antibiotic cream and slathered it on the various cuts he had accumulated. His forehead, his lips, a few other places. He used some adhesive strips to keep them all covered. They had not gotten infected yet and he did not want them to start. The wounds all nagged at him but not as much as his ability to survive.

Behind the counter in the grocery store's office Ward found a large blue canvas bag and started to fill it with all the things he thought they could put to use. He still felt groggy and slow and thinking was difficult. Dummy, holding his hand, got in his way, so he found a thick rope and cut off fifteen feet from it. He tied that around his waist and gave the other end to the girl while he gathered up cooking utensils and pots, seasoning, water containers, fuel, clothing, tarps, stakes, a shovel, and a few boxes of kitchen matches. A map and compass. Out of the drag of stores and down the road in a huntsman's garage he found guns but no bullets, and a pair of pristine hunting knives with thick, black, ergonomic grips and half-serrated edges. He looked at these items for a long time and took only the knives. To Dummy he gave a small bag and had her fill it up with foodstuffs and to the woman he gave another small bag and told her to take what she thought she should for her pequeño. Probably they had all they would need to live and not near enough to survive.

That night the women wanted to sleep in a house or the grocery store at least, but Ward slept outside so they all slept outside. The whole of him was so tired and creaky that he felt like an old building. Just before he faded out he watched the brightest of the constellations push through the dust as the sky rotated them around, and thought about Clancy and how much a promise could weigh if it had never been spoken. Probably not

as much as guilt. Regret was powerful but guilt had so much more inertia. When he woke up in the morning they all three woke, ate breakfast, and continued South.

Two days of walking and more walking in the rolling, rock-filled hills. The dust growing less and the grass growing more and mountains ahead of them in the graying distance of the horizon. The women slowed his normal pace; among the three he was the only one of good shape and strength. Dummy held on to the rope around his waist. His face healed well and did not feel so tender and most of the scabs were getting smaller. The bags he had picked up had canvas straps that dug into his shoulder if he let them. He took a spare shirt from one of the bags and put it over his clavicle and that seemed to ease the irritation for the most part and he showed Dummy and the Hispanic how to do the same. The girl trailed behind him, staying close enough to not tighten the slack of the rope around his waist.

In the middle of their second day the mountains no longer appeared as distant objectives but rather as obstacles that had to be conquered. The hills in front of him stood dotted with dolomite caves and lined with leafy trees with thick brown trunks. Many of the caves faced out from a cliff face, with no easy manner to get in or out. Ward looked past them to the trees where anyone could come in from all directions without warning. There was no water to be seen but he knew it ran underneath the ground, maybe feet away from him, feet of clay and dirt that would spoil the taste of the stream even if they dug straight to it. Dummy stepped forward and took a hold of his hand.

“She wants to know where we’re going,” the girl said.

Ward looked at her and then at the woman. “You speak Spanish?”

She didn't answer and Ward looked at the woman again. Eyes tired, hands cradling her belly. Her thin legs ran down from that distended bulge like spidery scrawl on the canvas of the grass behind her. Small wonder the girl could discern what the Hispanic wanted. He did not know much more walking it would take to force her labor. He knew that sort of thing happened. He moved the girl's hand back to the rope, and she looked up at him with some emotion he could not discern. Trust, maybe, but a trust of necessity. She'd follow him so long as he couldn't get away.

"We're going South. Up there," he said, pointing to the caverns and cliffs cut out of the plateau before them. "Where towns are more spread out. People'll be the death of us." He knelt down and looked at her. "The death of us. You understand? Too many is too dead."

"How many do we have?"

Ward stood back up and continued to walk into the hills. They both followed. Around noon the woman had to stop for a break. She cried and held her belly and pushed the food that Dummy offered her away. Ward did not know what to do about it. He might've killed or left her if it wasn't for the girl but he didn't know why this was. Why the girl made a difference. In Ward's mind there was no sense in feeling helpless about a building made of dynamite set afire. Maybe. They waited in the sun for an hour before Ward got up to move them along again. He didn't know what or who was in the mountains and he did not care for them to get the chance to prepare an introduction.

His feet ached by the time they reached the bottom of a cliff where they would stop for the night. He was sure the woman's did too. Dummy's might have but with kids it was hard to tell anything. Ward remembered people telling him how children were

simple creatures, but that was not true at all. Children had all the emotions of an adult and none of the ability to discern which ones they should show to others. A child might act mad if he is sad, and so might a man, but with a child there was a commitment to the lie. The lack of experience obscuring what they truly felt. They ate packaged pastries and did not start a fire, so that when the two fell asleep Ward watched over them for a while in the clear moonlight, back against rock.

The cave he found to dig in at looked made for that purpose. It clambered over the top of a rocky cliff, with a narrow trail leading up the rock towards it. The Hispanic almost fell three or four times going up and Ward decided she would not walk the trail again before delivering. The cave stood by itself on the cliff, with only a small space leading out of it that could be walked upon level with the cave's opening. Rocks led out to either side of the cave, rocks broken off from the cliff right above. They could be climbed upon and used as a natural kind of staircase to reach the forest above. He had Dummy gather up branches from there, big leafy ones from the trees around them. Bushes too, so long as they were all right. He told her to avoid the poisons ivy and oak and described to her the star-shapes of their leaves and the bright colors on their bottom. If she had an allergy to them there would be nothing for it except to itch, and that could cause an infection.

Ward swept the cave himself, first with a knife and a flashlight and then with a broom made from one of the branches Dummy had found. Stooping, he cleared it of what dung and rocks had been scattered about and there was space enough for three grown men to lay down comfortably. It would be tight but it would do.

He took the Hispanic by the shoulder. She looked pale and too skinny to be so pregnant and her skin seemed almost papery. Her eyes wandered, and Ward snapped to get her attention and then pointed towards the cave.

“Duerma,” he said, and then, shaking his head slightly as he searched for the words, “relaje.”

She looked like she understood and got down into the cave. She laid down, her head bare on the dirt. Ward sighed and grabbed a shirt from his bag and pushed it underneath her head. She let it come with little resistance. It occurred to Ward for the first time that he was probably going to have to deal with this woman’s dead body somehow. He almost laughed—as if it were so new a thing to deal with the dead body of someone near him.

Outside of the cave the sun was sliding down and Ward stood up and breathed the air in deep. It didn’t have the taste of dust at all and yet also lacked the cleanness of machine-purified like in a city. It had a taste, like emotions can have a taste, and can stay with you for so long that they stop you from feeling anything else. He knelt down and rubbed his hands in the grass and dirt and let the dry, wet feeling of both slide over his skin. Looking back at the cave, he thought of a messy room that needed cleaning. Any area would be a good one to start at and yet they all depended on another one being done somehow. So it was with organizing anything, even a new life.

Dummy gathered up plenty of brush, so he began with obscuring the cave. They laid bushes all along the path up the cliff, as well as along the front and sides of the opening of the cave. He let the two know that all traveling from the cave would be done over its top and into the forest, except in the case of emergencies. They left a two-foot

strip open at the cave mouth for the Hispanic during the day. Ward took a mental note to find a piece of brush big enough to cover it over when they slept. Sticks of every kind would come in handy. Ward wanted many different kinds. Ones for piercing, for smashing, for building, for whipping and snagging and deadfalls and maybe even logs for the bigger prey. Ward had never been a hunter of animals and did not want to rely on the occasional luck of inexperience.

Trapping would bring them the food they needed. Ward did not know what kind but there were animals that lived in the forest. If there was a forest there were animals, that was almost a certainty. Rabbits, squirrels, wolves, bears, and lions. This deep into a national park they had been given plenty of time to populate as they saw fit. Ward could not even think of the last time he had heard of a national park actually having staff, not that anyone ever talked about that sort of thing that much in the first place. He walked through the forest with Dummy behind him, thoughts drifting to unmade and impossible conversations with the people in his past. There were a lot of things to say.

“You like this?” he asked Dummy. “The woods and all.”

She shrugged at him, looking unsure.

“It’s okay if you don’t,” Ward said. “Just asking.”

“The trees are alright.” She pointed at one near her, with gnarled limbs wrestling each other for light-superiority. “That one’s nice.”

“That’s an oak,” he said. “Most of these are oak and hickory. That’s good wood.”

She didn’t respond to this. Ward thought about being shown how to build a fire when the knowledge inside him would tolerate nothing else. He thought about Nick with the scar down his face from his own brother, and how an inopportune strike at the anvil

could forever ruin any work already done. He thought about how he had never been much good at making anything except excuses for himself. He thought about this and didn't know how to continue with any surety, so he didn't.

Their first food outside of what they had brought in the bags was squirrel, three days in. Ward caught five of them with his traps and they feasted all night. He remembered there was some reason they shouldn't but the lure of fresh meat cooking was too much. They tore into the meat with dirty fingers and stained teeth and real eagerness. Sometime in the middle of the night each of them woke and shat horribly right outside the cave. Ward had dug out a place for bodily needs but it was too far away. The Hispanic moaned and moaned and none of them got any sleep. If Ward had not found water days before she would have dehydrated quickly.

There was a stream about a mile's hike into the forest. They had lots of bottles for it. He and Dummy took the route together and often, until he was sure she could do it by herself forwards and back and in the dark. This took maybe two days. Along the way he watched the forest's landscape for trails, for landmarks, for trees and rocks that stood out from the others. Anything that could lead him back in case of getting lost in the night, or a storm, or any other hundreds of things that might happen. He did not think the two could live long without him. He hoped they couldn't, in an odd way. Ward walked the path during the day continuously when he could think of nothing else to do, taking small variations in the route each time to learn the forest. He moved all day and he slept and he did not think about what he was trying to do. When he tried to sleep his last conscious thoughts always went to Kansas. He missed her and wanted her and knew he was

torturing himself with the thought of her and couldn't stop anyway. She made his sleep fitful. Dummy stayed on the rope behind him and if she let go of its coarse surface it was only to grab his hand or to go relieve herself.

The Hispanic's health had improved somewhat. Her skin had its color back and her eyes seemed active and alert. He and Dummy both tried to keep her laying down. On the fourth night, the temperature dropped and Ward put a fire together to keep them warm. He put a wall of stones around it to keep the wind out, to keep the light in. He watched it burn the entire time and snuffed it out when dawn came, covering it with dirt to hide the smoke. Their safety would not be so easily entrusted to the woods.

Without any proof he did not want to tell the two and worry them. But Ward felt some kind of a presence, something in the distance he could just almost hear. Ward stared into every inch of the forest, looking in the distance for irregularities in color and shape. There was no reason to think they would be safe at any time. Ward doubted he was so smart that he was the only one to think to hide there.

The morning after Ward had built the fire he came back from the stream with two fresh bottles and a hare pulled from one of his traps and saw Dummy sitting in the small clearing building piles with sticks. He had left early in the morning, but not without telling her first. She let him go off by himself. Looking closer at the focus of her activity revealed the tee-pee shape of it. The water sat on the ground when he dropped it down and knelt down next to the girl.

“The bigger sticks go on the bottom,” he said.

Taking a few he showed her. Big, middle, small. It was not so hard. He showed her once and then waited and she showed him and he was satisfied that she could do it on

her own. Ward did not think about this much. He skinned the rabbit while she watched, and laid the pelt out on the rocks over the cave, letting it dry. They needed bigger game. Birds, maybe. While they ate dinner the woman shifted and groaned uncomfortably. Ward moved, to give her room, but she smiled and caught his hand, drawing it to her belly. Not knowing how to react, he let her bring him close. Her hands were rough and slender, like the branches of an olive tree. The skin he touched was hot and rounded, and he was pressed against it for several seconds when he felt a pushing from inside. Ward wondered that night if the baby would ever know who its father was.

The air was wet and cool the next morning and Ward took the trail to the stream with Dummy in tow. When they arrived, he filled up his bottle and hers and started to walk West. In a wide enough circle he'd be able to find some branches on the ground big enough to start something. A kind of foundation, to what would probably end up looking like a small version of a barn. He had not thought to grab an axe or even a hatchet to go with his knife and looking back on it now that had been a poor decision. His brain had been in such a terrible way. If he had seen one he would have picked one up. Dummy pointed out logs to him as they moved and always he had to shake his head. He walked for the whole day and when he was done he had decided he would have to find the tools for the job. The logs he could find that were big enough to build with were all rotted through. And even if they weren't he'd never be able to move them. That night, as had become their custom, they sat around one another in the cave while they supped.

“I'm going to go back to that town,” he announced.

The Hispanic looked to Dummy to gauge her own reactions to what Ward said much of the time. The girl looked up at Ward intently and wrapped her hand in the rope attached to his waist.

“I’m going to go back to that town,” he said again, “and you two both are going to stay here.”

Dummy shook her head, pressing her lips together.

“It’s going to get cold soon. We stay here, we need shelter that isn’t a rock mouth.” He looked at the Hispanic. “She can’t be alone. You gotta help her out how she needs.”

The girl shook her head again and frowned at the ground. “You go, I go.”

“We go, she goes, and not with us. You understand? You got to understand.” If she did, she didn’t show it. “I’ll be gone for four days, I think. Less if I can find a bike.”

Dummy did not seem to hear, shaking her head, staring at the ground, wrapping and pulling at the rope in her hands. The Hispanic looked at him with dark eyes. He saw concern there, but not confusion, and it was not concern for him. Ward sighed and lifted his hand up over Dummy, suspending it, tensed and awkward, not knowing exactly how to apply it. Had he ever hugged Russell? They were so far apart. Eventually his palm landed on her back.

“Four days,” he said. “And then back.” To the Hispanic, “Cuatro dias, y . . . y returna. Y estoy aqui otro vez.”

She nodded at him, a pinch of understanding completing the image of her concern. She reached out to the girl and rubbed her arm, the two adults together trying to create some comfort in their enclosure.

When he left in the morning he had to cut the rope to keep from waking her. Going down to the base of the cliff he carefully moving and replacing all the shrubs and bushes they had set-up. When he was sure they would not hear him, he punched the rockface and gave himself a set of bloody knuckles. As he walked he wondered why it couldn't just be the women you liked that made chests feel so fucked up. Had Elaine made him feel like this? Of course she had.

He had lots of time to think as he walked through the hills and rock and grass. Some of it he devoted to yelling in his mind at imagined versions of the two. Some of it, he thought about Kansas and then about sleeping with Kansas. He wanted to sleep with her again almost more than he could bear. Not just anyone; her. It had to be her. But he had to change the subject of his thoughts every so often, for his own sanity. When he did this, a lot of the time he thought about the Hispanic.

She had to have a story. The epilogue was being written in her belly. She must have dodged the Trail somehow. Maybe she had hidden out somewhere, under the radar of the sweeps that had run across the country. Could be she had a legal brother or husband. Probably though, and Ward had heard of things like this, she served as a domestic servant. He could see it clearly. In a baby-blue outfit with unnecessary frills, showing up every day at five-thirty in the morning. She made the best French toast or cleaned every spot just right or took almost no pay and asked no questions. An irreplaceable commodity. Her employers kept her on without her asking. They made arrangements with the city government. That brother might have already been in New

Mexico, maybe she had some hope for the forced move. Family above all else, except for when you need the money.

She lived in a city, perhaps. Someplace big enough to where she would remain out of sight, someplace where people would be dying left and right and not worried about one more illegal hiding under the curtains of a house she would never afford. Typhoid, consumption, Ward had even heard leprosy had made its way to the Midwest, and she watched it all happening. Could be that the master of the house was the father of the babe. His wife caught a terrible fever after organizing a used-clothing drive for the poor little children in the area lost without their parents. Most of them got mismatched shoes and t-shirts with holes in them that weren't big enough to knock out the diseases carried on the cloth. Within a few weeks the wife was dying on their bed, refusing to go to the doctor. She had always disliked doctors. The husband felt himself getting sick and knew he had the same thing as his wife and now he couldn't even find a doctor, not with the government drafting them up left and right to help with the outbreaks. Going to a hospital would be as good as eating the bloody stool of the poor saps in the projects. His wife had never been able to give him a child and the Hispanic's revelation broke his heart. He sent her away, with some money and their car, maybe, and told her to get out of the city. Go somewhere safe.

The highwaymen picked her up soon after, of course. She has no idea where to go. She thought maybe New Mexico. A long drive but she missed her family so much. The exiles frightened her with the badges on their faces and then they smashed her car into the side of the road and got their hands on her and showed her what she really ought

to be frightened of. And then she laid in a cage like a human wreck until a girl broke her out.

Ward could prove none of this, naturally. Living with her he could learn to speak Spanish or her English and maybe he'd get to fact-check it. But he liked knowing something about her, even if it was false. It made her less strange, somehow, to know she had a history. And it passed the time, besides. The town was a far way to walk.

It was cold and it was mid-afternoon and Ward must have changed his course going back to the town somehow because he stood in front of a house. He looked at it; white boards supporting a black shingle roof that had patches torn out of it on every quarter. Ward examined it for a long time from about a half-mile away, using the frail red plastic binoculars he had picked up off a tiny stand in a gas station. He sat there for an hour, watching, losing the day. Something he couldn't do. There was a shed in the back. A small one, pressed against the house, the kind for outdoor needs.

He flung the shed door open with his knife in his free hand. Nothing scattered or appeared and Ward squinted to see inside. Shelves and a wall layered with jugs of fertilizer, an empty gas can, wires, cords, a blower, stainless steel shears that he grabbed, empty flower pots, several coffee grounds cans, pliers, two hammers, a screwdriver, a shovel that was too rusted else he would have taken it, and no axe.

He took a deep breath, and walked around to the side of the house and kicked in the door. Ward let his eyes adjust to the dark. A fine layer of dust covered the linoleum green table and the red chairs and the tile floor. All the dust Ward had seen of the Earth laid inside and maybe that's all the Earth was, a collection of things upon things waiting

to be covered over. He searched, room by room, an old familiar motioning that he could tell had already been done by someone else. Small bloodstains on the sheets, the curtains, the baby-blue carpet. Room by room, closet by closet, nothing in the house that he could use.

He picked up a locked diary in the master bedroom and read a few entries. Nothing interesting. Dust storms, sex frustration, the crops, the drought, fear. The woman who wrote it watched too much television. Ward sat down on the bed, and then he laid down. How long since, how long until such a feeling again. People had died there and he did not care. It was soft. He pressed up into the pillows and felt himself drifting. All of a sudden it struck him that he had not been comfortable and sober and alone for a long, long time. He drew one of the pillows into his arms, holding it close, thinking of brown blue-specked eyes and matted hair and a van's last ride. They were the only two of the crew still alive, if she still lived. Didn't that mean something, didn't the world have a way of pointing things out. He thought maybe he loved Kansas as much as he could love anyone. He knew he needed her, and wasn't that love? For someone to make you whole. For someone to fix that ache you'd always have if it wasn't for them. That's how he felt with her and he wanted that wholeness back more than anything. The pillow wasn't enough and neither would anything be if it wasn't her.

Lying there his thoughts ran through the same conversations with her, the same possibilities and fantasies that had been present for months and months. But unable to form a new variant, his thoughts focused on other topics. Like how someone could sleep on a bed—not just the why, going into the same house and scenery and objectives day in and out, but *how*. How could you sleep in one place time and time again knowing

someday that if all things went to the best possible plan that bed would hold your dead body? A mattress like a sort of practice coffin, for every night and then for a little while after your pulse finally stops. The Order had no need of beds like this, smaller versions of what Earth already was, and it had no more need for places like this.

When he got up it was in one sliding motion, and he hung his head out the open window. The wind was blowing West. He went to the kitchen. In a cabinet above the nonworking sink he found a box of long thick matches with red magnesium heads. Upstairs the curtains flamed up fast, just like the ones downstairs did, just like the box of matches did when he lit one and stuck it inside and tossed it into a bookcase.

By the time he had made it a half-mile away from the house the flames had begun to lick the grass around it, eating dessert as they downed a full course. It would scar the earth and lead people away. Crossing burnt land meant breathing ash as well as dust, it meant there were people there who were burning, it meant maybe go the other way around. Maybe for some it meant checking on the remains instead of going to the Ozarks, or maybe Ward wanted to watch something become part of the sky again.

The town of California stood just as empty as it had when he had been there days before. Nothing moved except when carried by the wind, and that was just papers and bags and shopping carts. Ward walked in the middle of the street, kicking a stone in front of him to occupy his time. It was nice to walk on a road again. His boots were tough but walking on uneven terrain wore on ankles and calves and thighs and everything connected to them after a time. In his many months cleaning and boozing and whatever

else Ward had become used to the wear, but there was something to be said for easing a way.

The hardware store had many axes and Ward took his time looking at them and considering. It had been a while since colony education but Ward was fairly sure wanted one with a wide, heavy blade, a thick shaft that wouldn't break. They had three colors, red, black, and orange, and Ward chose black. He picked up a saw since he was there anyway, and a hammer. A box of nails. A screwdriver. Measuring tape, a level, scissors, some pencils, two boxes of screws, more nails, duct tape, sandpaper, a draw knife, a small spade, a tarp, a chisel, a hatchet—all things he should have picked up before and would have if he had not been thinking of just getting away. His bag was much heavier when he finished grabbing everything but Ward felt reassured by its weight. A future should not be light.

He went inside a grocery store and walked by the aisle with the liquor. He saw all the bottles, saw how many could so easily be taken and he hated that part of him that made him look. It was such an easy thing to try and forget yourself when you hated your past. But his past had turned into nothing but a series of convenient excuses for the mistakes he wanted to make, and Ward felt nothing but goddamn tired of that. It was like emotions were live beings, and like any living thing, trying to end them had only made every bad feeling latch on to life the harder. There was nothing he could fix; there were people he maybe could help. That was as close to simple as he could get.

Stepping out of the store he saw a rabbit-foot keychain hanging on a stand by the cash register. Black with white mixed in, a silver chain coming off from it. His thumb

dived into its surface. Soft. He grabbed it and thought of Dummy, but only briefly. Something outside was rumbling.

It had been so long, months, since he had heard or seen a moving truck that he did not recognize the noise at first. The hardware store was right next to the big intersection of the town. Highway 50 cut through California running from East to West and going straight into Jefferson City. 87 intersected it, going North-South, but not to any particular big place. He ran away from the road and hid himself in a Dairy Queen on 87. A place with windows that could see out to the intersection from a distance, where he could slide down beneath a hard plastic-covered booth and just barely peek out.

He heard that he was wrong before he saw that he was. Not even the nuclear trucks made that much noise. Whatever it was shook the restaurant around him, sliding cups down from their towers next to the soda dispenser and clattering something in the kitchen. Chairs began to bounce with the vibrations, minutely hopping across the floor in half-formed waltzes with one another. Peeking his head up was unnecessary. The gargantuan black metal thing that tore across the highway and through the too-close buildings could be seen from laying down in the booth. It looked kind of like the front end of a train with tank treads attached, except it had to have been over thirty feet tall. Turrets that looked little but must have easily been the size of children were pointed down and up, spaced evenly and frequently all along the top and sides of it. Ward did not understand how a thing so large could move so quickly, around maybe forty miles an hour. It stayed on the highway but was wide, so wide, and pushed through the sides of nearby buildings like they were paper. And then, heightening Ward's disbelief, two more

followed it. If they continued on their course they would be in Jefferson City by the end of the day.

When they were gone and the furniture no longer shook Ward waited until he himself ceased to vibrate and got to his feet. He didn't even know where to begin with such a thing. What could possibly stand against such a thing? How could you even begin to. The number of men and women that could fit inside would have been great, so long as they were efficient with spacing, and Order requires Utility. He could not prove it was the Order, of course, but it seemed to make sense, the things being unmarked and made so obviously for destruction. He stepped back out onto 87 and walked towards the intersection with 50. On the ground on either side of the highway were new trenches dug there via the weight of the big metal death sleds. Many of the buildings looked like they had been cut in half, and then Ward noticed it looked like the town itself had been. Inside one of the buildings he saw a bike with a basket sitting beside what seemed to be the backdoor. The basket was squat, and small, but if Ward used some duct tape he could make his bag balance on it easily, and so that's what he did.

He started South again but not before stopping into a grocery store to find some small containers of food and a bookstore to find a book on pregnancy.

In the night the weather had turned too cold for Ward to sleep without covering himself with the tarp he picked up. He did not like doing it, because it was a bright, neon blue, but he did not feel as if he had a choice. Anyway it helped to cover the flashlight he used to look at the pregnancy book. With the bike he had made good time and only spent one night on the road, and had only a little ways to travel in the morning. He had wanted

to continue but was tired and needed to go off-road with the bike, which wasn't smart in the dark.

When daylight came there were rocks and trees which he remembered that let him know he was going the right way. That's why he was so very afraid when he saw smoke in the distance. Had he told the girl not to light a fire during the day? Of course he hadn't. It wasn't necessary. He thought she would know. He thought a child would know, he thought a child and a pregnant woman that couldn't speak with each other could take of themselves—no, no, what the fuck had he been thinking.

Arriving at the rock face he leapt off the bike and let it careen harmlessly into the rock. Through his belt he still had his knife and his L-wrench. He scrambled up the cliff, pushing all the brush aside in sudden annoyance at the ironic display of his own caution getting in his way. The path zigzagged up and somewhere above him a thin yellow stream began to pour over the side. Ward pushed himself flat against the cliff. He was maybe fifteen feet from the top, and there was a little overhang blocking his view and the view of him. Whoever it was above him began to whistle a tune while pissing. Ward quickly pulled the tire iron out of his pants. Never did get very good at throwing knives. Just ahead of him the trail up zagged back in the other direction for the final time, and it would give a nice view of the top.

He dashed forward with his head craned backwards, and saw the skinny, denim-jacketed man there making water. He had his eyes closed. Ward reared back and launched the wrench at the man, hitting him in the side of the skull where a bandana had been wrapped to keep sweat from his eyes. It was a solid hit and the man stumbled back, and then forward, and then lost his balance. The blow to his head must have staggered his

consciousness because he did not start to scream until he was almost at the bottom, making it a short exclamation of surprise instead of a fearful cry, followed by a distant clumping sound. Ward drew his knife and quickly got to the top, ready for what might come. Nothing did.

Instead he saw the limp, bloody body of the Hispanic, her head buried in the slim crack between two rocks outside the cave. Shallow cuts and scratches ran up and down her arms and legs. In front of her the fire smoked heavily but only gave off a modicum of heat. He knelt by her and checked the pulse on her wrist. Stillness. But warm, though. Hot, even. Recent. Her thick raven-colored hair covered her face, and he pushed it back to see if her eyes had any life in them. Instead he could barely make her eyes out from the bloody mishmash he revealed. Swallowing, he turned away and saw Dummy huddled in the cave. Shaking. Her face red and swollen from tears and probably knuckles too. He slid over, trying to hold her by the shoulders. She had shut her eyes, hitting him blind, pushing him away. Ward's mouth tightened strangely. She protested wordlessly, grunting and screeching as she used her legs and fists to attack him.

“Girl,” he said sharply, and then when she did not stop, “*Dummy.*”

She opened her eyes slow, trembling as she moved upwards. When she saw it was him she started her offense again, angrier this time. Ward would have let her continue but he needed her to talk.

“How many?” He asked. She kept swinging at him. He took her wrist and pinched the skin there, twisting. There was no time to waste. “How many are there? Was it just the one?”

She frowned at him, and almost looked like she wouldn't answer. Then she shook her head.

“What's with the racket, Scratch?” asked a man from above them. “You start in on that girl?” When no one answered, Ward heard rocks above them clacking against each other. Somebody moving down. “Goddammit, you did, you sumunabitch. Save ol' Keith something, huh? I ain't had no virgin pussy, ever. But I'll take the behind if you already gone.”

Ward drew his finger to his mouth and Dummy nodded. He rolled out of the cave and there was a big man with a thick, brown beard and sunglasses crawling down the rock carefully. Keith. Ward stood up slowly, looking at the red and black nightmare made of the Hispanic's face. He dropped his knife and grabbed the man by the leg, tugging him out. Keith swore and he landing awkwardly on a wide, smooth stone. Ward and the girl liked to sit on the stone. The man's nose spurted blood all over it.

Ward moved in to kick him in the head. The bearded man caught his foot and tugged it out from under him. There was a sudden and complete absence of sound, of breath, of sight as Ward slammed into ground. He heard movement from the man, and rolled to his side just quickly enough to avoid getting a yellow-handled screwdriver in his stomach. Keith stood up completely now. Ward could see how tall he was, how broad of shoulder and chest, made up largely of inked and reddened skin. He lifted up a big boot and kicked at Ward, who tried in turn to repeat the bearded man's defense by grabbing the foot. Keith hopped for a few seconds, moving with Ward's tugs. Ward tugged as hard as he could and the man jumped up and walloped him in the face with his other foot. They both went down to the dirt.

Ward scrambled to his feet. He shook his jaw with his hand, trying to spread the pain around. Tensing, he flung himself fist first into the face of the only just-getting up bearded man. The blow took them both to the ground again. A new bruise earned each time they hit it. Ward stood up and saw the man had gotten back up onto his hands and knees. He flung himself at Keith again, throwing his entire body into the punch and cutting the skin of the man's cheek with his knuckles. They again landed on the hard earth at the top of the cliff.

Breathing hard, his ears buzzing, Ward got up and wavered over to the smoldering remains of the fire and grabbed a thick, red-tinged log. Keith had turned over on his back. His breath came out funny. He spat at Ward, hitting around his boots. The liquid there a splashed traffic of blood and teeth. Ward brought the log up to crush the man's skull. Keith shifted and then stabbed downwards at Ward's foot with the screwdriver in his hands. Ward stumbled backwards to avoid it and dropped the log. The screwdriver busted halfwise on top the hard ground of the cliff.

Ward bent down to pick the log up. He got the air knocked out of him by Keith and dropped the log again. The man drove his shoulder into Ward's midsection. He picked Ward up all the way and slammed him into the hard rock wall. Gasping, Ward hit the man's back with his fists. He would not let go. Ward slipped his arms down and then up around the Keith' neck. He pulled and pulled on the man's throat. Keith tried to push Ward off and Ward pulled harder. Keith tried to throw Ward away and Ward pulled harder. The man was strong but his strength faded with no air to support it. His hands started to slide down from Ward's waist, to his thighs. Ward could feel him trying to

move the hands back up but they wouldn't go. Ward re-squeezed the neck, planted his feet, and wrenched his arms to the side. The man stumbled off-balanced over the cliff.

Keith was not done. He held on to the side, wheezing and grunting. Every kind of life would fight for itself. Ward almost stepped forward to crush his fingers, but then he saw that the trail was not so far beneath the man. It wouldn't take long for him to look down. Ward strode back towards the cave with four long steps, watched the intruder move his head above his shoulders and then above the cliff face. Then Ward ran forward and kicked him in the skull. There was a crunch and a kind of sick gasping and then a few more breaking sounds as the body fell farther and farther, at points twisting from momentum, at points collapsing.

He just breathed for a bit, watching. The exchange had taken all of a minute and a half, and he reflected on the entirety of its events and then he went back to Dummy.

"That all?" he asked her.

She nodded. Ward took a deep breath and then looked at the Hispanic's body. His knife was on the ground right beside her. The whole ordeal could have been much simpler with it, but vengeance ought never be so simple. He did not know why he thought so, why he thought of the act as vengeance for someone he barely knew. But it would have meant less to kill the man quickly, to kill him like someone he barely knew in the dead of night while they thought they were safe.

He looked at his knife at the ground and then at the Hispanic's body. For some reason he kept thinking of the way that he used to eat steaks. His mother said he mutilated them, tearing them not in ideal little squares but strips and strings and all manner of shapes, just to get at what he wanted. It all came out the same, he had told her,

there was no sense in being neat about it. She always wanted everything to be so neat. He looked at the Hispanic and he thought this and he knew that the baby could still be alive. Never before had he opened up a human in such a manner but he supposed the difference was not so great from any other animal provided you had an idea of where everything needed to go.

“Turn around,” he said to Dummy, while going and picking up the knife.

She did not. He shrugged. Warned her, at least. He dragged the Hispanic out from between the rocks, so that the entire body laid out away from the rock and on the dirt. With her legs spread out he knelt on the ground before her and began to work with his knife. Up, down, side-to-side, no need for caution with the dead flesh. Much like cutting steak. Within about two minutes of this he found the baby inside the newly-made cavern of her torso, soaked in red, its head still in the caul. He punctured that and cut and tied off the umbilical, not sure exactly how to do this last part but knowing it needed to be done. He patted its back, first lightly, then a bit harder, trying to find the right pressure. When finally it was able to gasp for air the baby began to cry and Ward took a look and saw that it was a boy.

Dummy asked him throughout the night if she could hold the child and they traded shifts with it. He supposed being dropped could do the boy no more harm than already being alive. The rope had been rewrapped around his waist for her to grab, and one end sat in her lap. When the baby was in her arms Ward closed his eyes but did not sleep, or at least not well. Partly was because the baby kept crying. It would have to be so hungry. He had grabbed some formula the first time they had gone through California

and stirred it now, almost ready to be gulped down. He knew that he could not give the child all of it—it would have to be portioned off until they found more. He had not grabbed much, expecting the Hispanic to do most of the work of feeding the child. As if giving birth would have been simple and risk-free. It was like there was something concreted in him to remain such a damn fool. The small glass containers of food that he actually had grabbed many of would not do for months and months. He knew this from the baby book he found. The three of them had to go.

Before night had fallen he took out the time to get rid of the Hispanic's body. He took this time out but he spent more than allotted just looking at the terrible remains of her body and eventually leaving it in the forest without burying or burning it. She had used a deep purple blanket and he covered the body with that. Otherwise it remained bare under the stars like all the rest of anyone and Ward struggled to find fault with that. Kansas might, but she wasn't there. Ward thought all the time about how Kansas wasn't there.

When not looking at the baby, he watched Dummy and she watched him. She looked like she had something she wanted to say, or wanted him to say. All he could think of was her, holding that child. A child doomed just from being born, just from being conceived. In this world there was no place left for either of them, and trying to make one just seemed selfish on his part.

What would they have done? Made a cabin, started some kind of a family? Perhaps the woman and he would have learned each other's language through the series of whispers they would share in a bed. Ward had not desired the Hispanic but over so much time and with so few options surely such a thing could have been possible. Even

now he considered, if he were to build something with Dummy. Would he hold her there if she wanted to go? Would he raise her until she fell in love with him? He did not want that, not actively, but who could say what lengths biology would go to in such a situation. Ward longed for the simplicity of knowing what needed to be done.

He thought and he thought but all he could come to was that there was only one future to be had for any kind of humanity and that lay far outside of his bounds. But he still had the uniform. Still had some kind of an affiliation. Maybe that could get her in the ships. The baby too. Ward realized all of a sudden the how much he wanted Dummy to live, but also that he did not care where she did it. So long as she was. So long as it wasn't for nothing that she had been stuck with him. He had gotten in the way of her future, anyway, or she had put him in the way. But a child didn't know what was best. If not for killing three crew in a drunken haze, if not for being so wrapped up in himself, she would have been fine. Forgetting the ugliness of this world in exchange for the promise of a new one, waiting in a metal pod to be launched out to the cosmos. He scanned his map and tried to remember the colored lines of months and months before right after he had been re-orphaned by a grenade.

When dawn arrived he shook her lightly to wake her and finally spoke, the tiny boy sleeping in his hands.

"I didn't want any of this to happen," he said, and wondered how he meant it.

"You came back." She shrugged. "I thought you wouldn't."

"I'll keep coming back," he said, and knew exactly how he meant it. "But that doesn't mean . . . that don't mean I couldn't have stopped anything. You know why they came, right?"

“The fire.”

“Right. Where we’re about to be headed we can’t afford that. Nothing like that, understand? You’re not sure, you need to ask. I can survive out here myself. I can show you.”

She nodded after a time, and then it seemed something occurred to her in what he said.

“Where are we going?”

“Well,” he said, not exactly sure how to continue. He thought of Nick, now part of the Midwest landscape. “What do you think about the stars?”

“I think they’re far away.”

He nodded. “Yes they are. And that’s why we’ve got to get going now.”

They went East and North.

At the bottom of the cliff beneath their camp he tossed most of the tools out of the bag he had grabbed besides the ones small enough to use as convenient weapons. For himself he took a thick-headed monkey wrench. The L-wrench got lost somewhere after being used as a missile. He gave Dummy one of the hammers and taught her how to swing it. Not with the arm, with the body. Like you mean it. He had her swing into the rock face to learn what impact felt like, to make sure she would keep her grip. She was a quick learner.

“There’s a lot you’re going to need to know,” he told her as they walked. Wind faintly washed over the ground and the three, just enough to let them feel it. “Tenets.”

“Tenets?”

The baby stayed quiet as they walked, talked, though Ward didn't know if this was from peace or from a lack of sufficient strength to be anything louder. The slept so much. It worried him, babies were supposed to cry.

“Like rules. Ruling ideas, I guess.”

He could see from her face that she didn't understand.

“The Order pervades,” he said, feeling a chill. “For example. That means it's everywhere.”

“Why?”

“Because otherwise it wouldn't work,” he said, shrugging. “Death is the failure to serve Order, that's another. A big one. Believing that one's why so many die.”

“Did you believe in it?”

“I don't know,” Ward said. Then he sighed. “Maybe. Yeah. Maybe still do. Seemed it'd take a hard line to get things working again.”

“So you killed people?”

Ward saw no reason to lie. “Yeah.”

She waited for him. Ward remembered a conversation he had a long time ago with Carter and waiting for the man to reveal himself.

“So many,” he explained, “everywhere. They weren't going to do anything with themselves. Didn't seem to matter.”

“Does it?”

Ward did not know how to answer that. Just by treating a thing as worthless you could make it such, or near enough.

“Anything that cannot thrive deserves death,” he said. “That’s another one. Remember these.”

He told her all of them, and then again in correct order and when they stopped at night they ate and Ward did not know what to do with the baby. He had been crushing down the vitamins from a bottle he had picked up and mixing them with the water he gave it to supplement the small amounts of formula it got. It was no way to keep a baby alive. So tiny. Barely bigger than the size of his hand. His small face a collection of odd lines. He did not know it was possible for someone so small to breath.

After eating they continued towards the town Ward had found on the map on the way to the river. He did not like moving in the dark but the baby did not have much time. Dummy didn’t need to see something else die, not someone that came out of the Hispanic. Ward didn’t need to see someone die either.

“Can I name him?” she asked as they walked.

“Softer,” he whispered back, never liking low visibility. “And sure.”

“Jeremy,” she said. “I like that name. That was my brother’s name. He took care of me good.”

He moved his hand down to hers. “What’s your name?”

“Dummy.”

Her answer so automatic, Ward stopped for a moment, opening his mouth as if to ask her more. She kept walking and tugged his waist along.

When they came to the town it was just nearing sun-up. It was not a large place and it only had one barn. Ward searched through what they encountered first, sparse rows

of unkempt lawns and broken windows and folded-in roofing of old, haggard houses. Most of them lived up to their appearance of having nothing worth holding. Some didn't even have furniture. One did not have anything on the walls. Another one that he came to had a big propane tank in the back of it, most likely empty. The interior looked and sounded quiet but he had Dummy wait outside with the babe regardless. Survivors had ever been good at quiet.

It was a small one-story, the backdoor leading straight into the tiny kitchen and breakfast nook with sunflowery wallpaper. Shadows fell about the walls and carpet of the place from the sparse light of the rising sun with long intermingling fingers of grey and black. Every room was empty of life. In the upstairs he found a room with a skylight and a crib. Some tiny clothes hung in the closet and he grabbed those.

Downstairs in its pantry he found containers of formula, hardly believing his luck. In the cabinets above the sink in the kitchen he found specially designed bottles with the mixer built in for ease of stirring. Dummy held the baby and before too long he had a bottle ready. The babe sucked at it, his lips at first blind and curious, and then eager, swallowing quickly.

They sat on the kitchen floor and watched the baby feed together. The tiles of the ground were soiled linoleum and soaked in rather than reflected what little light managed to squeeze in through the windows. In both of his arms he held the child, Dummy leaning into him to watch. He realized that he only needed his chest and one of his arms to steady Jeremy and so he shifted and put his closest arm to the girl up above her, on the edge of a slightly opened cabinet door. She moved backwards into the door almost right away and shut it, so that his arm stayed above her only because he was still pressing it into the

wood. It slid down to her shoulders slowly, uneasily, like he was trying to feed a strange dog.

He thought of what they would need. Transportation for one, a stroller or basket for the boy if nothing else. After about five minutes the child had gone through half the bottle. He let Dummy hold him, and then stood up to look around the house for something he could use. A gun, maybe. When he got to the window he saw lights flashing down the road and he hit the floor. His hands and feet dug into the carpet as he scrambled back to Dummy and told her to be quiet. He must have startled her, because she dropped the glass bottle and it shattered at her feet. The baby started to cry. The strangers could have guns. He could get shot in the head. The last ones wanted to rape Dummy.

Ward grabbed Jeremy and tried to shush him but he kept going, and so he put his hand over the boy's mouth. Outside he could hear a car stopping and the crunch of boots on gravel and the slam of car doors. Without thinking he pulled the knife out of his belt and held it to the baby's throat. The blade was wider than the neck by several inches. Dummy clinched his arm.

"I don't want you to," she whispered.

Ward looked at the shadowy visage of himself in the linoleum floor, his emotions only just catching up with the severe logic of the situation. He closed his eyes and breathed in deep. The knife fit back in its sheath easy. The baby kept wailing, and Ward held him to his chest tight. It muffled the sound. Beams of light shone in through the windows of the house where the three of them sat huddled against a kitchen counter.

"Nothing," said one. "You hearing things again, Danno."

“Can’t hardly help it,” said another. “So damn hungry for some real meat. Fucking cult took the whole damn supply.”

“Speaking of supply,” the first said, “what do you think they got in there?”

They walked around for a few more seconds, circling and looking in, seeing nothing. Ward held the baby so tight. Had to be quiet. Had to be still. No telling if they had guns, but he didn’t want to find out. When the backdoor to the house was opened he could feel his heart bashing against his chest, and wondered if it was hurting the baby. Ward could see them, their reflections on a window above them. Their lights zoomed in on the pantry in the corner, and a short, skinny bald man with a long dark handlebar mustache opened it up.

“Bingola,” he cried out. “We got booze, buddy. Five bottles of wine, here!”

“Well grab it and let’s go. Lot more houses to check.”

The skinny man did so and quickly. Ward hardly breathed the entire time, he did not feel as if it was possible. Eventually their crunches became distant and he heard again the slamming of car doors. The car started up and slowly moved away. He brought the baby off from his chest. Jeremy’s head fell limply to the side. Ward shook him lightly and he did not respond. He laid him down on the ground and started to breath into his mouth and press lightly into his chest. Five minutes of this and no response. Dummy didn’t say a word and neither did he and the two of them just sat there looking at the corpse, new in so many different ways. Never had a child’s life been taken by him, and even if everyone was in the process of becoming someone who they weren’t there were still some kinds of people that all kinds of people had no business being. Maybe it was just another drop in the bucket or maybe it was the last straw off of a broom that had

never been able to clean a damn thing but either way Ward could not stand another minute of having killed someone on accident. He got up and kicked out the door of the house and ran to the road, knife in one hand and wrench in the other.

Their car was not far off, sitting in the street in front of a two-story green-roofed home. He ran close to the ground and crept up behind it. No one inside. Two shadows moved around the corner of the building in front. Ward examined the car's position—the front end of it was adjacent to the far side of the house, so that all of the building stretched out before the car. The automobile was tall enough to hide a crouched person.

He knelt down next to the wheel close to the door, hiding his feet. When the two men came back they did not speak, all heavy breaths and footsteps. Ward put his knife in its sheath in his belt and held the monkey wrench with both hands. The skinny one, the one the he had seen before, crossed in front of him. Ward rocketed up, taking half of the man's jaw off in a spray of blood and bone with the wrench. He cried out, a sound like a stopped-up faucet, and fell to the ground. Ward leapt on top of the car and with his knife drawn.

The other man was burly, unshaven, with a lazy eye and a necklace of bones around his neck. He pulled out a gun. It fired off to the side and shot through a house when Ward leapt on him. His knees landed first, on the burly man's torso, and slammed him down. Ward sunk his knife his chest through the top of the man's shoulders, and then did it a few more times just to make sure.

Breathing heavily atop the man, he could hear the sloppy gasps of the other one who's face he had broken. Ward looked closely at the necklace on the bloody chest beneath him and saw that the bones there were long and slender, like those of a finger.

Fingers like his, except maybe with a different set of chromosomes or years behind them. He wondered how the Order had let these men slide for so long. He stood up and unstuck his knife from the torso and then walked over and re-stuck it in the broken faced man, then cleaned it off on the lawn of the house.

Dummy stood a little ways behind him. He looked at her and could see that she had seen it all. The baby was in her hands, and he took it back from her. Back inside the house where Jeremy had died Ward found his pack and the matches inside of it, and wrapped the child in a linen from a closet and then set the curtains of the house on fire. Why not. And outside he guided Dummy back to the car of the might-have-been cannibals, and took the black-handled revolver off the one that he had jumped on. The car started after a few tries and they left the fire burning behind them.

For whatever reason, perhaps premonition, she did not want to show Ward her finger. He saw it anyway, of course; two people, even ones so far apart in age, could not live as close as they did and have many secrets, but even so she kept it from him for at least five days or so. Long enough for it to turn black and gooey and pus-filled and absolutely frightening. But he noticed in hindsight how she had made every effort to keep it out of sight. Moving her hand behind herself, keeping her body faced to the side. What actually made him notice something was wrong was of course the spread of the infection, the results of such a thing.

One morning he woke from the backseat of the car, parked a half-mile off the road behind a brush-and-vine swamped billboard, to see Dummy drenched and shivering in the front. Her hair had turned dark from the sweat coming out of her body and so had

the cloth seat underneath her. When Ward took her hand then, saw the terrible bloat of her ring finger, she did not even have the wherewithal to protest. He shifted her around so that her head stayed in his lap while he drove. The seatbelt went across her waist and with her lying down as she did he could hold on to her shoulder and head just in case of a collision.

At around four in the afternoon they pulled into a Palm Motel. There were three other cars in the lot but they had all been smashed or looted of essentials. He picked her up out of the car, her body in his arms a wet bag of sticks, then kicked open the door of a room and sat Dummy down on the single bed. He lifted the screen up off its stand and put it on the ground. Then he pulled the stand up in front of the girl. Her eyes were open but lidded heavily and she watched him move around the room. From his pack he pulled a length of rope, grabbed her hand, and strapped her to the table at her wrist. He wished he had a rubber band but he managed to make the thin thread of a different rope work, tying it close to her knuckle. She squirmed already, though he tried to be gentle about it, but once he pulled out his knife and put a flame from a lighter to the blade she twisted and shifted uncontrollably though she could not get free.

“No, Ward,” she said.

“It’ll take your whole hand,” he said. “It’s got to go.”

“No,” she said again, tears in her eyes, “I don’t want you to.”

Ward swallowed a sigh and held her palm against the table with one heavy hand. He looked at the little finger carefully. Swollen and juicy, on its way to seeming a burnt sausage. She had so many other scrapes and scratches from the Ozarks, but of course it was the one on the finger that got infected. They had both been touching so many things.

He would have to cut it right at the first bone past the knuckle. Give her a little left to work with, maybe. It had to be done. Kansas would approve.

Maybe he helped the girl out of a need for validation. That explained the most of his past. What is any person seeking other than that, and the only sure way to ever go about that has been the earning of affection. To be worth something in somebody else's eyes.

He handed her a piece of plastic to bite on. She screamed at him through it when he started. Begged him to stop with wild green eyes. He wanted to do it quick, cut her and be done, but that would make it harder to sew up, make it harder for her. He could and would and did take what she screamed at him. He'd take whatever she had if it helped her out. Of what he had seen Ward knew life's natural function was to return all beings to death and to do so however it could. Bullets, bottles, disease, heartache. Every manner an infection by a different name, or an injection, a way to get at the death scratching away at your heart and set it loose. Life could come at you as hard as it wanted and always it would but nothing was quite so hard as just letting it. After a while she ran out of the strength to protest and just laid there shaking every once in a while.

He had needle and thread already ready. It was messy work. Maybe in a better surgeon's hands it would've taken less stitches. Or more. He was not sure of how that worked. Nonetheless when it was finished no more blood came out and that satisfied him. He laid Dummy down to rest, already mostly unconscious, then tossed the leftover finger into the wastebasket and dropped that into another room across the way—it stank.

Behind the front desk in the lobby there was a first-aid kit hanging on the wall. Inside there was gauze that he had not thought to pick up in the town of California and

antibiotic cream that had run out from him using it on himself. Maybe it would help. Outside the sky had become dark and he walked around the property a bit. Dead husks of palm trees right outside every door to every room, the motel forming a square around the pool in the middle. He stopped by the ding-heavy black Lincoln taken from the huesos and opened the glove compartment. The men had left him with a long, heavy pair of black binoculars and, what Ward came for, a melty three-fourths of a chocolate bar that he broke at the half mark. He threw away the bit that had been touched by whichever man. Returning to the room he used both gauze and cream on the girl and then laid down next to her and slept until morning. When he woke she had curled into the inside of his arm and he did not move for fear of waking her as well.

They laid like that for another few hours. When she stirred he took the chocolate and held it around her nose and mouth. She took a small bite and that was all and fell asleep again. It went on like this and before midnight that day her fever had begun to peak. He left her by herself for ten minutes to go search out some water—there were five bottles under a plastic sheet on the shelf in the office, next to a roll of paper towels that he also grabbed—and when he got back she was lying halfway off the bed. When he returned her to the mattress he took a bunch of paper towels and poured a bottle into them and let the soaked cloth rest against her hot skin.

She moved her legs against each other, her knees knocking slightly, and Ward understood why she had been trying to get up. He looked in the room and there was nothing. He stepped outside and looked around and went up to one of the abandoned cars and kicked off a hubcap and brought it back and stuffed the bottom with paper towels and slid it under her. She still had her pants on and so he helped her off with those but not

before laying a cloth over the girl. There was something about the intimacy of naked skin, something in children reserved for family alone that he did not want to counter.

Her fever peaked during the middle of the night. Ward had read from time to time that people suffered from delirium in the heat of themselves but the girl did not. Either she was too strong even though so young or perhaps she was not so immune and the horrors devised by her own mind could not compete with the ones already delivered unto her by her surroundings. In any case she shifted and turned often but did not seem afraid. Any time she woke and saw her finger gone once again Ward was there to hold her until she calmed. At maybe dawn she began to feel cool again.

When she woke early in the afternoon she was weak but wanted to look around.

“I’ve never been to a hotel before,” she said.

Ward almost explained to her that it was a motel, but realized he didn’t know exactly what the difference was and didn’t want to deal with the question. He walked with her and they went from room to room. She got bored with that soon, having no interest in the numerous replications of the same living space, and asked to go into the pool. Ward doubted it would be much good for her stitches but it was exactly because of the stitches that he let her do it. He had her wear a woman’s swimsuit that he found in the pool closet, laying on top of a couple of brooms and a container of chlorine. It did not fit well but he did not think they could afford to have wet clothes at the moment.

Looking at the water he saw nothing like algae that would give him pause. The motel was far away enough from the dust that the water was fairly clear. There were a few leaves from the palms in it but that was all. All the same, first he triple-wrapped her

gauzed nub in paper-towels, then re-wrapped gauze over that, and then an Ace bandage across that. Then he grabbed a plastic trash bag and taped it over her entire arm. She gave the whole apparatus a disdainful look.

“Now you can swim as much as you want,” he said. “Just let me know if you get too tired, or feel your finger getting wet.”

“What finger?”

“You know what I mean. I don’t want to re-stitch it.”

She nodded turned and looked at the pool. Toeing the liquid, she peered inside, as if suddenly rethinking her decision to enter. She looked and then relooked at all the protection on her arm. Ward was having none of it and picked her up and tossed her in. Not knowing if she could swim or not, he made sure it was in the shallower end. She squealed and splashed and looked at him so angrily that he laughed. Then she laughed with him, moving about in the water. It felt almost obscene to enjoy something, to enjoy anything, and he had to sit down on one of the plastic-stripped poolside chairs just to handle it, just to see her continue to splash and play.

They stayed through that night and relaxed and enjoyed. Ward had found a pack of cards in the parking lot and he taught her how to play Go Fish. It was the only game he could remember all the rules of besides War, and he didn’t know how he felt about playing that. In the morning he got up before her, putting their things in the car, and wondered if he needed to apologize. He knew that he probably should, not because he actually had something to apologize for but that a child might think so, and he wanted her on his side. He needed at least that much. Thinking about it, he put his hands in the

pocket of his pants and found the rabbit's foot there from the day he saw those death sleds. He dangled it in front of his face, considering.

“What's that?” Dummy asked him, waking up and sitting back on her palms.

“Rabbit's foot. Limb for a limb,” he said, handing the soft patch of fur to her. “It's supposed to be good luck.”

“There is no luck or fate, only consequences,” she said, but grabbed it anyway.

Ward almost started to repeat her before he stopped himself. It was good that she had remembered. It would make it easier for her. She seemed like a smart kid. For a moment he wanted to ask her what subjects she had been good at in school but it seemed that would go over about as well as her asking him about either of his parents. She stroked the fur of the trinket with her thumb like he thought she might, and he liked that.

He had some hard bread and dried fruit in his pack. They broke their fast over that before getting into the car. He picked up a lot of pillows and stuffed them into the passenger seat, so that she could have a soft bed for a little while longer. So that she would want to sit beside him as he drove. It took a few tries for the car to kick over but soon they were rolling down Highway 54 at about fifty miles an hour. The vehicle could have gone faster but he didn't know if he'd find gas anywhere. He could have gone faster but he wanted plenty of time to swerve in case there was anything on the road. Nothing around the highway was depressed by tank treads but from studying his map Ward knew that would change up ahead. 54 ran straight into Jefferson City. It had been more than a week since he had seen those sleds. He imagined they worked fairly fast but did not want to find out if he was wrong. The scenery around them looked broken regardless. Hills stripped of trees and growth surrounding junk-littered roads and exits—exits sometimes

so filled with debris and parts and turned over wood and stone, so clogged with elements of the past that they could not be used.

About ten minutes out of Jeff City he turned South onto Route B, then West onto Route M, then onto Highway 50. It would take him straight to 44 which would go directly into St. Louis. He didn't need to see the state capital to know there was nothing left there. The Order had reserves and reserves of power waiting to be spent. The buildings that had not been bulldozed by the sleds would have been bombed into shells of themselves. Buildings that had been in place for years and years would be scattered into every street and avenue like so much confetti. Probably the people would be too. Their history, their catalogues of accomplishments.

Ward drove, mind drifting even though his eyes were fixed on the road. All the events that had come to pass were all the events that had been possible to come to pass. Destiny and hope, as forces of optimism, had by definition been in opposition since they were conceived. But neither had a place in a world where the stage for the future was never set. The execution of all things possible had left the world diseased, desolate, and aching for rebirth. And the Order would provide it. Driving along the road through husk after husk of dead towns, many of them annihilated years and years before the Order even existed through some form of poverty or another, he found himself wishing he could wear his tough brown and black uniform for more than just protection.

Dummy slept in the reclined passenger seat beside him, surrounded by pillows. He looked at her in between staying sentry on the road and wondered what new places she would see.

As they neared St. Louis a great cloud of dust spanning the entire horizon had gathered behind them and started its pursuit. Ward tried to keep ahead of it but not by too much. Just enough so that he could still see. Never would he believe in providence or anything of the sort but it seemed to him odd that a nature-made cloak to hide behind had been delivered to them as they closed in on the city.

Probably it was still a few months from launch day but Ward knew the city ahead was home for a number of ships and so probably an even larger number of children. There were launch centers all across the continent but the only one he knew of for sure that was close was coming up ahead of them. Ward scratched the beard at his throat. It had gotten thick and curly and prone to trapping in dirty bits of the world around him. He thought probably the last time he shaved had been in Kansas. Wichita, that was it. When he still had Rebel. When he had walked him all around the bunker, and discovered the cavernous construction of rows and rows and hundreds and thousands of people in metal pods, sedated and waiting.

His thoughts lingered on the dog for a few moments but he was taken from them when he saw a craft passing over the forward horizon. An enormous blue and white thing, looking from a distance like some strange cross between a jet and a Christmas tree. The front of it was narrow and T-shaped, but the back was conical. Ward thought the cone was just a giant engine, but he could see those clearly on the wings. His foot relaxed off the pedal and he looked closer. It began to make sense. The back cone of it seemed made up entirely by white orbs that reflected the light of the sun in a million directions off the incoming dust. Ward was a bit puzzled until he saw it take a long bank to the right and the orbs began to drop.

Ward stopped the car entirely, not knowing how big their explosion would be. Dust began to run past them in the car, and the sky browned overhead. Dummy woke up and he pointed out the window at the legion of orbs dropping to the ground. But no explosion came, or if it did, not high enough for him to see any flames. He wondered about that. Probably something the Order dropped from the sky was meant for killing. Maybe for knocking people out. It was hard to say. If it didn't explode he didn't want to know how it would work—at least with explosions it was easy to tell where they had landed, what had been and would be affected. Fire was easy to move around and easier to spot.

Such a ship, with such an enormous back end, had to be incredibly vulnerable to anti-air fire. But maybe they didn't care if the orbs broke easy and early. Probably whatever was inside was heavier than air. If it sank to the Earth instead of getting released from ground level, it made no difference. He turned off the road onto Highway 30.

“Are we going straight into the city?” she asked him.

“Not really. More to the South.”

“You told me more people around means the closer we get to dying.”

“Yup.”

“Aren't there lots of people around that city?”

“I think the population was in the few millions at some point or another.”

“But they can't all be dead.”

Something Ward considered here and there. He did not know to a certainty what had been dropped in those orbs, but he could take one or two guesses. Recruiters had

been set up in every major and minor city back when he was still cleaning, promising warm beds and food to any that would come with them. With all the problems of the land homelessness was a severe issue, especially for children. He supposed those young ones that decided not to take advantage of the Order's offers were either seen as lost causes, too set on growing up and eventually taking control in the remains of the broken world, or just not needed after so many had already been harvested for the Order's purpose. He only really knew so much.

"Maybe not yet." He took a breath.

"So they're all dead?"

"Or as good as that."

"That's terrible."

"Anything that cannot thrive deserves death."

She did not repeat him, looking displeased.

"Did you know any of them that died?" he asked her, and then when she shook her head, "then what do you care?"

She stayed quiet for a long while, scrunching her face up. Then she said, "If we only cared about the people we knew then the world would be horrible."

"It is horrible. To be a reflection of it is our only means of survival."

"You don't even know my name," she said. "Do you care about me?"

Ward looked at her. "What is your name?"

But she wouldn't look at him anymore and he needed to keep his attention on the road.

By the end of the day he had found a hill with more or less the positioning that he wanted, between the intersections of 30 with State Highway MM, and MM with Highway 21. The binoculars he had found in the glove compartment while at the motel gave him a fine view of either intersection, each corralled by the husks of gas stations and convenience marts that had nothing in them but the bones of shelves and counters and various pieces of debris fleshing them out. The binoculars had powerful lenses and he had to set them on a rock and lay down in order to keep them steady. He looked from one intersection to the other, waiting. Dummy sat behind him, toying with her rabbit's foot, playing lookout, looking with her hand over her eyes in whatever direction Ward wasn't. He knew the bunker was someplace close but to say where exactly was beyond him, and he did not want to stumble upon such a thing blind.

By nighttime they had seen nothing and clouds covered over the moon, so he stopped looking with the binoculars. In the dark, with enough elevation, a man could see lights for miles and miles, lights like the kind you'd need to drive in the dark. He and Dummy sat down, facing opposite directions and pressing each other's backs against one another.

"Where will we go?" she asked him quietly.

"I told you."

"After that. In the ships."

"I told you that too."

"But space is big, right?"

"Biggest thing there is."

Or at least the biggest physical thing. But emotions were too new for a child to contemplate that, or maybe Ward just didn't want her to start. If there was any justice they were still all separate for her, a distinct place in her mind for each one before getting caught up in the blender of the world. But he doubted it.

"So how will they know where to go?"

"I guess it takes a lot of careful calculation and even more patience."

She sniffed. "What if we don't end up anywhere? What if we just get stuck in space forever?"

"What if you died in the night without waking up?"

"In my sleep?"

"Yeah."

"I guess I wouldn't know the difference."

"There you go. Fear of change is fear of Order is death."

She repeated him. He always liked it when she did.

He did not stay awake much past midnight, not seeing the point. Supposing he saw something close to dawn, then he would have to be awake for a day and a half. Once he located the shelter he did not want to have to wait long before going inside. Delaying invited death. When he woke, he shook Dummy's small frame to get her up as well. They ate jerky and bread and drank some water and returned to watching.

A plan was nothing, no matter how intelligently conceived, without the diligence to carry it out in exactitude. The Order taught him this, implicit in their explicit thoroughness. So Ward waited. He could be as patient as need be. He waited throughout the day, the sun wailing on his neck and face, and finally he saw what he had been

looking for. Coming down 21 was a small collection of automobiles—two motorcycles, a sedan, and a jeep with no top to it. He adjusted his binoculars and followed the convoy as it rushed across the highway and then took a sharp turn to the West a bit past the intersection, away from him.

He watched the jeep especially closely, because what he thought he saw, what had only flitted across his range of vision from such a distance, was a mess of dark hair flying back behind a form shrouded in a deep brown cloak. He dropped the binoculars, snatched Dummy up and shoved her into the car. The distantly old moving parts cranked and screamed and Ward inwardly begged for it to start just once more and he'd never bother it again. In fact he'd do it the same favor he did to everything else if that's what it took, he'd just let it die. He turned the key again and again and finally it turned over and he started down the road.

After following them for a little over two miles in the middle of the countryside he found he could discern their trail, and the trail that others had created, from the paths of broken and bent grass treaded all the way from the highway. With the field so naturally grown, so much of it untouched for years by the hands of man, it would have been near impossible to see without passing by it exactly at the right moment or following those that had been there before him. The stumps of trees laid all around the ground as dwarfed monuments to nature.

Ward stopped the car, leaving it on—he couldn't take a chance on it not starting—and then he stepped outside and beckoned for Dummy to do the same. They walked around to the back of the car and Ward put a hand on the trunk, thinking. He had

little faith in his ability to talk his way in, and far too much in the Order's ability to know who he was. And if they knew him, they would kill him. But he didn't trust Dummy, was the thing. Not enough. Not to stay put if she heard sounds of fighting, not to stay unshot-in-the-head. He'd tell her to stay and she'd argue with him and he'd just end up doing what he thought of in the first place.

He went back to where the driver's side door was still open and popped the trunk. Inside it sat their bag with almost all their belongings. Ward still had on him his knife and wrench, the revolver with its four bullets. He picked her up and set her inside. Immediately she tried to get out, but he held her fast.

"You never given me reason to doubt your worth, girl." He looked straight in her eyes. The greenness there always struck him. "Not once. But this is my time, and mine alone."

He pushed her in then and laid her down, and she let him. From the bag he took some rope and wrapped it around one hook inside the trunk to another, back and forth a dozen times. The several pillows they took from the motel he grabbed from the cab in order to pad her. She fit snug.

"There's going to be a bump. Once it's over, feel free to get out of the rope. Until then, this should help keep you safe. That's all. I promise."

"Will you let me out?"

"If I don't," Ward said, "someone else will. And you'll do as they say."

"No I won't. I won't at all. I—"

"You are very young, girl. Never squander potential."

She started to repeat him but before half the words were out of her mouth he had slammed the completely trunk shut. With his wrench pulled out of his belt and into his hands he shattered the car's windshield, and carefully pulled the fractured glass sheet onto the grass. No sense in keeping it on the car, not with what he had in mind. Not if the bunker he destined after was anything like the other two he had visited. He put the car in gear quick, ready to go. Ready to not think about whether he would see the girl again. Ready not to wonder if she was really the reason he was so quick to be inside. Flashes of a lifetime ago inside of a van ran behind his eyes.

The bunker's entrance sloped downwards into the ground for about thirty feet. There was a raised two-foot high concrete barrier at the bottom. Beyond that were six armed blue and white guards in front of it—more than he expected, they must have been switching shifts right then. Probably they were all dealing with more than they expected. At ground level in front of the entrance there was a long enough stretch of even land that Ward got the car up to sixty miles an hour. It slowed somewhat when he took his foot off the pedal—the battered machinery powering the car sounding almost relaxed—and hopped his feet up onto the tops of the front seats, knife and wrench in hand, balancing horizontal by using his forearms on the steering wheel. They started firing at the car only a dozen yards away and that was not nearly enough time. The car crashed into the raised barrier hard enough to send him flying through the windshield-hole and into the center-most guard's chest. It gave way like bad shelving. The two of them slid across the concrete, Ward on top of him, for a good fifteen feet. If the force of the impact didn't kill the guard then Ward's knife did.

For a moment after the din of the crash there was stunned silence. Immediately to his left there was a dreadlocked black kid in blue and white garb, looking in confused wonder at the wildy-bearded man in crew colors. Ward unstuck his knife from the man he landed into and shoved it into the side of the kid's neck. He did not die right away, his hands coming up to Ward's knife-arm and clutching at it, trying and failing to bring it down. The guards began to shout and raise their guns. He kept his hand on the knife in the one's throat, and kept the body attached to the knife in front of his own. Then he hurled his wrench at one guard, catching her square in the neck and crushing her larynx.

Three seconds after the car crashed the guards began to fire. Ward pressed the body of the knifed man forward and let his back catch the bullets. They all wore the same tough material; even so it was not long before the light completely left the guard's eyes. He drew his revolver and shot one in the chest twice and another in the head. They both fell but only the one shot in the head was dead. His last shot at the remaining woman failed him and ricocheted off the stone walls.

Ward dropped the revolver and held the dead guard at the waist. He leant into him and the two touched heads. Step by step he lifted the dreadlocked kid and pushed forward to the last standing; a woman with short-cropped red hair. She fired and fired. Ward could feel each shot strike the dead kid's back like a hammer blow to his arms. At some point she was going to start firing at his feet. When he got close enough, Ward spun the body shield and ripped his knife out of its neck. The body pirouetted lifelessly, a long bloody arc spraying out from it and into the woman's eyes. Ward had his knife in her gut before she was able to fire again.

He turned just in time to see the one he had hit in the chest reaching for his gun. A kick to the face and he was out; a stomp at the neck and he was dead. Ward picked up the automatic rifle the man had gone after, one much the same as he had once had, and shot the woman whose throat he had crushed with the wrench. No sense in suffering. Ward looked up at the wall and saw a small white cylinder whirring and whining in his direction. An alarm began to sound.

In front of him was a long, blue hallway, branching out into others perhaps just as long or longer. Nothing was marked, nothing on the walls except picture after picture of the stars. The Order taught you how much you needed to know. If you weren't of a rank to get to someplace then they simply didn't tell you the place existed. He hustled down the corridor to the first intersection, opening up to the right. There were footsteps. Coming closer, he flipped the rifle he had so that it rested on his right hand, closest to the intersection, and reared back. There was no real getting a glimpse of the man's face, if it was a man at all, just a quick sight of something Ward pummeled into with the butt of the gun. The person clattered to the ground. Ward let the gun's momentum carry itself forward so that it flipped over with the butt of it resting on his shoulder and then crouched down and leaned into the intersection. He saw legs, fired at them, hit them. Two women skidded down in front of him, the one whose face he had bashed still laid moaning right beside them. No one else came down the way and so he fired at all three until they stopped moving.

Bullets began to rain down the main corridor, coming from far down it where he could not see. They cracked into the stone all around him and scattered sharp bits of slate into his face. Firing blind, he tucked into the right turn of the intersection and hoped that

he had cleared out everyone waiting there. When the rock blinked out of his eyes, he saw that he had not.

Crouched right beside him in a blue and white uniform was a blue-eyed kid that barely looked old enough to grow a beard. His rifle was pointed right at Ward, though it shook wildly, and his free hand had grabbed Ward's right arm, pinning it against the wall with all the strength of a strung-out teenager. They looked at each other, breathing for a few moments, shots still firing down the corridor beside them.

Ward shoved his rifle forward, hitting the kid in the face with the barrel and trying to trap his gun against the wall. The kid fired anyway, and Ward felt something hot and hard and horrible bang through his arm. He shoved his head into the kid's, standing up with the blow like the unloading a spring. The kid fell back, unconscious and bloody. No more bullets fired down the hallway but Ward imagined it would not be long. He looked at the kid's face, the mashed nose there a can of red paint that someone caved in. A bullet or two could take care of what was left. They seemed of a similar size. Ward remembered in Texas there had been a bathroom nearby and searched it out to go and change.

It did not seem prudent to wait around and see for himself if his ploy worked but after maybe ten minutes the alarm ceased to sound. It probably helped that he began to keep an eye on the cameras, passing under them where he could, dodging their line of sight even with the blue and white on. He had never seen a regular with a beard and didn't know if it was allowed. By now he should have gotten the girl out of the car. Anyone could have found her inside. He did not know what he was looking for—he knew exactly who he was looking for. Unassisted his arm would hang limp at his side, and

assisted or not it felt afire. The bullet had passed straight through the thick outside portion of his deltoid, not hitting any bones but the knowledge of that did not make it hurt any less. The wound bled down his new uniform and he could feel it gather around his waist where the fabric clung to his body and began to drip around his arm by passing through the tunnel of his sleeve. He kept the arm close to his torso, holding it there most the time.

Dummy was a resourceful child and a stubborn one and he could not believe she would stay inside the trunk long. The members of the Order in the bunker would just take her to the pods. Knowing this made him avoid any contact with them, to avoid any more bloodshed. There did not seem to be so many around, though he did not know why. Perhaps they were mostly all on assignment in the city nearby. Dodging down corridors and into random doors to avoid these Order members let Ward find a supply closet where he found paper towels to clean his wound and then a collection of short white square cloths to tie a bandage together, running under his armpit and over his shoulder.

He would have been lying if he said his thoughts were concerned wholly with the girl, or even halfway. Somewhere there was Kansas. Somewhere nearby. He went room by room. Nearly all of them were empty of people. His shoulder ached with every step he took. Pain made a man's body examine each sensation under a microscope. But he could handle the hurt, could manage it so long as he could end the one in his chest.

Right past the tall, wide entrance of the last room he entered there were a large number of stacked blue plastic crates. Entering into the room cautiously, looking around, he saw it was in the same kind of enormous hanger of pods and their hosts that he had seen in Wichita. And Kansas was there. But not alone. If it weren't for the eight armed brown-and-black crewmembers standing in front of her he would have not been able to

keep himself away. He could not see her entirely, but recognized her cloak, her hair. Her voice most of all.

“You have all done well,” she said. “I would say better than expected, but that would just be flattery. It was exactly as expected. Exactly what was needed. We are on the cusp of something humanity has not been given for nearly three centuries. An entirely fresh start for a people on new land. A civilization planned from the bottom up. We must not fail.”

All of them stood silent before her. Ward recognized the look in their eyes, the reverence. He had held it once too. But it was impossible to revere someone you felt you knew, understood, even if it only been for a night.

“They will talk about it someday,” Kansas said, pacing back and forth in front of them. “Our work. They’ll never know the particulars, of course. But their school teachers will tell them how we ruined our home planet and robbed it of its virtues. And that because of these sins a great cleansing had to pass. And if society falls such a way again, then the cleansing will return. Order must and will be kept to remain vigilant and upstanding. This is our success. The salvation of the human race, of Order. The seed of a planet to be planted deep into the soil of the universe.

“Humankind cannot prevail, not in the normal sense. This is no game to win. Truly prevailing means persistence, and that is the highest imperative of all. And to persist, we must have an absolute clean slate of all the ills which have befallen our race. We must be untainted. Anything that cannot thrive deserves death.”

They all repeated her. Ward found himself whispering it.

“And so, in a very literal sense, you all must be cleansed now. A sanitation spray to make sure you bring nothing unwanted to your new homes.”

“You’re not coming with us?” One of them asked.

Ward could not see from the heads in front of her but imagined that she smiled.

“My work here is not done quite yet. Step inside.”

She gestured to her right, where there was a large room with a window so that anyone outside could look in. Ward did, and watched as they filed in, watched as Kansas pressed the button next to the glass, watched as all the crew dressed in brown and black fell to the ground with contented smiles on their faces. He watched Kansas lean forward against the glass as if a great weight had been pressed upon her, watched her body shudder up and down, watched her swear and punch the wall. Someone obviously feeling protected by the bounds of solitude.

“*Fucking* Ward.” He could hear a sob in her voice.

He stood up and made himself easy to see. “What?”

She turned and saw him, saw him seeing her. The gun in her hands clattered to the floor. Before he knew what was happening she was on him, arms around him, his gun dropped to the floor like hers, her tongue was moving against his and they were kissing like teenagers behind a school. The tears on her face were hot and wet, just like her mouth. After a long while it ended.

“How did you find me?” she asked. “Why are you here? Are you here for me?”

“I am now,” said Ward.

“Now?”

He took a breath, looking down, pressing his forehead against hers. His arms around her waist felt right and he didn't feel much else.

"I brought a girl here. A child, to put on the ship."

"A child," she said, starting to tear up again. "She would get to go. So many don't."

"I saw."

Her eyes went down and looked at his arm, where there was dried blood around his hand.

"What happened? Did you get hurt?"

"Shot. In the shoulder."

"From one of ours? I heard the alarm."

He nodded. She looked at his shoulder, a look of perhaps puzzlement or maybe concern or even lament but the possibilities were endless and unknowable in her face and always had been, and Ward wondered if this could be a ubiquitous example in some regard and that maybe that was the reason anything desired also inspired a certain amount of unyielding fear.

"I'll be fine," he said.

"It looks like it passed through."

"Like I said."

She slipped her arm around his waist. "Why the girl, Ward? Why help her?"

A hundred times he had asked himself the same thing and yet it was when Kansas asked him that he found the best answer.

"No kind of man was ever any kind of man forgetting what he owed."

“I suppose not,” she said, “Are you sure you weren’t just looking for someone else besides me to love you?”

Ward looked down.

“You love me?” he asked.

“I can’t stop myself. And I’ve tried. Tried and tried. It gets in the way of so much, Ward. Of everything I believe. And yet there it is.” She shifted slightly, putting her cheek into the pad of his shoulder, the unhurt one. “Is it the same for you?”

He nodded, his face shuffling against her hair.

“I’ve been crying a lot, Ward. There have been a few crews. Some battalions. Every time I kill one of ours. It’s not right. I keep thinking of you.” She said this as a confession, something to be ashamed of—he knew this and even so it still made his heart launch against his chest. “It is not Order to think the thoughts I’ve been having.”

She moved against him. “I want to think about something else for a while.”

They kissed again. There was a hard clacking noise from near the open entrance of the giant room. They both turned to look but there were crates and pods blocking the way. Ward leant down and picked up his gun and handed her his knife. Her own gun was far away and in the line of sight of the entrance. Probably there was nothing to worry about but life had not handed him much to argue against suspicion. He nodded for her to follow him.

There was a man in blue and white, portly, with a olive-colored skin.

“She got away from me,” he said, smiling, almost sheepish. “This girl. Found her around the entrance. Can you help me out?”

Of course. Dummy was always so stubborn. Ward had near-forgotten about her.

“Sure,” Kansas said. “You go that way.” She pointed in the direction away from the entrance.

With so many pods and boxes and crates there were a thousand places to hide. Ward pointed his gun to the ground and looked around, looked down and up and to the side. He looked behind to Kansas and shrugged. She motioned for him to keep looking, and he right away did, following orders. It felt nice. He went through the big opening into the hallway. From behind him he heard a terrible hard smacking sound and then a slump. He turned and saw Kansas on the ground with Dummy on the crate above her body. The hammer in her hands bloody all over. She had swung it like she meant it.

The man who had brought Dummy in grabbed the girl off the box. Yelling at her. Shaking her. Too much. All too much. Ward grabbed him around the neck with both arms and snapped to one side. The man’s head came almost all the way around and he collapsed to the floor.

Ward went over to Kansas and dropped to a knee. He looked into her eyes. Anything there was fading. The one side of her head was all pulpy and soft. It rubbed off onto his hands and then his arm when he propped her skull up. He put her into his lap and held her to him and for minute she held him too. She clawed at his arms. She shook hard, her mouth gurgled, her eyes unfocused, and then all of it went away. Ward felt her life go like a cough out of his own lungs. He put her aside and he looked up at Dummy. Standing over him on the crate still, looking like she had thrown a ball in a crystal room. His gun was right beside him and he picked it up. Dummy got down from the crate and put the hammer to the ground. He looked at her and then he kept doing that.

He shoved the gun off his lap with a short groaning yell, a kind of primal tearing at the air around him. He wanted to hold Kansas up again, wanted to hold her at all, but could not move his arms towards her, could not move his arms even to wipe the wet red pieces of her thoughts off of him.

“She had a knife in her hands,” he could hear her say. “She had your knife in her hands and she was bringing it up at you.”

The words bounced across the portions of his skull not caught up with trying not to kill something else. He bundled himself up into a ball, feeling tears running down his cheeks where her tears had run down his cheeks. A knife in her hands. His knife was right near her body, placed around her hands, but of course it was, it all had been dropped and scattered in the moment. He stared and stared at the body. He put his mouth against his knee and bit into it, drawing blood. It blocked everything out, annihilated Dummy’s questions about who she was, why they were kissing, had they sexed before. She told him to say something.

He had never seen the child harm anything. Why now. Could it be as simple as the preservation of a life she liked? He wanted to believe so but nothing had ever been as easy as that. The only thing that had ever been so easy had been Dummy, and it was about time for her to let him down, just like family, like Carter, like Elaine and Rebel. Others. His mind raced and attempted to latch on to whatever possibility he could, whatever model that would allow him the feeling that he had been soaking in only minutes before. It could be she was scared and just lashed out at the shape she saw. It could be jealousy acting inside the girl. It could be madness. It could and could and could so many things but the was of it tore at him like a lawnmower riding over a tree stump.

She sat down next to him and said nothing. She said she was sorry but that was nothing. Her hug was soft and skinny and small and just like her. He crawled over to Kansas and searched her clothes. Over next to the room where she had cleansed the crew he found a collection of packs and went through them all, and then he searched the entirety of the cavernous hanger. This took minutes upon minutes and eventually a little over an hour, going pod by pod, bench by bench, every corner everywhere. It would make things so much easier to find a journal, a notebook of some kind. He could imagine it.

“That fucking man. I finally slept with him and now it feels like something. Like it means something. The next time I see him I will make him love me and make him say it and then I’ll stab him in the heart just so he knows what it’s like to have it taken away. So he can know what he’s done to my Order.”

But he found nothing of the sort.

A few hours passed and no one came in to look at or for them. Ward wondered how many had already died, how many of those left were just technicians or those chosen to go on the ship themselves.

Without much effort he had found an empty pod. It was simple to open, simple to use. Order requires utility. They had sat beneath it since he found it hours before, saying nothing. If one of them was going to speak first it would always have to be him.

“Do you know why I taught you all that stuff? The tenets?”

He hadn’t been looking at her and thought she might’ve gone to sleep. But she answered right away.

“To survive.”

“Right. Just that.” There was a weight trailing beneath his voice, for this reason, for so many reasons. “Lost my family, same as you, while back, before all this started. Since then,” he sighed, “I’ve gone in more wrong directions than I’ve ever had a right to live through. But those tenets, they’re the only thing that ever made anything make any sense for any good amount of time.”

He rubbed his hand over his face, looking straight ahead into the shadowed, metal reflection of the two of them on the occupied pod before them. He could make out in her hands that she stroked the soft charm he gave her. He took a breath.

“I guess . . . I guess I was trying to toughen you up. ‘Cause I’ve never been handed nothing or nobody that didn’t have some kind of knife somewhere hanging behind their back. And then you found me.”

He held his hand out and she grasped it immediately, had been waiting. For a while he just enjoyed that. Then he picked her up and set her inside the pod.

“How do you know we’ll go to the same place?” she asked him.

“We aren’t,” he said. He had never so much wanted to lie to someone, but he couldn’t. Not to her. “I’m not going.”

She started to get up. “Then neither am I,” she said. He pushed her back and continued to strap her in. “Ward, please. Please. *Please.*”

She started to cry and kept saying the word and he kept buckling the buckles, checking the machine, making sure it would all work. He thought about Kansas’s last speech. We must be untainted. How could he make staying make sense when leaving was the only thing left that he wanted to do? But he had known this from the start, somewhere

in his mind. Kansas just gave it words. From being around him the girl had murdered. Maybe not a good person or maybe not someone undeserving but that was as bad as it would ever get because of him and he would make sure.

“I can’t, kid. I got too much weighing me down to ever leave this place. And you gotta go because you just got to.” He touched her face, smoothed back her hair. “And I’m so sorry, Dummy. I really am.”

He dropped his hand to hers, where she tugged at his palm, trying to keep it close. She squirmed, kicking her legs. She offered up her name if she could just stay with him.

“I know your name, Dummy,” he said, his mouth curling up just slightly. She stopped moving, and he stood up completely, his hand on top of the door.

“I love you.”

She repeated him. He always liked it when she repeated him. And then he said goodbye and closed her in.

IV

He headed South by Southwest, walking, taking his time. He carried his rifle in his hands and his uniform on his back but nothing and no one bothered him. On occasion he saw the huge airships fly by, dropping orbs, but they either ignored or did not see him. He stayed away from towns unless he needed to eat. He went out of his way. Every now

and then there would be thumps in the distance, smashing and terminating, the footsteps of giants that ended the delay of Order.

Maybe a month away from St. Louis, a few miles outside of Little Rock, he woke up one morning and saw streaks running across the Eastern sky. He had been too far away to hear it launch but at the top of the vertical clouds he could see a massive blue and black ship racing into the sky. He watched it go all the way up. It was the wrong ship for her to be on it but he pretended anyway, was glad when he could not see it anymore.

The interstate he was on would take him straight to Dallas, and from there it would be a simple thing to get on 45 and take it all the way down to Houston. He would walk. There was no rush. Somewhere in the suburbs there he would find a cemetery and a grave probably next to his brother or maybe just a house and an urn. He was never quite sure what the old man had wanted in that regard. His mother would not have a grave, but there would be something, to be sure, even if it was just a place. Ward would see these things and after that he would keep going like he always and never had before.